

Abiding in Love

John 15:9-17

Last week was the NFL draft. The Chicago Bears got Caleb Williams with their number 1 pick; the latest in a long line of quarterbacks that Bears fans have hoped would lead them to a Super Bowl. 39 quarterbacks have started a game for the Bears in the last 34 years. The last one, Justin Fields, went to the Pittsburgh Steelers in an offseason trade. He never lived up to the hype he came onto the team with, and had to deal with the constant changes in head coaches and offensive coordinators, leaving him constantly having to learn new systems.

The Steelers, on the other hand, have been a model of consistency. They've only had three head coaches in the past 55 years. They haven't had a losing season in the last 20 years, though they've remained right around .500 recently. Why? Because instead of the constant change, they allow time for coaches to develop players, to build the team they want to play the system they want.

That ability for consistency is part of what it means as we hear Jesus talking with his disciples about remaining and abiding. Jesus has been teaching them for the last three years, and now is preparing them for his departure. These verses are part of the words of Jesus on Maundy Thursday, on the night when he would be betrayed. They also come in a time of uncertainty and change. In the midst of that uncertainty, of not knowing what would happen next, Jesus tells them to remain in his love. How can they abide or remain in his love when everything was going to change?

The answer to the question of their uncertainty, and our uncertainty, is found in that word, remain. Remaining is not something that is temporary. It is because of God's abiding, remaining love for us, shown in Christ's death

on the cross, which allows us to follow his commands and remain in his love.

Connection is what we see in the Gospel lesson from John 15. The preceding verses are where Jesus describes himself as the Vine, and his followers as branches. It's a great picture of how we grow and bear fruit when we are connected to Christ. It's a great reminder of the importance of connection, how we need it. When John describes Jesus' last supper, Jesus talks about himself like a vine, and his disciples, his followers, as branches. That tells us that in the midst of change, there's something firm that we can hold onto. Abiding, remaining in love is not something that is temporary. Like a vine that takes years to get established before it produces fruit, abiding takes time and patience. It is because of God's abiding, remaining love for us, shown in Christ's death on the cross, which we abide in his love. And it is through God's love for you that those being confirmed will remain faithful to the promises made today and we will all know that God will be with us wherever we go.

After sharing these words with his disciples, after sharing a last meal with them and washing their feet, Jesus took them to the garden, where he continued to pray for them, knowing what was to come. It was in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus was arrested, and separated from his disciples. It was there that the disciples scattered and separated from each other. But after his death and resurrection, Jesus brought them back together. Jesus reminded and showed his disciples that their connections to each other and to the Father would be restored and repaired.

It's good to remember that we have that connection, because we live in a world that

threatens to pull everything apart. Increased polarization and isolation and disconnection. At times you've felt unmoored and ungrounded, unsure of what happens next.

Without God, none of the promises the confirmands are about to make could be kept. Without God, sin and stubbornness would threaten to separate everyone and end love. Without God, nothing would stay together. Thankfully, God is here, too. It is God who holds all things together, who joins you together, and will keep you together. As you face the challenges of the future, God promises to be faithful to you. He died for you, after all. And He continually offers His forgiveness to those He loves. As He forgives you, you forgive those around you. God's work is to create and preserve and restore. God's work of forgiveness restores relationships. And so we rejoice today. And we rejoice that we are connected to each other, and to God.

Three eighth graders will confirm their faith today. Confirmation can seem like a graduation. It's the end of having to come to Wednesday afternoon classes. It's the end of learning about the catechism as homework and classwork. But it's the beginning of making your faith your own. It's not the end of learning. It's a step on the journey. As they confess and confirm their faith, they will pledge to remain connected to Jesus, even in the face of death. That sounds hard, difficult, even impossible. But hope is found in how they answer; "I do with the help of God." The hope is found in realizing that they and we can't do that on our own. No, we can only do so with the help and grace of God.

It's also time for many students at Iowa State to be graduating, or at least heading off for the summer, to internships or back home. That can be a time of disconnection, too, having to plant roots in a new place, finding connection in a situation that is only temporary. But Jesus'

command to abide and remain in His word and love applies even there.

How do we remain connected to Jesus? How do we grow in Christ? Through God's Word and through Holy Communion. By reading your Bible at home, hearing God's Word read and proclaimed in church, and participating in a Bible study with other Christians. The other way that you stay connected to Jesus is through Holy Communion. Holy Communion keeps us connected to Christ. Baptism and God's Word connect us to Jesus in the first place. God's Word and the Lord's Supper keep us connected and growing in Christ, looking outside of ourselves to God and those around us.

Consistency helps, just as putting in the work in the weight room helps improve your strength, putting in the miles running improves your speed and endurance, and putting in your time with the books improves your knowledge and study habits. Consistently doing those little things adds up over time. It applies in athletics. It applies in academics. It applies in your work. It applies in your faith life, too.

Spring is a time of new life. It's a time of change and departures, of endings and beginnings. Like the disciples, we're not alone. We know the Holy Spirit is at work in the world and in us. We are connected through Jesus with the Father, and we're connected through Jesus to each other. We are able to pray for one another, and comfort one another. But we know we're not alone, and we're loved by a God who will never let us go. That's a wonderful feeling.

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Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
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