

“Abiding in Community” John 15:12-17 Shane Hatfield 3/7/21

Now it's time to dig into God's word. If you have a Bible, open up to John 15. We have been studying Jesus' farewell sermons to His disciples the night before He was betrayed. This is often called the farewell discourse; we're calling it “A Glorious Farewell.” Tonight, we're talking about abiding in community. In the first part of His sermons, Jesus talked a lot about His going to the Father and then the Holy Spirit coming down to us. Now, in the beginning of chapter 15, He has shifted from talking about His going to our abiding. Last week we talked about abiding in Christ and we learned that abiding with Christ means living with Him. He wants us to move in and live with Him, just as the Holy Spirit has moved in and lived with us and we talked about how abiding brings love and joy and peace and fruit for His mission and I asked, ‘How do we abide in Him?’ We abide by His means of grace which are the word of God, prayer, and the Holy Spirit, and the last one is we abide in Him through community. I wanted to take a whole week just to talk about this concept of abiding in community, because Jesus really expands on it and elaborates on it here in John 15:12-17. So, I'm going to read the text.

Before I read the text, if you're a young listener out there, let me give you three things to listen for: a story about a dog rescue, the ultimate example of loving one another, and a question: how can you love someone in the church? Those are the three things you're going to listen for. Adults, you just have to listen to the outline, okay? We don't give you questions. You're on your own. Alright, let me read for us. This is God's word from John 15:12-17.

“¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another.””

This is God's word

A few years ago, I heard a podcast called “From Tree to Shining Tree.” It was on Radio Lab on NPR, and there was a lady on who was an ecology professor from British Columbia. Her name was Susan Simard. Susan told the story about how she, as a young girl, had her eyes opened to the world of roots, tree roots that is. She said it like this, she said that her family had a house in the forest and one day they were out there, and they had a family gathering. While they were at this family gathering, their family dog, Jiggs, got lost. They looked all over for Jiggs; they were yelling his name. They were searching high and low for him, when eventually they heard Jiggs barking from the outhouse. Kids, if you don't know what an outhouse is, ask your parents after the worship service. So, they went to the outhouse, and Jiggs had fallen in the hole in the outhouse. Well, of course, they had to rescue Jiggs and the only way they could rescue Jiggs was to take this column that was built into the ground and dig out around the column so that it was a pit. So, eventually they dug the pit out enough and they were able to rescue Jiggs from the pit and clean him and save him. They must have really loved that dog, a lot, right? But while they were in the process of digging out this column into a pit, her eyes were opened to the world of roots.

All of these roots were exposed in the dirt, and that led her to go on and get a PhD and become a specialist in trees and roots and what her research did was uncover that trees in a

forest, their root systems all share similar nutrients. See, scientists used to think that trees were disconnected, and different types of trees couldn't survive together, but what her research has shown is that no, all of the roots of the trees in the forest are all sharing the nutrients in the soil together so that they can survive.

Now when I heard that story, I thought, what an amazing illustration of the gospel. When we look at Christian community, what we often think of is all of these individual trees existing in a forest together. That's what we see on the surface. But underneath that surface is a vast root system that is Christ, that nourishes all of us so that we bear fruit for the kingdom. And so, tonight, as we look at this passage, what I want you to see is that we live intimate, fruitful lives for Jesus in community, that we abide with Him, we live with Him in community. It's as we live in this community and we abide together and love one another, that we can bear fruit. Without abiding in Him together in this community, we can't bear fruit. But because the Holy Spirit has knit us together in Christ, we can love one another as Christ has loved us, and we can bear fruit for the kingdom, and we can experience the love and the joy and the peace that Christ has for us. So, we're going to look at three things this evening. We're going to look at the necessity of abiding in community, the example of abiding in community, and the fruit of abiding in community.

First, let's look at the necessity of abiding in community. In John 15:10, Jesus said, if we keep His commandments then we will abide in Him and experience His love and the fullness of God's joy. So, that commandment there is kind of general, but then when we come into 15:12, which we just read, Jesus gives a very specific command, right? For all of you who need more details and more specificity, Jesus gives it. He says, I want you to love one another as I have loved you. Now, if that sounds familiar, that's because Jesus gave His disciples the same command in John 13. Remember in the Upper Room when Jesus washed His disciples' feet, and He said, "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"? Right? So, here, Jesus reiterates that command in the context of abiding. He's saying that abiding is not something we can do alone. We can't abide in Christ, alone. We abide in community! Remember how last week we talked about how abiding is similar to abiding, right? Abiding means making your home with somebody. Jesus wants us to make our home with Him in community.

