

*Trinity Abides: A Journey on God's Way of Love*  
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park  
The Rev. Chase Danford, Priest-in-Charge

*Abide in me as I abide in you...I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit*

Where does memory abide? This is a question I sometimes think about when I try to replay a scene from the past, or when I try to remember the details of a conversation or more practical matters like, did I turn off the oven?

Recently, I discovered a digital treasure trove of letters from my time in seminary. In the Episcopal Church, seminarians are expected to write what is called an Ember Day Letter to their bishop four times a year. Ember Days were traditionally periods of fasting and prayer, and while I can't say that I did any fasting or prayer as part of my Ember Day letter writing, when I re-read these letters, I remembered that they were opportunities for genuine spiritual reflection. I updated my bishop on mundane matters like what classes I was taking and what I was doing in my field education assignments, but I also shared what I was passionate about in those classes and assignments and what excited me about ministry. I wrote honestly about my ambivalence about daily chapel attendance and questions about whether I was really doing the right thing. I wrote of my grief over my father's death. I graduated from seminary ten years ago this month and next month will have been ordained for a decade, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to review these letters at this milestone moment.

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*Abide in me, as I abide in you.*

As it is used here in John's gospel, the word abide could have two meanings. The one I usually think of, and the meaning closest to the original Greek is to remain, to stay. Abide in me. Stay with me. Remain with me. It is the same word Jesus used in the garden the night before his death, when he asked his disciples to stay with him and keep watch with him. And it is the same word used by the travelers on the road to Emmaus, who not realizing that the man walking with them was Jesus, said to him, "stay with us, for it is almost evening and the day is nearly over." Both Jesus and his disciples in these moments said, I need you. Stay with me. Remain with me. Abide with me. And to my mind, they are speaking about something more than just companionship, as wonderful as that is. Reading these moments through the lens of John's mystical narrative, I hear abide as having a sacramental quality. To abide is to share an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Jesus abides with his disciples, his friends, in both body and spirit. And he asks them to do the same.

The other sense of the word abide is to conform. We often think of conform in a negative way. Of giving up ourselves to fit the image we are supposed to be. But to conform to God's will is to be grafted into the true vine, the vine that gives life to the world. Jesus says, I am the vine, you

are the branches. This true vine is love. To conform to God's will is to join Christ's Way of Love. And this way is a path, but it is also a living, breathing thing. It is a vine. And the outward expression of that vine is the Church. We are the Branches. We are God's body in the world. We are called to be with one another, so that together we can bear much fruit. So that we can share Christ's love with the world so that all humanity and all creation may abide with one another. So that we may all be one.

Here at Trinity Church, you have abided with one another through good times and not so good times. Over the last decade, this church has suffered traumas and transitions. After a period of rapid growth, suddenly the brakes went on ten years ago, and the church suffered from a period of internal conflict. Many people left. Years of healing ensued, and the church was ready to call a rector again. Much progress was made during that time, but it came to an end sooner than was expected, and the church was in another period of transition. After a year in transition, last February I was called here to serve, to begin in June. And then covid hit in March, and the church had to shut down public worship. But Trinity pivoted, like so many other churches. With the leadership of volunteers, staff, and our interim priest, services went online. And while the church was closed for worship and meetings, our social justice and anti-hunger programs continued to provide much needed relief and advocacy for those in need in our community. I was able to join you as planned in June, and with the guidance of the diocese, we reopened our church last July and have had continuous in-person and livestreamed worship ever since. Our Zoom adult education classes and lay-led in-person Bible sharing group are well-attended and are spaces of rich sharing and learning. Our children's Sunday school is a hybrid of in-person and Zoom, and is thriving. Our Stewardship team helped bring us together and inspired a robust annual giving campaign in the midst of a pandemic. Our music ministry embraced digital technologies that no one here had ever used before. Our Jersey Shore Bike Ride for Food Justice reached a new record for participation and funds raised. And there are so many stories to share that if I continued, we would be here all day.

Here at Trinity, we have abided during these challenging times. We have remained. We have stayed, but we have not stayed the same. And while we have faith that our beautiful church will stand here at the corner of Asbury and Grand for generations to come, we have not remained in the same spot on an emotional and community level that we were last March. To abide does not always mean to remain completely unchanged or exactly in one place. To abide with Christ means to join a living journey of faith. Where will we go? Where will our journey with Christ take us as individuals and as a church?

Looking back at the past might help point the way forward. When I discovered my letters from seminary, I traced a journey of a younger version of myself searching for his passions in life and ministry and searching to find his footing and his confidence to follow those passions. Looking back over the last ten years of ministry, I view it all as a privilege, and I have grown so much and learned so much. I'm grateful for it all. But it's been the past year here at Trinity that has excited me and fulfilled me more than anything before. And that tells me that there is so much more to come.

If we look back at Trinity's history and think about our present, what patterns and themes will we see? I believe that the core of who we are is found in words you'll see right when you open up our webpage. We quote from the epistle reading from 1st John: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God...For if we love one another, God abides in us, and God's love will be perfected in us.* And then you read this statement:

*At Trinity, love is at the very core of our faith and ministry. Our mission then is simple: to love God and to love our neighbor. This conviction leads us to respect the dignity of all people, welcome the stranger, embrace our enemy, demonstrate radical hospitality, reach out to help those who are marginalized and in need, be advocates for justice and peace, and maintain a genuine commitment to inclusivity and diversity in our church family. Trinity is Love!*

We are on a journey of love, walking with love, and walking toward love. And we have taken steps this year to widen the path so that we may invite others to walk alongside us. Nothing has excited me more this year than when we took the next steps toward making our campus accessible for all of God's people of every ability. You see, when I told you that looking back at my letters helped clarify my passions in life and ministry, it confirmed for me that I believe my calling is to join in building the Beloved Community. My greatest hope and aspiration is to widen the path, to make more room at the table, to make sure that everyone is welcome at the feast for all peoples that God has prepared from the foundation of the world.

I believe that you and I are on the same journey. We are the Branches. Joining with our siblings in Christ and people of goodwill from every corner of the world, we are branches of the True Vine, the Vine of God's love. We abide in the love of Christ, not staying in one place, but waiting for God to give us a vision of where our next steps will be.

*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.*

What fruit will we bear here at Trinity and in our community? As we consider the work that lies ahead of us, we might feel overwhelmed. We might be intimidated. How, for example, are we going to raise the money to make our church and our community programs fully accessible? But don't be afraid. When we live with authenticity and the courage of our convictions, when we step forward in confidence and faith, it may feel really vulnerable, but we will find a way. I look for inspiration to the story from Acts today. The Ethiopian court official who met Philip on the wilderness road was an outsider to the apostle: he was a foreigner, he was considered a sexual minority, he was a person with a disability. But neither Philip nor the official let that stop them from abiding with Christ together. Philip proclaimed the good news, and the official said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized."

As we emerge from the pandemic, as we as a society confront a legacy of racial injustice and present economic challenges and political polarization, as we as a human family confront the climate crisis, there is much that might intimidate us, much that might make us lose our footing for a moment, to lose our confidence that we can make a difference. But here at Trinity Church,

let us always remember those words of an outsider who was invited into the banquet: Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?

Trinity, look, here is water, here is our journey of love. Abide together. Abide with God.

Look, here is water! What is to prevent us from baptizing all the world with the love of God?

Amen.