

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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1 John 3:1-7, Luke 24:35-48
Abiding in Christ

In the Name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning is about *abiding* in Christ. Do not wander off from him, like some poor lost sheep straying from its Good Shepherd. And do not permit this world's temptations to do you harm, as if you were some branch lopped off from the True Vine, with little future left except to wither and die from lack of life. My text, then, is from our Epistle Lesson, from First John Chapter 3:

⁵You know that he was revealed to *take away* sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who *abides in him* sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. (1 John 3:5-6, RSV)

Notice the holy purpose for which Jesus came: to *take away* sin. If we will abide with him, he will do this for us. He will heal a fever that rages in us and lift a burden that weighs us down -- the burden of sin that so discourages us and all humanity.

EMMAUS

Today's Gospel Lesson is directly preceded by the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. A stranger has taken up the walk with them. It is our resurrected Lord Jesus, but these two do not recognize him. They simply recognize that they are glad for his presence with them. They would have him linger with them. Modern translations use the plain word "stay": "Stay with us..." (RSV, NRSV). And that is fine. But the King James Version uses the lovely word I want to lift up this morning, "abide":

²⁸And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. ²⁹But they constrained him, saying, *Abide with us*: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them. (Luke 24:28-29, KJV)

My theme is that divine "abiding" goes both ways. Our greatest blessing is that our resurrected Jesus will abide *with us*. But we ought not to evade and

fight against this very blessing for which we hope. That is, we should make it our daily ambition to abide *with him*.

At the end of the day, during Vespers or Compline, or at the end of life, when we celebrate the funeral, we often sing the prayer that Jesus will abide *with us*. Here are two of the verses of that great hymn:

- 1 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, oh, abide with me.

- 4 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!

Text: Henry F. Lyte, 1793-1847, *Abide with Me*
LBW 272

Indeed, if the Lord abides *with us*, we do triumph still, in full face of the horrors of sin, death, and the devil. What I want is that we not make ourselves strange and irrational by refusing to abide *with him*. Let it be our morning prayer and intention that we will abide with Jesus this day, every day. And then, I do believe, we will bring some much needed beauty and goodness to this world.

TRUE BEAUTY

There is a tall building on the corner of Park Avenue and 87th Street with a courtyard of flowers along the sidewalk. There are tulips there now, and it is almost unbelievable how intense their colors are – deep reds, like the scarlets of sunset. I walk by that building just about every day, and in these beautiful spring days as I walk by those particular flowers, I sometimes find myself thinking of Mrs. Anna Ehrmann, of blessed memory, and her daily constitutional. Anna lived to about age 94. She died many years ago. She rather looked like Miss Marple played by dear Joan Hickson in the PBS Mystery Series, especially when she would stop and gaze at those flowers. She observed things. She took delight in things. She did not require much in this world: simple food, daily exercise. When she developed heart troubles in old age, she peacefully accepted it: “What can you expect,” she said, “when you are almost 90.”

So, sometimes I would chance upon her as I walked from the parsonage to the church. She would be standing there, admiring the flowers. And I would be standing there, admiring *her*.

New York City is beautiful in the springtime, with its flowers and fresh air and beautiful skies. But the true adornment of this world is a beautiful life! That is what I am after: that we should abide with Jesus, and in abiding, become more lovely in the eyes of our Maker and our neighbors.

BEAUTIFUL DOES NOT MEAN UNEARTHLY OR SKINNY FROM FASTING.

Now, being beautiful in this world does not mean being unearthly or skinny from fasting or haggard from an ascetic manner of life. Rather, being beautiful in this world means being Christlike. It means so loving and abiding in Christ that the world is somehow put in mind of Jesus. True beauty means living in this world in harmony with it, as if this is where we belong and the world is glad to have us.

All people, no matter how lowly and humble, have some place in this world¹. God has made them, and would not be without them. They belong here, and they are worthy of life and of serving him. And all creatures, from the majestic hawk soaring in the mountain tops, to the mighty bear reigning in the Yukon, to the butterflies floating in the meadow, to the minnows meandering in the rowboat lake in our Central Park, to the very plankton in the sea soon to be consumed by the mighty whale – all the critters have a place in the world and belong here. And all the things and features of the landscape, from the mighty mountains to the very dust swirling in the sunlight – it all belongs. There is no offense in its being in the world. But sin has no place. It does not belong. It is a horror to our Maker. We know this from the lengths to which Christ went on the Cross to overcome sin, to make sure that someday there will no longer be sin in our world.

After all, when we rejoice to say “Christ saves us from our sins,” we do not mean merely that he saves us from the “punishment” of our sins, but also something more simple and direct: he saves us “from our sins”! Naturally, honestly, inevitably: if we abide in him, he saves us from sin. It can’t be helped. Life in Christ means there has got to be a whole lot less sinning going on in the world.

ABSTINENCE FROM SIN

¹ I believe I got this good idea – that all things belong in this word *except* for sin – from Chrysostom or Spurgeon or Luther. But I no longer remember precisely.

Christians, then, are like alcoholics or other addicts. We have some abstaining to do, for the rest of our lives. Day by day, if we would abide with Christ, we must fight the good fight of abstinence from sin. As St. John puts it in our text:

⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him sins; (1 John 3:5-6, RSV)

Some people need to abstain from alcohol. Every atom of alcohol has become, as it were, their mortal enemy. Their bodies just cannot take it. Their bodies are not suited to it. Christians are people who should practice abstinence from sin. We were not built for sin. Our lives and our bodies are not suited to it. Sin can only diminish us.

St. Paul testifies to his holy desire to abide in Christ Jesus. He wants to be wholly Christ's, because Christ has "made me his own":

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me *his own*. ¹³Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:8-14)

Perhaps we can use the good, plain saying of John the Baptist to state the ideal of abiding in Christ:

He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30, RSV)

ADORNMENTS IN THIS WORLD

I think that many of us have been blessed to know people like Anna Erhmann, who gazed at the beautiful flowers while herself being a beautiful adornment in this world. We have known people who lived lovely lives in Christ. I think of my dear old pastor, Rev. Raymond Shaheen, for example. As he approached his 88th birthday, he sent me a letter with this passage in it:

Come 9 May, God willing, I shall mark the 88th anniversary of my birth. I am so grateful to Him that He continues to use me. No day is long enough by which to love and to serve His glory.

"No day is long enough by which to love and to serve His glory." This from a man who loved the early morning hours, who loved to greet the sunrise hard

at work in his study, praying and writing and carrying on his ministry.

And you young people here at Immanuel, including our visiting Choir from Mattawan, Michigan. In the eyes of your parents, you are beautiful. From the moment you were born, when mother and father admired your little hands and toes, and probably for as long as you live, your parents will think you beautiful, and they are right: certainly you are. And in the eyes of your girlfriend or boyfriend or wife or husband someday, you will also be beautiful, even to old age and grey hair. But think of this, and be pleased in the thinking of it: all the world, yea, all eternity, will join in the admiration of your parents and your loved ones if you will abide with Christ. This world knows no higher beauty than that of a consecrated life. A life given over wholly to Jesus, adorned with virtue and the beauty of holiness: that is what abiding with Christ offers to each one of us.

Yes, there is much beauty in this world, and you who bear the name of Christ, have the chance to increase beauty on earth through nurturing and yielding to a holy desire to abide with him, to be like Him, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.