He gave us this metaphor last week for abiding. He said that He is the vine, the Father is the vinedresser, and we are the branches. Now, He's saying that we're not these solitary branches all disconnected from one another. We're interconnected to this vine. But we're not really used to vines in our culture, are we? We're more of a tree culture, okay? So, think about it this way: Jesus is the root. He's the root of the matter. He's the source of all life for the tree. And He's saying that we're the branches on that tree, and we grow, and we produce the leaves and the fruit on the tree. Now, I like what one commentator said, He said, "What is the trunk?" What's the trunk of the tree? Now, Jesus doesn't say it here, but by implication, the trunk of the tree is the church. The trunk of the tree is the body of believers who are connected by the Holy Spirit to the root system. And it's because they are connected to the Holy Spirit and Jesus, the root system, that the trunk then transfers the nutrients from the roots to the branches so that the branches can produce the leaves and the fruit. An abiding community is the body of Christ connected to each other.

Jesus tells us that this abiding community has a mark, a distinguishing mark about it. Do you guys remember doing leaf collections in science? Do they still do leaf collections? You should. This is what I remember about leaf collections. Trees have different types of leaves. I

don't remember which ones. My wife's family does though! They are fantastic about walking through the trail and spotting all the different trees, like, "Oh that's an oak tree and that's a maple tree." I don't remember. But here's the mark of a Christian tree: loving one another as Christ has loved us. Jesus says when we're connected to Him and this life-giving body, that we love one another, and we produce fruit. But we can't do it alone, and so often in our culture, we think that we live the Christian life alone. And Jesus is saying, no, no, no this is necessary. This is a command, not a suggestion, not an ideal. He commands that we live in this community together, that's marked by loving one another. Now, why would He do that? Because that's the way God created us! God created us to live in community.

Whenever I was a campus minister, for those of you who are new, I was a campus minister in Stillwater for six and a half years. That's why I recently took this job. I'm no longer a campus minister, but as a campus minister, one day one of my students came to my office and said, "I need to meet. I'm depressed. I'm dejected. I just really need to talk to you." So, I said, "Okay." So, he came in and sat down, and I said, "Hey buddy, what's going on? Tell me what's wrong." And he said, "Well, last weekend my friends wanted to go out, and I decided that I was going to stay home because I needed to be with the Lord." I said, "Okay, that's great. What happened?" He said, "Well, my friends left, they went out. I did my quiet time. I read and I prayed and after I was done, I just sat there and I got lonely, and then I felt ashamed because I was lonely. And then I got depressed and I just sat there in my shame and my loneliness and my depression." And he said, "I just can't figure out what's wrong with me. I just can't be alone without getting lonely!" And I said, "Why didn't you go out with your friends? Were they partying?" He said, "No." "Are you guys fighting? Why didn't you go out?" He said, "I just wanted to test myself to see if I could live with just me and Jesus." I said, "Now, it's interesting that you would want to live with just you and Jesus because in Genesis 1 God said that He created us in His image to be fruitful and multiply. So, that means He created us to live in community. And in Genesis 2 He looks at Adam and says it's not good for Adam to be alone, I'll make a helper fit for him, and He makes Eve. So, it seems to me that God created you to be in community and you felt lonely because you were by yourself!" I said, "I think it would be perfectly Biblical for you to go and hang out with your friends after your quiet time!" And you could just see the relief wash over him that he wasn't sinning just because he couldn't sit there and be alone by himself.

This idea that true spirituality is just me and Jesus is not Biblical! It's just not. Yes, nobody else could be Jesus and the church can't be Jesus. Only Jesus can satisfy us and nourish us, but when Jesus calls us to Himself, He called us into a body. He called us into community! I mean, when we were born, we were born into families! Right? We live this sacrificial life connected to Jesus in community. It is necessary for us to abide in community, to be fruitful people and fruitful Christians and I know that has been challenging. The last year has made it very challenging to abide in community, for all of us. I know it just as much as anyone, I fully believe one of the few times in my life I went through depression from about March to about July last year. Part of it was because I was so cut off from the body of Christ! I was so cut off from my friends and my family and my family, my wife and my kids, we were digging in every day just trying to survive and I really feel like it wasn't until I was able to go back and worship and be with the body of Christ that my depression left, and I was able to experience the joy of Christ again with His body. I know it's challenging, but we need to continue to find safe and creative ways to abide in community, as we can. Those with special needs in the health community who are vulnerable, we've got to protect you, we've got to take care of you and

make sure that you don't get sick, but we also need to make sure that you have community, that we love you and that you're not left alone. And as the pandemic improves, we need to continue to figure out how to love one another.

