Abide in My Love – Experience God!

*(Celebration of New Ministry, John 15: 9-17)*

*Jesus said to the disciples, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” (John 15.15)*

Well good evening again – what a lovely beginning to a very exciting night for me. The young voices of our Calvary school choirs; the beautifully chanted litany; inspirational readings from Scripture. Not to mention Bishop High in his pointy hat. And just think – the best part of the service is still to come. All of those gifts and presentations for me. Followed by bread and wine up here. And then cookies. Does the Episcopal Church do it right or what?!? Thank all of you for being part of this night.

Now before I go any further, I want to answer the question that many of you are asking yourselves. And that I know ALL of my clergy friends are wondering. And that is – what is he doing up there? I thought the Bishop was supposed to preach; or one of his friends. Doesn’t he have any clergy friends?

Well, you know . . . that is exactly what I am wondering right now. Certainly, the more common practice in our Diocese is for the Bishop or a close clergy friend to preach. And then I could be all relaxed and sitting out there and watching one of you work! I mean, what was I thinking?!?

However, Bishop High suggested that this is a unique opportunity for the new Rector to talk to his congregation outside some of the constraints of Sunday lectionary preaching. He said it is a chance to share what I would want my new life with you to be like. Maybe lay out my vision –say things that I would not get around to saying once I drop back into the weekly routine of church life. And so as he talked, I began to think yes. I can talk about all of the great things that we are doing. And all the even greater things that we will do together now that I am here. So I (probably foolishly) allowed him to persuade me. But none the less, I am up here. So let’s see what we can do with this time.

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As I said, I originally imagined this as a time for talking about all of the great plans that your Vestry and I have for the upcoming few years.

Plans to get more of you involved. Plans to welcome new members and grow our church. Plans to support our school and help it increase enrollment. Plans to continue and increase our mission and outreach. Plans to update our buildings and grounds. All of that.

And then – fitting right in with that idea – our annual Diocesan clergy conference happened just a couple of weeks ago. So I had the opportunity to hear talks and participate in workshops that gave me all of this great information about how to do those very things. And how to do them even better.

I heard how to be a more effective preacher. Looked at ideas to help me be a more knowledgeable teacher. Heard how to run a better stewardship campaign. And saw all sorts of new ways to reach those outside out walls. And the best thing was that these great ideas came with cool new labels and terminology.

I was so excited that I couldn’t wait to come back tell you how we are going to start a front door, green field, outside the walls, meet them where they are, have church in a bar, evangelism ministry in which all of us are empowered to drag people, I mean lead people, to Jesus Christ - without waiting for them to come through our doors and find us.

And so after two days of being inspired by tremendous speakers and people that have great success stories to share – I was ready to come back and lead us into battle for lost souls.

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But then, something unexpected happened. The last of the plenary speakers of the week was an Anglican priest from Wales named Christopher Webb. He came with the appropriate British accent and all, but he is a Benedictine monk and the head of this Benedictine Priory in Denver, CO.

However, Webb is a very non-traditional monk, to say the least. He is something called a new monastic, which is the result of a fairly recent movement in monastic communities to redefine the nature of what it means to be in community together. In fact, in the case of Webb’s monastery, it is redefined such that it no longer requires that the monks actually live together. Or, that you need be single. So Webb does not live in the monastery – and he is married with four children.

And so here is this odd ball monk who is exceptionally intelligent and well read, with a strange accent and an off the wall sense of humor.

I mean the first thing this guy did was make fun of our Bishop Andy’s hairstyle. Kept calling him “Dude.” You’re wasted on Texas – you need to be bishop of California. Don’t worry Bp. High – I won’t be making fun of your silly hat and calling you “Dude”.

But in the midst of Webb’s humor and his kidding around was a very serious message for the gathered clergy. A message about understanding our primary ministry – the one thing that we should most try to do and to be. And he said that ministry is NOT primarily teaching and preaching. I.e., talking about God.

Rather than a worship experience in which we mostly just talk about God and sing about God; He said we need to be about experiencing God. Experiencing God and bringing others into that same experience. It is the experiencing of God that churches need to be about – not the talking about God. So stop measuring the value of your service on how many people showed up, or how much money was in the plate, or on how cleverly you wove the Gospel of the day into an appropriate current application.. Instead, measure the value of what you do on the extent to which God was experienced in this place.

And then just to be sure that we understood where he was coming from, he added this. “If you don’t take anything else away from what I tell you today, remember this: I want you to stop being a leader, and be a priest.”

