

Encircled in Love

John 15:9-17

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Our Gospel reading this morning has always been a favorite passage of mine. It is a glorious passage encircling us in God's love.

In our passage, Jesus is a Wisdom teacher. While our passage today begins in the 9th verse of chapter 15, you might remember that the chapter starts with Jesus saying: "I am the vine and you are the branches." He offers us a beautiful image to reflect on – a metaphor for our faith journey. With the vine, the branches are intertwined. They share the same DNA – the same food source – the same roots. Knowing this, Jesus asks us to pay attention and abide in this knowing – to abide in this love.

By abiding in the vine, we bear the fruit of the vine, offering it to the world through our love. This is the invitation of our faith and our story of being a church – to be people of the vine. It is the invitation that I heard as a young girl which guided me to ordination. It is the invitation that I have tried to listen for throughout my 26 years as the Minister of Spiritual Life.

Many years ago, while on my first pilgrimage to Iona, I attended morning prayer in the Abbey. It was a glorious spring morning in early May. The bright blue sky framed the rising sun sparkling on the Sound of Iona. It was breathtaking to enter the chilly, silent, still Abbey that was flooded with sunlight illuminating the simple marble altar, thick stone walls and wooden lectern at the front. That morning the Gospel was read by a young Scottish woman who was a member of the Island Community. I can't remember the passage she read, but I remember the melodic sound of her gentle voice sharing the closing blessing given after every scripture reading:

For the word of God in scripture
For the word of God among us
For the word of God within us.
Thanks be to God.

Ah, I thought, now I have the words for ministry and my own faith journey - listen for God in scripture, listen for God in community and listen for God within. Doing this fleshes out the story of being intertwined and encircled in God's love.

Over our years together we have listened for the Word of God in scripture.

Many years ago, the first Quiet Room was housed in what we now call the Community Room just a few doors down from the library. Each Monday at eleven a few of us gathered for group Lectio Divina. Lectio is an ancient way of listening to scripture. Following the lectionary, we read the Gospel reading for the coming Sunday three times. The first time, we listened for a

word or a phrase that jumped out to us. After a few moments of silence, we would share that word or phrase. A second reader would read the passage again, from a different translation, and this time we'd listen for how the passage spoke to our hearts. After some silence we would share what we noticed. Then, a third reader would read the passage from another translation and we would listen for how God was inviting us to live in the world because of our understanding of the scripture. After some silence, we would share what we noticed.

Week after week, year after year, we met for Lectio Divina. When the Chapel was remodeled, we moved our circle up there. This practice of listening to scripture in community changed me. Gradually I shifted from always thinking about and studying the scripture to listening and waiting for my heart to know and understand its meaning. I began to preach and teach differently – the Word of God is not just something we know but something we LIVE with our whole beings.

Over the years, we have also experienced the Word of God among us.

Last month, the musicians, Jim and I gathered in this Meeting House to tape the last Taize Service that I would lead. We've been holding monthly Taize services in the Chapel for so many years that I can't remember when they started! At some point, we began to end each Taize service with a Dona Nobis composed by Gregory Norbet. The cellist would begin the piece, then Brenda would join in on the piano guiding the worshippers through the six verses, with the soprano soloist singing a glorious descant during the refrain. This simple music became deeply embedded in my heart as the presence of the Holy Spirit always seemed present.

When Covid happened and our Taize services became virtual we stopped singing this Dona Nobis. I'm not sure why. I decided that for our last recording I wanted to sing it one more time but I wasn't prepared to feel so emotional. As the music began and I looked out into this beautiful empty sanctuary it felt sad to be ending with just a recording. Then, unexpectedly, I began to remember all our gatherings here and all the people throughout the years – our times of community worship, weddings, funerals, baptisms, pastoral prayers, sermons, shared life stories of so many who came before us and I realized this is what it means to know the Word of God among us. Life together is the living Word.

Over the years, we have learned to listen for the Word of God within us - the place where God's wisdom is whispered into our hearts and we begin to know and understand the truth of God's love.

This way of inner listening was particularly enriched for me in our Awakening the Spirit book group, the hours and hours of spiritual direction sessions and my practice of contemplative prayer. Over time, I began to understand how God speaks to us in the silence of our hearts and how we're invited to listen and be attentive.

One late fall evening in 1999, after we had gathered for a church retreat to paint the canvas labyrinth, I went down to the auditorium to walk the labyrinth. No one was there. The light was low, some candles were lit and quiet music was playing. Sometime during this walk, I

heard the quiet voice of God's Wisdom say to me: "I'm not going to blow in through the front door, look for me in the cracks and crannies." This message was so loud that I had to pay attention. It has guided me throughout the years listening again and again to the Word of God within us.

All of this has framed my faith journey and ministry.

Thank you for being the community of faith that has allowed me to discover the story of my ministry. I am deeply grateful for our 26 years together and all the times we have encountered God's presence among us.

As we move into a new era at First Church, may you be encircled in Holy Light and love, and may God be with you on the journey. Amen.

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