What sin wants to do is isolate us. Sin wants to keep us alone. The Holy Spirit wants to keep us connected to each other in a body where we can love each other and experience the fruit of our glorious relationship with Jesus. So, the first thing we see in this passage is that abiding in community is a necessity. We have to have it. And so, maybe you're sitting there and you're skeptical, and you're thinking, "Well, what about Jesus? Didn't Jesus go alone on the mountain to be with His Father in the mornings and pray? Didn't He spend time alone with God? Isn't solitude a discipline of the church?" Yes! It is. But Jesus also came down. He also spent a bunch of time, probably most of His time with His disciples in community. Silence and solitude are important. They're important because God speaks to us in those moments, but what He speaks to us in silence and solitude He wants us to embody in the body of Christ as we go out and we love one another. Jesus, Himself, said – when He was a boy, He was lost. His parents couldn't find Him. And when they finally found Him, He was in the temple – and He said, "Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" He wanted to be with God's people. He's our great example of abiding in community, and that's the second thing that we see here.

He's our example of abiding in community. Verse 13, Jesus says, "¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Think about all the things that Jesus laid down for His friends. He laid down being eternally present with the Father and the Holy Spirit, enraptured in love and joy with them. He laid all those things aside to come to earth and be with us. He laid down His perfect life to endure the sin and misery of this life. He laid down His life by enduring temptation, persecution, and misunderstanding. He laid down His life by washing His disciples' feet just days before they would betray Him and abandon Him. He laid down His life by dying a sacrificial death on the cross for us. He's the supreme example of loving one another. As we abide in Christ, then we love one another out of the overflow of the way that He loved us. We love one another because He has loved us so much, and we lay down our lives for each other, the way that He laid down His life for us. It's that type of life that shows that we're a friend of Jesus. In verse 14, He said: "¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you." We show that we're friends of Jesus as we love one another.

Again, we show that we're a part of that tree. We show that we bear the marks of being a Christian. And He's revealed this way of life from the Father. Look at verse 15: "¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." Think about this: God the Father called the Son to sacrifice Himself for us, and the Son submitted. And Jesus says He reveals the heart of the Father. So, think about this: most of the time I think people think of God the Father as the mean, angry, stoic, cold-hearted God of the Old Testament that only has wrath. But if Jesus reveals the Father, and we look at Jesus and say, "Look at His love! Look at the way He laid down His life for us!" Then that means that the heart of the Father is a loving heart that also lays down something for us. And that means that the Holy Spirit is a loving Spirit that was willing to let Jesus leave, and was willing to guide Jesus in love, and then even was with Jesus on the cross. Jesus reveals that the whole Trinity is a community of love, laying down its life for one another and for us. The Trinity is not cold and stoic and static. The Trinity is complex and dynamic and it's moving out in love, and because we're created in God's image, the image of a dynamic, loving God, that's what moves us out to love one another the way that Christ has loved us! That's the source of our community. That's the example of our community:

that we go out and love each other with that dynamic, pulsating love the way that God has loved us. That's the heart of true friendship. True friendship is loving one another, and the Bible describes true friendship by really giving it two characteristics. Biblical friendship is both loyal and constant. There's loyalty and there's constancy. Jesus, Himself, displays both loyalty and constancy towards His disciples, and He produces this loyalty and this constancy within us so that within this community we're both loyal and consistent to each other.

There's a great picture of this type of friendship in the Lord of the Rings. In the first book, Frodo is about to leave to go on his journey with the ring and he has been making plans for a long time to leave everything and go, and he thinks he's been really good at keeping the secret, but he hasn't. His friends know that he's about to leave and they tell him, 'Frodo, we know what we're about to do!' And Frodo says this, he says: "It doesn't seem that I can trust anyone." And His friend Merry looks at him and says, "It depends on what you want. You can trust us to stick through thick and thin to the bitter end and you can trust us to keep any of your secrets closer than you keep them to yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo." That's the mark of Christian community. That's the mark of true friendship. Friends that will not let you go through trouble alone. Because Jesus is at work in us through the Holy Spirit, we move toward each other in love and we won't let each other do it alone.

