

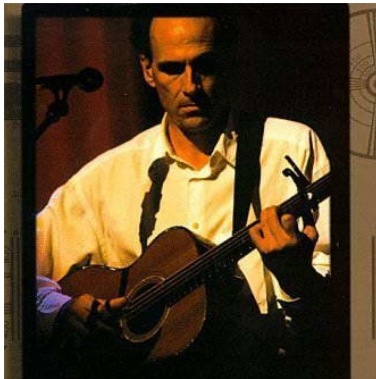
In Christ Alone, Pt. 4
Living In Christ
John 14: 8-11, 18-20; 17: 20-23

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**March 11, AD 2021
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One of the most encouraging signs of spiritual vitality in our church has been a growing participation in *formational* prayer. This kind of prayer seeks deeper intimacy with Jesus. We invite Jesus to form us, to shape us and conform us to his image in us. Paul wrote to the Galatian church of how he yearned for Christ to be *formed* in them (Gal. 4: 19). Formational prayer is a way of being shaped by Scripture. We engage our imaginations as we receive the word pictures given to us in Scripture. I know that our Lent study contains a lot of theology in our daily readings. So in these messages, I've been feeling drawn to present the same truths but more imaginatively.

Today we're considering what it means to live daily in Christ. We're pressing toward a closer intimacy with Jesus. To get there, I'd like to direct you toward a time in your life when you felt that all was well. You were safe. Loved. Joyful. A time in your memory when the world seemed as it should be. I want to evoke the places that feel that way to you. The people. The circumstances.



There's a song by James Taylor that consistently gives me that feeling. In the final verse of the song, Taylor recounts waking up from a dream in which he was back in his childhood home. It was a time before his parents had died. A time before his children were born. He was a child himself and he felt protected, loved, and safe. The memory of being there made him feel the joy of Christmas morning as a child. He has set us up for this memory by the bridge in the song in which he declares that what matters most in all we do is the way we love. Take a listen to this snippet.

I know now,
One thing only matters in these days:
True love, love and love alone, true love.

Came out of my dream last night
And thought I was back in my old home
Mom and Dad were both still alive
And the babies not yet born, no.

It felt like a festival,
And it felt like Christmas morning.

I felt the darkness roll away
Even as the world was turning,
I mean, even as the world was turning.

(James Taylor, "Jump Up Behind Me," *Hourglass*, 1997)

Once upon a time, I didn't feel alone. I felt protected by the love of those who looked after me. I hadn't yet felt the weight of adult responsibility. I didn't feel the cold stripe of death stealing my joy. I was a child, loved and safe. And for a moment all the darkness of the world rolled away. The shadows vanished in the light of this love. Can you remember such a time? Imagine such a moment?



This week's readings begins with this stirring painting by the Indian artist Jyoti Sahi.¹ It's called "Abide in Me." Abide means to remain or stay. Here we see Jesus cradled in the arms of his Father. This is the position of a child, but his beard and face reveal that he is the mature Jesus, nestled against the Father's chest. The Father leans over him, hugs him. They are close, so close. Perhaps you can remember holding a child this way. Smelling the child's scent, comforting her, praying over her. Perhaps you have a precious memory of being held this way. Can you recall your father's scent? The feel of his arms around you, the feel of your head on his chest? If you have such a memory you know that it is golden, and if you don't have any such memory you know how this picture stabs you with longing.

A closer look reveals that the Father holds a cup in his hand. What cup did the Father offer the Son? Was it not in the Garden of agony when the Son cried, "Father, if it be possible, take this cup from me." The cup of excruciating suffering for the world's redemption. Look closer and notice the gestures made by the hands of the Son. His palms are open. His hand is released in offering. "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." The cup must be drunk, and it will be drained

willingly. But just before the lethal draught, the Father and the Son embrace tightly, tenderly.

Now think of these Scriptures from John, “I and the Father are one...I am in the Father and the Father is in me...[I pray] that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you..” They belong to together, the eternal Father and the eternal Son. They have loved each other from before time began. In the fullness of time the Father sent forth the Son to be born of a woman (Gal. 4: 6). But even a man living in the conditions of this dark, broken world, the Son continued to love the Father as he always had. Now with a human voice he prayed, “Just as you Father are in me and I in you.” They flow in and out of each other. They are in each other’s arms, even through the terrible suffering on the cross.

I want us to notice something crucial from these passages. There is a pattern Jesus sets up, and then breaks, with dramatic effect. In John 14:10, Jesus tells the disciples, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” We’re one. Then in the very next verse Jesus repeats this phrase. “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” We’ve got a pattern going. A call and response. The call: I am in the Father. The echo: and the Father is in me. So just a few verses later, Jesus sets it up a third time. The call: In that day, you will know that I am in my Father. We’re ready for the reply. If you were just listening to Jesus speak, when he says, “I am in my Father,” you’re waiting for the second half “And the Father is in me.” But on the third time, that’s *not* what he says. “I am in the Father and *you in me, and I in you.*” He breaks the pattern by inserting us. Us!

