

Homily – April 28th, 2024 – Fifth Sunday of Easter



When we experience the best things in life, we don't have words to describe those things. We stand there with our mouths open, and we are at a loss for words; it's just that good. Equally true, when we experience the worst things in

life, we go numb. We lose words. All we can do is weep. Tears replace words.

When it comes to our faith, especially in our feeble attempts to describe what God is like, we just know our words are going to fail us. The best we can do is to use metaphors, symbols, poetry, rituals, or music. Jesus never used complicated theological language to describe God the Father or to describe himself. He said things like, ***"I am the vine, and my Father is the vine grower"*** or, ***"I am the vine and you are the branches."***

Then he uses a word that you really only find in the Bible or some older forms of English; he uses the word "abide" seven times. He keeps saying, ***"Abide in me, as I abide in you."*** And, ***"Abide in me and you will bear much fruit."*** We would say it differently. Instead of saying "abide in me," we would say, "stay with me," or "remain in me." Abide, stay, remain—they all mean the same thing.

There is an assumption, a truth, that Jesus is living from that most of us didn't grow up with. The assumption, that Jesus is working out of, is that we are already connected to God, to the Divine; the Divine is already and always has been living its life in us. Most of us have grown up with the assumption that we have to do something, like holy things, spiritual things, in order to access God in our lives, in order to get "connected" to the Divine. Many of us think we begin in the world of separation and somehow we spend the rest of our lives trying to get God's attention. It's like we are throwing lifelines in the direction of God. We keep

thinking God has put us “on hold,” and if we just listen to enough elevator music, God will eventually pick up and answer. Or, we keep thinking the Divine is way out there standoffish and unapproachable until we start going to church more or say more prayers.

Much of our theology led us in that direction, that we are separate from God. From the opening lines in the Bible it says that God created the world. That seems like an innocent enough statement; none of us has any problem with that. However, if God created the world, then God is not the world. God and the world are two different, unique, and separate things. So, just by the very act of creation, we are separate from God. Then comes the story of Adam and Eve’s sin which caused them to get kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Their sin, which we traditionally call Original Sin, intensified the separation even more. Then comes our personal sin, which exacerbates the problem still further. Now, we have a major problem. Creation, original sin, and personal sin have conspired to create a canyon of separation between us and God. We need someone to bring us together. We need a savior, a mediator, a middleman between God, who is so good and ourselves, who are so sinful. Ah, ha. We have Jesus! He will surely bridge the gap between us and God, and if he has to take on the sins of the world and die on the Cross for us, he is surely willing to do it.

That’s one way of think about it, one way of putting theology together in our minds. It’s not bad; it seems to work. It’s the way I have been putting things together in my mind for much of my life.

However---and there’s always a “however” with this Jesus—there may be a different way of thinking about our relationship to God. Instead of starting off in the world of separation and wondering how we are going to get united with God, Jesus is proposing another solution.

It has to do with the word “abide.” Remember, abide means to “stay” or “remain.” Jesus never says, “Try real hard to get connected to me.” Instead he says, “Abide in me. Stay with me. Remain in me (and you will bear much fruit).” Jesus starts off in

the world of union, not separation. Live your life from this truth; move at the world from this reality. ***“Remain in me as I remain in you.”*** Jesus assumes we are already connected, that’s why he said, “Remain in me.”

So, if we are already connected to God, what is the role of Jesus, our middleman, our redeemer, our savior? Is he out of a job? Is he redundant? The role of Jesus is to manifest the truth. He came to make visible, to make apparent, to show us the connection that is already there and to encourage us to live from it. Don’t waste a minute on a god who gives you the silent treatment and who pushes you further and further into the world of separation and isolation each time you sin. St. Paul says, ***“Can anything separate us from the love of God?”*** It’s not a rhetorical question. The answer is an emphatic, “NO!”

The Gospel of John opens with two disciples of John the Baptist, who are looking for something more, something or someone who will feed their souls. They stumble upon Jesus and ask, ***“Rabbi, where are you staying (abiding)?”*** He said, “Come and see.” They stayed with him (abided with him) that whole day. They were never the same afterwards. They were changed forever. They just abided with him; they felt connected like a vine to a branch.

Again, in John’s gospel, Jesus hangs out with a Samaritan woman at a well. She had a reputation and even had trouble seeing the good that was within herself. Jesus affirmed her and restored her dignity. She runs back to her village and tells people about this Jesus, who knew her entire past—the good and the bad--yet loves her to the core. So, the Samaritans, seeing how alive this woman was, begged Jesus to stay with them (to abide with them). So, he went and stayed with them for two days. They, too, came alive in his presence and had their lives transformed.

There’s another story about how the resurrected Jesus, walked alongside two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were sad and discouraged because Jesus had been crucified, but they didn’t know that the resurrected Lord was walking next to them. As evening was coming, they urged him to stay with them (to abide

with them). So, he went in a stayed (abided) with them. Their lives were forever changed. Their sorrow was replaced with pure joy, all because they simply ask Jesus to “stay with us.”

Jesus’ preferred method is never to send people away to study theology, to go on a retreat, or to start a 9-day novena in the hopes they will feel closer to God. He favors another approach. “Abide in me, as I abide in you. I’m already living in you, why don’t you just try living in me. We are already connected like a vine is connected to the branches. Live from that connection and your lives will bear much fruit.”

Have you ever noticed an older couple who can just be in each other’s presence and not feel the need to say anything? They are abiding in each other. Or, have you ever noticed teenagers who just like to hang out with each other with no particular agenda. They too are abiding in each other. Jesus comes to us with no particular agenda except this: abide in me as I abide in you. All we have to do is ask, and he’s right there.

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