

Abide With Me

John 15:1-8

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May 2, 2021

Several personal development gurus, including Jim Rohn, Tony Robbins and Darren Hardy share an observation that is some variation of this idea: we are a direct reflection of the people with whom we spend the most time. That is, our actions, behavior and thoughts are shaped by those around us. It's true! The books we read, music we listen to or places we visit often result from a recommendation from someone. And it's more than that. Our perspective and world view: the way we think and the lens through which we see the world, and the way we talk about it are influenced greatly by others around us.

A character in the novel *Lonesome Dove* is so fond of a Latin dictum that he emblazons it on a sign. The phrase seems to mean something like, "A grape changes color when it sees another grape." The idea, as the novel goes on to suggest, is that we cannot help but be changed by the people in our lives. We absorb who and what we are around, even if we're not entirely conscious of it.

It seems to me that (in one sense) this is what Jesus is talking about when he says, "Remain in me... no branch can bear fruit by itself... if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit." Jesus' words seem to emphasize proximity, connectedness. We surround ourselves and stay close to; those to whom and to what - we want to be most like.

Henry, a pastor in the small fishing village of Lower Brixham in Devonshire England, had a lung condition that had deteriorated into tuberculosis. Henry planned a therapeutic holiday to Italy with the hopes that the climate there would improve or at least alleviate the symptoms of his poor health.

In his last sermon before heading to Italy he said, "I must put everything in order before I leave, because I have no idea how long I'll be away." It was September and he knew he couldn't weather another cold, damp British winter. In 1847 there was not much that could be done for tuberculosis, except for a change of climate. While he prepared for his trip, and while he was traveling, he worked on a poem. That poem has become a hymn, one that may be familiar: "Abide with Me." Henry posted his poem in a letter to his family while he had briefly stopped in Avignon, France. He never made it all the way to Italy. Henry died there in France, his last words were, "Peace! Joy!" "Abide with Me" was sung for the first time at his funeral.

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

They had finished supper, Jesus had lifted the cup of wine and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." In his Gospel, Mark records how Jesus followed up the words of institution saying "Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again

of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." That same night, less than twenty-four hours before his crucifixion, John records that Jesus said to his disciples, "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

*I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's pow'r?
Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.*

In John's Gospel Jesus says of himself, "I am the bread of life," "I am the Light of the world," "Before Abraham was, I am," "I am the Door," "I am the Good Shepherd," "I am the Resurrection and the Life," "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," "I am the True Vine."

Jesus the bread of Life, the Light of the World, the God of Abraham's praise, the Doorway of Salvation, the Good Shepherd of the sheep, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the True Vine, hung dead on the cross and Henry with his tuberculosis, and you with your troubles and me with mine hung there with him because in baptism we abide in Jesus and he abides in us. Through the cloud of the cross and sunshine of his glorious Easter morning resurrection, we trust that Jesus abides with us and we with him. This is what it means to abide. We are not separated from one another, not in life not in death. In Jesus, we are one... one in him. Yet Jesus warns us when he says, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the Vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

*Come not in terrors, as the King of kings,
But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings;
Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea.
Come, Friend of sinners, thus abide with me.*

"Abide with Me" is a hymn often chosen for funerals. It is true that when life's little day ebbs swiftly to a close, we Christians take comfort in our Lord Jesus, in the fact that we abide in him and that he abides with us. However, we face many days in our life where death *doesn't* loom a great deal! In those days too, it is good to remember that as Christians we abide in Jesus and he abides in us. Give thanks when the Holy Spirit in life and in death sets Jesus and his cross and passion before our eyes. In the midst of earth's vain shadows, it is Jesus, who says, "I am the Light," Who shines through the dim gloom and decay of the world, it is his light that abides with us, it is his life-giving nutrients passing from Vine to branch that gives us life, even life eternal... and makes fruit grow amidst our daily struggles.

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.*

In his Word, in his Supper, in his Baptism we abide in Jesus and Jesus abides in us. As we remember Jesus' words and actions through sharing in his word and sacraments, Jesus' presence is made manifest to us. We talked about this concept at our confirmation retreat last Sunday. There is a way in which we experience the past (the ancient stories of Scripture, practicing the sacraments of baptism and communion) in the present, while also glimpsing the future promises of God. Promises of life ever-lasting, love ever-giving. These experiences have the power to assuage our fears, for in sharing them, we abide with Christ, and Christ abides in us.

*Hold thou the cross before my closing eyes;
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O God, abide with me.*

Each time I read about Jesus' miracles in the Gospels or the faith of the early Christians in Acts, I cannot help but be changed by what I read. When I am part of a community that shows Christ-like love and compassion to others, the odds of my doing the same are good. Jesus' invitation to remain in him – to abide in him- is an invitation to relationship... a relationship that is life-giving and bound to change us; to influence us more than any other. May we accept this invitation to relationship, to spend time with Jesus. It is an invitation to growth, to love, to life itself.

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