We get taken in the circle of love that is the Father and the Son. Jesus the Son is in the Father. But he tells us that we are in him. And so if we are in Jesus, and Jesus is in the Father, then where are we? In the Father too! In his prayers a few chapters later, Jesus prays for our unity, “that they may all be one, just as you Father are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us...” There’s room in the love of the Father and the Son for us to be included.

I remember wonderful days when our children were little. At a certain age, each one loved nothing more than sitting in the bed between Rhonda and me. Eating cheerios while we drank coffee. Or reading a book together or watching *Arthur* on TV. Sandwiched in the warmth of father and mother who loved each other so much that their lives came forth. Secure. Happy. All too soon, of course, by turns we became kind of creepy and disgusting to them. The idea of being pinned in a bed between your parents was pretty suffocating. By God’s mercy, we

have grandchildren who, for a few years at least, don't think we're gross. We're savoring creating that closeness.



Let's go to one more picture: Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. I'm forever grateful to Henri Nouwen for his book that opened the beauty of this painting to me. Again we have an image of a father and a son. The last picture showed the tender sadness, the final embrace before the cup had to be drunk. But this painting depicts relief. A return from the far country. And end to the father's suffering of waiting. And end to the son's suffering from wandering. He is on his knees. His lovely locks of youth are shaved bare in his disgrace. His head is pressed against his father's chest, eyes closed, the estrangement healed, the shame lifted, the loneliness gone. He releases completely into his father's embrace. I can hear James Taylor's song running through this moment. "Came out of my dream last night and thought I was back in my old home...And it felt like a festival. And it felt like Christmas morning. I felt the darkness roll away, even as the world was turning."

The hands of the father welcome him. They touch him affectionately but gently. The father, too, is so relieved. This my son was dead and is alive again. He's back, he's back, oh, he's back. He pressed the filthy ragged boy against his own fine robes. Bring a ring. Set a feast. Strike up the band. He's back!

In his reflections on this scene, Nouwen makes a daring suggestion. The father in the parable is clearly our heavenly Father. But could the returning son be Jesus, the eternal Son who had been away in the far country searching for us? Could this be Jesus ragged and torn from carrying our griefs, bearing our sorrows and taking our sins as his own? Was he so lonely, so very lost, so very overwhelmed by estrangement when the cross dumped into the death of God-forsakenness? And now he's home again. Relieved that his work is done. Ready to be restored at the Father's right hand as Lord.

So what if we tie all this together. The Father is in me and I am in the Father. The Father is in me and you are in me and I am in you. My return to the Father is your return to the Father if you are in me. I carry in my heart all the prodigals I have called home. I got home ragged with your raggedness. I fell on my knees before my Father, bruised, torn, penniless and disgraced with your poverty and shame. I carried it all to him, I carried you to him in me. And he received us! He

welcomed me home and in me he welcomes you home. No prodigal has been farther away than I have been, so I can gather anyone and everyone in me. There is room in the love of the Father and the Son for you. There is room in this eternal, exclusive, intimate love for a world full of people reclaimed by Jesus, relocated into Christ.

We must not neglect the third divine person in this love story: God the Holy Spirit. The eternal Spirit has ever been the love that passes between Father and Son. He is the glue of their covenant love. And he is the one who joins us to Jesus so that Jesus can take us into the Father. He is the love that dances between all who are joined to Christ in the Father's embrace.



Our job? To stay in this love by conscious choice. By continuing choice. To press in. To press deeper into Christ. Several years ago, Nancy Spiller and I wrote a song with this picture in mind. I imagined the scene when Mary anointed Jesus head with precious oil, so beautifully depicted by artist Linda Richardson. That oil is the Spirit, flowing down Jesus head and beard to the rest of his body, the church. It went like this:

Fall, blessed Spirit, fall
Down the beard of the Son
And mark me as one
Whom he holds, love enfolds

Run, Holy Spirit, Run
As oil from his hair
So precious and rare
Drips on me joyfully

Change my heart!

As I press in, closer to Jesus
Help me press in, closer to Jesus
Safe in His arms, lost in His robe,
Gripped by his hands, I nestle near
Fall blessed Spirit, fall.

This week, dear ones, take time in your prayer to imagine this divine embrace of Father and Son. Then claim how you are included. In that circle. The Spirit has relocated you into Christ. And Christ is in the Father's arms. So nestle close, We're gathered home in the everlasting embrace of the God who is love, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

¹ From the book *Faces of Vision: Images of Life and Faith*, Eric Lott and Jyoti Sahi
<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2008/16-may/books-arts/book-reviews/abide-in-me>