



“The Dude Abides”

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May 6, 2018

John 15:9-17

In the Cohen brothers film, *The Big Lebowski*, *The Dude*, the main character in the movie, seems unphased by the disasters that happen in his life. In fact, all *The Dude* seems to be concerned about in life is bowling and the upcoming bowling tournament. Mayhem ensues as he is mistaken for a millionaire with the same name, Jeffrey Lebowski, that owes a bunch of gangsters some money. *The Dude's* house is vandalized by those gangsters, who end up ruining *The Dude's* rug. *The Dude* is then drawn into a complicated and weird plot involving the kidnapping of the millionaire Lebowski's wife. *The Dude* then goes on several adventures where he is attacked by a wide range of people. Then, at the end of the movie, the mysterious cowboy narrator, *The Stranger*, asks *The Dude* how he is. *The Dude* answers, “strikes and gutters, ups and downs, you know.” *The Stranger* tells *The Dude*, “take it easy, I know that you will.” To which *The Dude* raises up his hands, and in answer to the implied question of how *The Dude* stays happy and calm through the ups and downs, strikes and gutters of his life, says the most famous line of the movie. “Well, you know, the Dude abides.”

Today, I think it is important to remember that not only does *The Dude* abide, but that Jesus abides. Jesus abides and that abiding is a crucial part of our Christian faith. In our scripture for today Jesus asks us to abide in his love. Just as he abides in God's love, we too are to abide in his love. Jesus abides. But how do we do that? How do we lean into the presence of God through the strikes and gutters of our lives? How do we manifest love? How do we abide in Jesus's love? Well, our scripture for today tells us. It says that we are to love one another. And not only that, we are to keep God's commandments which are clearly meant to show us how to live in community. Following Jesus and living as resurrected people means loving our neighbor, being friends to one to another, and recognizing the power of community. That is abiding. Jesus abides.

But many of us don't really want to abide in Jesus, or be friends, or love our neighbors. We think we can do it all by ourselves. We don't really need God. We think we can handle it alone. We think we can plan and strategize. We think we can figure it out. We think that just a little bit more money will make things better. We think that a promotion will solve our problems. We think we can be strong. We think that through our individual and lonely efforts we can force our lives to be “all ups, and no downs, all strikes and no gutters.” But Jesus abides.

Since Jesus abides, Jesus' understanding of abiding is seen in a poignant and common image... the vine. When we look back at the beginning of this chapter of John, and see the image of the vine, we realize that when we try to control everything ourselves and leave God out of the picture, we fail to grow and take root and we can never create anything that is good and true and lasting. “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless you abide in the vine, neither can you [bear fruit] unless you abide in me.” Jesus abides.

Radical preacher and controversial pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber claims that she'd rather be completely self-sufficient than be a connected grape vine. She compares the stately beauty and independence of the sunflower with the twisted chaos of the grape vine. "A Grape Vine? Really? Vines, and branches off of vines, are all tangled and messy and it's just too hard to know what is what. If I'm going to bear fruit I want it attributed to me and my branch. If I'm too tangled up with other vines and branches I might not get credit. So, Jesus...can I be something a little more distinct? Perhaps you are the soil and I am...the sunflower? Big, bright, audacious and distinctive? Nope. Vines and branches that bear fruit. That's what we get. So, not only are we dependent on Jesus, but our lives are uncomfortably tangled up together. The Christian life is a vine-y, branch-y, jumbled mess of us and Jesus and others." Jesus abides.

Although we are snarled, gnarled, ugly branches; although we are crooked, cracked, and craggy branches; although we are intertwined, interwoven, interlaced branches we must be and need to be connected to one another. That is what it means to be church and that is what it means to be Christian. We need church. We need to remember that Jesus abides. We need to take a lesson from The Dude. We need to abide in Jesus and let Jesus abide in us. Jesus does not promise us that he will take away the pain and the tragedies of life. Jesus does not promise us that happiness is all that we will ever experience. Jesus does not promise us that the thorns won't prick us or the bees won't sting us. Jesus doesn't promise us that our lives won't become an intertwined and tangled and jumbled mess. But Jesus does promise us that he will abide. Jesus will abide with us through all of our ups and downs, all of our strikes and gutters, and all of our sufferings and pleasures. And when we abide with Jesus, Jesus will nourish us and bring flavor to our lives. Jesus abides.

Christian spirituality is an intimate reality, a reality of loving our neighbors, learning each other's' stories, and cultivating relationships. We are called to abide in Jesus. Abiding is an important word and concept in the Gospels. The Greek word for abide is *meno* and it is mentioned three times in Matthew, six times in Luke, twice in Mark. Do you know how many times *meno*, or abide, is mentioned in John? Thirty-four times. Abiding was important to the author of John, it was important to Jesus, and it should be important to us. Jesus abides.

But why is *meno*, abiding so crucial to being the church? Because abiding means that we are nourished. We are nourished. We are connected to God and connected to one another and we bear fruit and flowers that blossom as goodness, and justice, and righteousness in the world. We abide because we are nourished. If the source, the vine, and the branches are not connected, there is no nourishment or fruitfulness. The branch might fall to the ground and touch the soil, and soak up the rain, and receive the sun, but that branch will die because it is not connected to the divine and to the community. We must be connected to the source that nourishes us. Jesus abides.

Abiding is also crucial because it is where we get our flavor. I don't know much about growing grapes or about the thriving of a vineyard, but I hear that wine has a unique personality based upon the location of the vineyard. The connection of the vine to the microclimate, the mountains, the springs of water, or the soil gives that particular wine a unique flavor. I heard about a wine with a unique subtle flavor of eucalyptus. The reason the wine is flavored that way is because

there is a eucalyptus tree in the corner of the vineyard. That tree influences the grapes and you can taste a hint of the eucalyptus. Being connected and nourished by the abiding Jesus brings flavor to our lives, the flavor of resurrection, the flavor of restoration, the flavor of rejuvenation, the flavor of rebirth. Jesus abides.

As for Royal Lane, we have had twenty years where The Dude has abided. Harry Wooten has abided with Royal Lane and Royal Lane with him. Harry's connection to this place has been one of nourishment. Harry's connection to this place has provided flavor. His ministry and his care and his creativity and his leadership has nourished and flavored our lives. Harry's influence and presence has nourished my life as well, all the way back to when I first began to understand what abiding with Jesus meant. Harry and I met in the vineyard of Judson Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. That was the church where I was baptized and began my walk with Christ and it was where Harry began his ministry career. Harry was one of the abiding presences in my life as he taught me how to be connected to the church, to bring and receive nourishment from a community of faith, and to flavor our world with wit, wisdom, and humor, and energy. Harry taught me how to abide.

Harry, today we celebrate that you are the dude. And we are grateful that you have abided with us and that God abides with us and through us because of your good work. And so, we also remember this day that we are a resurrected people, that we are to be connected to each other, that we are to love our neighbors, that we are to flavor this world with friendship and grace, and that we are all called to abide.

The Dude abides! Jesus abides!

Amen.