***“Abide in Me”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, May 2, 2021

**1 John 4:7–8, 11–12**

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . 11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

**John 15:1–9**

1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. . . 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”

Today we have more readings from the John literature, and that means more emphasis on love, a message that had great meaning for the believers to whom John wrote his letter, and which has great meaning for us today. I can hear John’s love for his parishioners in his words: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

In early April I preached on one of the two “God is love” passages. Today we have the other passage: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (4:8). Love is the real test of whether Jesus’ Spirit is active within you, love being the greatest of the fruits of the Spirit. As John says, “if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (4:12). In other words, by our actions are we known. Can you see God’s love bearing fruit in *your* actions? Practice makes perfect. As we grow, love takes on new dimensions of depth within us. Love seeks to reach perfected expression; mature form, which means shedding selfishness and manipulativeness from our love. We commonly pollute our love with selfishness. As Paul says, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable. . . It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4–7).

How does love mature? Through practice and self-correction. As we grow physically, mentally, and spiritually, our love understands more and blossoms more fully. We see some of that hinted at in the gospel quote.

If you are a branch rooted in the vine, who is Jesus, then you will bear spiritual fruit. In fact, the branch cannot bear fruit unless it is rooted in the vine (John 15:4). If you stay rooted in the vine, you bear fruit. If you pray and think about Jesus’ words, you are helping yourself to stay rooted in him. If you abide in him, he nurtures you with love. You can see why the vine is an important symbol, probably the most important, because it really says something about the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, and it says something about our lived experience. We should be conscious of that experience of feeling connected to the vine. Have you ever had an experience that made you feel connected to God, perhaps allowed you to sense God’s plans for you?

He says “abide in me.” What a warm and deep word, “abide.” It means live, in the sense of dwelling permanently. Again, it is an experience that we will know in our hearts. It would be like coming home after a long day, to be welcomed. So what I need to explore in this sermon is inward experience, and the mental picture we have of what that experience means.

If we are guided by our mental picture of whether we are abiding in Jesus, isn’t there a danger of self-deception, or of delusion about whether we have a healthy relationship with Jesus or not? Yes, indeed, there is a danger of self-deception, whether through miscalculation or deliberate dishonesty. Those are always possible. I don’t want to spend much time on the latter. If someone is deliberately deceitful, they probably cannot be reached by reason or by preaching. They have a spiritual sickness unto death.

There are many more people, I think, who mean well but who do not understand themselves, or cannot assess themselves very accurately. They do not notice their errors or their neurotic behaviors; they are only dimly conscious of how they are affecting others. You or I may be one of those people. How do we correct ourselves and get back into a healthy relationship with our creator? I think it takes a consciousness of *spiritual need* and a desire to do better. Like the man who asked for healing, saying, “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). This man had enough honesty to admit that he had some unbelief, along with a certain amount of belief. Jesus granted the healing that the man wanted. Jesus can help those who honestly want help. If you don’t want help, he won’t force it on you. Jesus is always ready for you, to listen when you are ready.

Love is the same way. Most of us need some help with loving. We might say “Lord, I love. Help my unlovingness. Heal my coldness. Light a flame under me, a flame not of fanaticism but of love.” Or we might be like Peter when he foolishly but enthusiastically remarked, when Jesus was washing his feet: “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” (John 13:9). Jesus answered “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean” (13:10), which seems to be saying that Peter is mainly clean, but his feet have taken on the dust of the road of that day’s walking.

In other words, Peter is basically clean spiritually, but maybe needs a bit of spiritual cleansing every day. Our feet pick up some dirt every day. We all need a bit of cleansing, perhaps in the form of a session of prayer, or Bible study, or worship, or spiritual service. We can give ourselves the gift of a few moments each day to connect with God, to talk with Jesus. It could be a centering moment before the day starts, or a calm reflection at day’s end.

These things are like a foot-washing for the soul. After one of these cleansings, we think a little more clearly and we serve a little more lovingly. John tells us that we are already children of God (1 John 3:1). We just need to go further and “obey his commandments” (3:24), knowing that the main commandments are to abide in him and to love one another. These are a repeat of the Great Commandment. “Love one another” Jesus said (John 15:9). When a scribe affirmed Jesus’ assertion of the dual love commandment, and then added “this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices,” Jesus said “you are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:33–34).

I think none of us is far from the kingdom of God. We just need a “rest stop” from the day, a spiritual tune-up from time to time, a little cleansing, an inspiring reminder or a moment of heartfelt prayer. Find a way to fulfill the commandment “you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14).

To summarize: As we grow, our love grows. Jesus, the vine, nurtures us spiritually every day, and he forwards his plan for our lives. He works to reduce any self-deception that we may have. He helps us with learning to love. He says “you are clean” and “you are not far from the kingdom of God.”

I hope today’s service functions as a spiritual foot-washing for you. Remember to abide in him.