

Study Guide April 29, 2018

Readings: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Theme: Abide in Christ

This fifth week of Easter, the lectionary continues to provide us with a blue print of sorts for what it means to be followers of Jesus, Christians and a Church. If I were to pull one common theme through these for readings, it would be from John's gospel and epistle: Abide in Christ. To abide in Jesus is an invitation to be with him, and to be like him in the way we share the good news of God's redemption through love and forgiveness.

Philip, in Acts, has literally spent time being with Jesus. He has learned first hand what it means to be Christ-like, "to be holy as I am holy" (Leviticus 20:26; 1 Peter 1:13-16). Because of this, he is able to do what he has been commissioned to do (Matthew 28:18-20). But we don't have that luxury of going back in time to learn first hand. Thus, we need to be nurtured in scripture and shaped for by the Holy Spirit; we need to be feed and pruned like a vine in order to produce the fruits of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:13-23). When we abide in Christ, we are closer to God's Spirit, which is hard at work reshaping our hearts and communities, where we thrive and flourish as individuals and as the body of Christ himself.

Read: Acts 8:26-40; Matthew 28:18-20

In this passage, Philip meets a eunuch from Ethiopia who is making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The audience of the book of Acts would have been curious about this figure. A person from a distant land whose appearance was different from theirs would have intrigued the audience. As a court official in charge of the Ethiopian queen's treasury, the eunuch is a powerful individual. However he does not flaunt his power but instead humbles himself before the Apostle. He invites him to sit with him and to explain the meaning of the words from Isaiah that are posted on a "billboard." Philip, who has learned to abide in Jesus, answers his call to teach the good news of Christ. And through their conversation, the eunuch is won over and desires to be baptized so he too can abide in Christ. It also says something about the nature of the church, and the inclusive nature of baptism; regardless of one's national origin or position, all are invited to be a part of Christ.

Q: What parts of this passage speak to your heart today? And how might it bring you closer to abiding in Jesus?

Q: How might God be inviting you to illuminate the scriptures for people in your lives?

Prayer Starter: Lord Christ, today as I seek to be more like you and less like me, I pray for your Holy Spirit to guide me and empower me to share the good news with others.

READ: 1 John 4:7-21

This reading from John is a moving description of God's love, and it ties perfectly with the gospel call to abide in Jesus, the perfection of God's love manifested in the world. As followers of Jesus, God's love is revealed in and through us, so we are called to express this love in the way we live our lives, including our inward emotions and our outward actions. John makes it explicitly clear that God loves us, no matter what. But he also raises the question of to what extent are we willing to love one another where God's love is perfected within and among us all as individuals and as the body of Christ.

Q: What parts of this passage speak to your heart today? And how might it bring you closer to abiding in Jesus?

Q: It doesn't take much to realize that we are all in dire need of God's unconditional love. What are some ways that God is inviting you to do that might reveal God's love for someone in your life, in your community, or even in the world?

Prayer Starter: Lord Christ, you came into my life to teach me how to love, and showed me how far you are willing to go to share it with me. Open my heart, not just to receive this gift but to also allow it to freely flow from me in all that I do today. Amen.

READ: John 15:1-8; Psalm 80:1-19 (7-12)

Jesus describes for them how to be sustained in life – by abiding in him. Just as the life of a branch is sustained by being connected with the vine, our lives are sustained through our relationship with Christ. The passage also describes how the vinegrower periodically prunes the branches so that they can bear more fruit. Like a branch being pruned, there may be times in one's life when circumstances cause a person to let go of a commitment, habit, or some other aspect of life in order to eventually live more fully and fruitfully. By drawing one's attention to abiding in Christ, individuals and institutions can be better prepared to discern, navigate, and embrace seasons of pruning and flourishing.

Q: What parts of this passage speak to your heart today? And how might it bring you closer to abiding in Jesus?

Q: What is going on in your life, inside your heart and outside in your world, that you need God to prune so that you might be better able to abide and flourish in Christ's love?

Prayer Starter: Lord Christ, even as I am a part of your vine, I am just a branch. I cannot prune myself without your help. I pray that you might work on me today so that I might abide in your love and peace. Amen.

Slow Read: Psalm 22:24-30

As you read and re-read this passage slowly, remember to breath in the Spirit and allow the words to speak to your heart. Try to picture how that word or phrase shapes a closer relationship with God that can be shared with others in your life.

Prayer: Open my heart to receive your love and my hands to give it all away. Amen.