And he got a smattering of applause when he said that. Not from me – my first thought was – who let this guy in here? Didn’t they know what he was going to say? Doesn’t he know that the primary focus of our Diocese for the last five years or so has been to form clergy leaders who then raise up lay leaders to share in the forming and organizing of our ministries to more effectively involve everyone in the work of the church.

And this guy is saying, forget all of that leadership stuff and BE a priest?

But I continued to listen, and he continued to talk. And I began to hear more of what he meant.

In order for us to experience God – in order for me to open our worship and our lives together to an experience of God, I must first be about experiencing God myself. Through prayer and reflection and by spending time each week, away from all of the voices of the world, in order to hear God’s voice.

And then I need to help you do the same. See, it is easy to talk about God. Well actually, as Webb points out, the easiest thing to do is to come to church, and just have coffee together and talk about everything BUT God. But the next easiest thing is to talk about God himself. The hardest thing to do is to experience God.

That takes some work – some intentionality. It involves a dedicated effort to leave other things behind, and to open ourselves to the workings of the Spirit. And it is risky. Being open to allowing God to go to work on our lives might mean change – even transformation.

But that should be why we are here.

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Jesus says it this way:

Abide in my love. Abide (reside) my love – and my joy will be in you. Abide (experience) my love and YOUR JOY will be made complete.

And the love that he offers is one that is relational – a mutual love in which we are co-participants. Jesus tells the disciples (and tells us) that we are not to see ourselves as servants – but as friends.

In other words, the relationship between God and us is not intended to be one-sided. But reciprocal, as friends who care deeply for each other.

*Abide in my love.* Jesus is inviting us, to share in the intimacy of his own relationship with God the Father. And he says that by doing that. By experiencing his love - we are completed. We are completed. Our joy is made complete.

Br. Webb is saying something very similar. As a priest, we invite our congregation into our own relationship with God. We do that through our public prayers. We obviously do that in our preaching. And we do that as we go about living our personal lives. And so as my life as your Rector unfolds, so will your witness of my relationship with God. And that is a very special intimacy.

One of the things that I learned long ago about being the Rector of a church is that there is nowhere to hide. Whether I am having a good day or a bad day, the one certainty is that I have all of my days right up here in front of God and all of you. Therefore, as witnesses to my ongoing experience and relationship with God – I hope that you will respect the intimacy of that relationship and to be understanding and supportive.

Particularly supportive. In fact, I hereby give you permission every Sunday to say the words, *“I enjoyed your sermon,”* even when you did not have any idea of what I was talking about.

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But I digress. Back to experiencing God.

And back to Webb’s assertion that the most important thing that a priest does is NOT what he does. It is not about getting things done and leading others in getting even more things done. In fact, he says that church business meetings are where prayer and spirituality go to die.

Because none of what we do ultimately has eternal value. All of our meetings about our buildings and our stuff that seem so important have a finite life. All of this (the building) – every THING that we build together will eventually turn to dust. What will last will be the community that we make together. We – you and me – are Calvary church. Not this building – even with its beautiful stained glass.

So while meetings about our stuff are necessary, they will never provide something of eternal value. But when we come together and experience and abide in the love of God and then find ways to nurture and demonstrate our love of God and our love for one another. Then. Then, we have done something that has eternal value.

Then we nurtured relationships and formed a community that will last even after we are gone, and the buildings are all broken. Then we will have done the work that the Body of Christ is meant to do.

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Many of you know that we had a funeral service here yesterday. A lovely lady named Olga, who was the sister of one of our long time members, but who did not come around our church very often. Nor did any of her family.

I was called over the weekend and told about her death and asked if she could have her final service here at Calvary. And I remember having a fleeting selfish thought as I was making arrangements with the family and agreeing to the time and day and place of the service. Thinking – oh my, there goes another day out of my already busy week that I won’t be able to use for preparing for all of this tonight.

Shame on me. Shame on me.

Yes, this is a beautiful service in which many have a part and so it has required lots of planning and organization. And there is no doubt that this is one of the most moving and important days in the life of Paul Wehner and my family. And for Calvary. And yes, we can and should experience God here tonight.

But this is not why we call ourselves the Body of Christ.

We are the Body of Christ when we put our arms around a family that we barely know. When we hold them close and help them abide in God’s love. We are the Body of Christ when open our doors and our prayer books and offer the comforting words that are found there. Words that promise salvation and forgiveness and comfort and peace. We are the Body of Christ not only when we invite those who are hurting to come to that table and share the bread and wine and be comforted by the presence of Christ, but also when we sit with them out there and share the food that we brought. And comfort them with our presence.

We are the Body of Christ when we abide together in the love of Jesus Christ and allow him to complete our joy.

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And I pray, that as your Rector, I never ever let us forget that.

Amen.