

Sermon 2024 05 04

Hello. For those who don't know me, I'm Vince Katter, current Senior Warden of St Mark's aka the chair of the Vestry. If you're new here, lay people such as me don't often give sermons, but we are between permanent priests, and I was advised, prodded perhaps, to take a couple of the Sunday preaching spots to reflect on the lessons and how they pertain to our circumstances.

In today's lessons we are exhorted by Jesus to abide in his love by loving each other as we have been loved by Jesus, so that our joy may be complete.

Jesus has just made the point (as we heard last week) that we disciples are branches attached to the vine, that the vine is the source of OUR ability to live as God intended.

I think there's lots of biological backup for this sort of metaphor - branches, hang onto the vine for dear life - and for pruning, we've all got a fair amount of what I'll call "prunable whatnot" and it can look pretty rough.

In this week's Gospel, Jesus now makes the point - 'abide in my love, by loving one another as I have loved you so that your joy may be complete'.

In reading this passage and considering the purpose of the sermon - 'abide' and 'joy' stood out as things to consider.

To abide is to "bear something patiently, to endure, to wait, to agree, to sojourn in a place." I have a sense that most of us don't use the word that frequently - it has a bit of 'old library book smell and feel' about it, and because of its different meanings, it needs some context to figure out if this abiding we are talking about is –

'hanging on the strap in a bus or subway for 20 minutes because all the seats are full',

or

'hanging out in a garden on a cool spring afternoon'.

The thing I'd like to emphasize is that you have agency if you are abiding something, and you typically have patience, as you create a space for events to unfold.

And here at St. Mark's, we certainly have much to abide - in the 'bear something patiently' sense. In addition to the usual "getting along as an Episcopal congregation in the early 21st century," we are facing three challenges which we must abide: enduring a building project, waiting for a new rector, and operating as part of a new diocese.

How do we reconcile/abide the unsettling nature of these significant changes with Jesus' call for joy? I hope that some openness and information about these changes will allow for more joy, so I will offer a few updates:

First - Building update -

You may have noticed that we have walls and bricks where there was just a hole a few months ago. We are in the middle of what we call the "phase 3 build out". This gives us a parish hall that will look finished from the street, but will be largely unfinished inside - think 'warehouse interior'. We will have 2 additional bathrooms just past the existing acolyte room here on this level, so we will bid adieu to the portapotty outside, and we will get the permanent ADA ramp and landing for the North Bride's Walk door. While we won't be gathering regularly in the unfinished spaces, we will be able to tour them to flesh out our 'phase 4 interior plans'.

We are currently talking with our architect and construction firm about the best sequencing options for proceeding with phase 4. We may be finishing the new building one grouping of rooms at a time, as we raise the funds. We'll be seeing some fresh color coded images of phase 3 and phase 4 shortly.

Secondly - Regarding the search for our next rector - The vestry met with Canon Scott Leannah in April for a helpful review of how parishes go about doing this these days. We are following a priest-in-charge process where the Vestry acts as the search committee with input from the parish on what they want from the next person we call, and where the priest and the parish try each other out for a few years, before mutually deciding on a permanent relationship as rector and parish. You are already seeing survey questions from the Vestry related to this and we plan to further deepen our understanding of your answers with small group cottage meetings in May. I have great hope and not a little joy seeing how well our lay leadership on the Vestry has come together to see us through this part of our shared life.

Regarding Diocesan reunion - I attended the Special Convention in Baraboo yesterday and am happy to announce that The Rt Rev Matt Guenther is now the effective bishop of Wisconsin! This has been a long-considered, well-coordinated transition - carefully planned to avoid kinking or bruising the individual branches of the parishes involved while now starting the braiding and intergrafting of the 3 diocesan branches into one.

OK - done with the updates - on to the gospel.

In the gospel, we are asked to 'abide in love so that our joy might be complete'

What is the JOY we hear about? What does that source of life actually look and feel like? And how can we make joy happen?

Now, I suspect that we all have somewhat different experiences of joy.

People sometimes describe it as being in a 'flow' state - enveloped in light, embraced with warmth, with your distractions, imperfections, and 'prunable whatnots' faded into the background - you are aware of them, but not in thrall to them.

My wife of 4 plus decades has a saying - especially about church things - that everything needs more joy, with the sense that there is really not a thing as too much joy. She references that famous Saturday Night Live skit calling for "more Cowbell" and says along the same vein: MORE JOY!

Years ago, when I first heard it, after I was done rolling my eyes, I immediately responded with some version of 'that will never happen'. After some reflection, I ended up realizing that -

'She's Not Wrong About That' (in capital letters).

I also understood that there were challenges with my thinking about joy, and the degree of direct control I might have over the quantity of joy in my vicinity.

I don't think we get to command joy or apply it like a commodity - as if I thought 'joy is like butter', and I like butter, and more butter is better, so I'm going to quadruple the butter in a cookie recipe, which works about as well as telling people 'be joyful or else'. Joy doesn't work like that.

I also think we've all had the experience of attempting to be joyful by trying to recreate conditions that we recall being joyful in, at some point in the past, and finding out that - hmmm - this is nice or OK, but why am I missing the joy that I expected?

And I think our idiom of 'pure joy' sometimes does us a disservice - this idea that joy does not exist or is devalued if there are distractions, imperfections, and prunable whatnot within our range of perception.

And this is where our agency comes in - that key part of abiding - that I've come to understand -

We get to assist in creating the conditions for joy, our 'hanging onto the vine' so to speak, by loving each other - being all in, present, engaged, and looking for the budding flowers that will become fruit in each other - that other agent of the holy spirit standing in front of you, equally attempting to abide - and celebrating that abundance, while regarding what might seem the prunable whatnot in each other with a large measure of humility and forbearance.

Discernment of prunable whatnot takes time, so that we - individually and collectively - figure out which of the old growths that we are holding onto needs removal, which one needs some TLC, and which one will bear flowers next year, not this year, because that is its nature. Loving reflections (sometimes with mirrors, sometimes without) and gentle mindful assistance is what I think we owe each other as fellow agents of the holy spirit, and I am so thankful that I have experienced this here, with all of you.

Creating the conditions for 'a flow state of joy', 'existing as a community with Joy', is what I hear as the Gospel message - and I'll add that Jesus was remarkably direct about this - He says: 'Abide in my love by following my commandment to love each other so that your joy may be complete'. No longish parables about objects, people, and places to ponder. One can imagine the disciples saying to each other - 'ok, I think I understand this one' - before they all head across the Kidron Valley to Gethsemane.

We have our entire lives to abide in love with joy. What a challenge, what an exhortation, what a commandment!

We will be celebrating the Eucharist shortly - that memorial of shared bread and wine at a communal meal - where I believe a common experience we have is of deep joy - having used the structure of the liturgy to prepare ourselves for that.

Let us take that experience and consider how we use our time in the world this week to create the conditions for abiding in joy for ourselves and all those we encounter.

Amen