So, we have to ask ourselves, "How can we love one another right now? What does it look like?" You can make a meal for someone and take it to them. You can call a friend that you haven't seen at worship in months because they're part of the medical community and they've got to stay away, and they've got to protect themselves for their job. You can sit with a friend while they're at the doctor's office. You can meet with a friend who's struggling in their faith and give them Biblical counsel. I'll tell you, as part of my new duties, I'm calling people, I'm talking to them, I'm meeting with them. It has been such a treasure to hear about this church and to hear the way that you guys have loved one another over the years. One of the greatest examples is a young lady in our congregation who was injured in a climbing accident. She sustained serious injuries, and people from the congregation literally took her in and nursed her back to health. What an amazing testimony of loving one another! That's the mark of Christ. That's the mark that the Holy Spirit is alive here! It's going to take time to rebuild that. The pandemic has made it hard to love one another. It's made it challenging. It's going to take time to rebuild it, but by the power of the Holy Spirit we're going to do it, because that's what Jesus wants. That's what He's doing. And so, if you're here and you're waiting to experience that love and feel it again, patience. We're trying. We're going to try. We're going to keep moving toward each other.

Somebody once gave me a great formula for intimacy. Do we have any engineers out there? You love formulas. Here's your formula for intimacy: time plus communication equals intimacy. It works with your wife. It works for your kids. It works for your church. You give it time and you communicate with each another, you are going to build intimacy and that's what we're going to do through the power of the Holy Spirit. This real friendship is sacrificial. We're not talking about making an idol out of community. Here's the thing about community: if you make community the thing, then it becomes an idol. But if you make Jesus the thing, if you worship and serve Jesus, then community and friendship becomes the fruit.

That's the last thing that we see in this passage is the fruit of abiding in community. So, we looked at the necessity of abiding in community, the example of abiding in community, and now, the fruit of abiding in community. Jesus says it here in verse 16: "16 You did not choose me,

but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” As we abide in community with Jesus, we bear this eternal fruit. What is that eternal fruit? Well, I like the way that C.S. Lewis says it. He says, “The most immortal thing you can meet is another person.” If you want to change the course of eternity, love someone else. Reach out to someone else and love; impact their lives. So, as we experience the love and the joy and the peace of being intimately connected to Jesus through the body of Christ, and we extend that to other people, we impact eternity. We transform their lives. God uses that to bring eternal fruit. As we abide in community, we bear the fruit of love for one another. We bear the fruit of loving and serving one another. We had some friends in our old church who were having complications in their pregnancy, and they were very scared, they were alone, and they were afraid, and they were in the hospital. In one weekend, forty something people from our church visited them during that time and loved on them and cared for them then and after their child came. It’s the Holy Spirit that moves us to love one another.

As we abide in community, we bring peace. Peace is shalom and healing and well-being. Last week I told you about a man named Kip. Kip was an alcoholic, and Kip’s alcoholism was so terrible that for three years he lived alone by himself in a bamboo patch that was filled with sewage. And one day he needed a drink and so, he asked these people at a stoplight for a drink and this man threw him a couple dollars and he ran to the liquor store as fast as he could, just so he could get a drink. When he came out, he heard a voice tell him, “Go to AA.” So he went to AA, Alcoholics Anonymous. When he got there, there were all these people who loved on him and cared for him, even though he stank. He hadn’t changed clothes or shaved in three years. He was so overwhelmed by the meeting that he got up and when he tried to leave, a woman came up to him and said, “No! Don’t leave!” And she kissed him on the lips. He was so shocked that he came back the next time and again and again and again. But he didn’t change because he tried to do it on his own. Because he did try to do it on his own, and he almost killed himself. Eventually, he realized he couldn’t do it on his own and he moved in his sponsor, Chuck. Chuck and his friends gave him orange juice and karo syrup until he sobered up. After years of living with Chuck, he recovered, and he healed, and he transformed into a man who could love and serve his family.

What if the church loved people like that? What if we took self-righteous sinners like you and me and we brought them in and loved them so well that they recovered from their self-righteousness and they poured themselves out to love others? What if the church loved addicts so well that they recovered here in the body of Christ? That’s what the Holy Spirit wants to do. He wants to make us into a church, not that’s just pretty and nice and friendly, but a church where people come in and are healed by the power of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit.

As we abide in community, we experience joy. One of my friends told me about a time when he took his daughter to church camp, and she took a friend. Kids: church camps and church, they’re great places to be evangelistic. This little girl invited her friend to come to camp. The friend thought she was coming to play sports and when she showed up there were all these nice people! And they were so happy! She said, “I’ve never been around a group of people who are so happy before!” She was so overwhelmed by this happiness that she said, “Why are they so happy?” She learned about Jesus and she gave her life to Christ! We create this community.

Abiding in Christ gives us joy. Abiding in Christ gives us love. Abiding in Christ gives us peace. Abiding in Christ makes us more diverse. The research that I was telling you about before, loggers and foresters used to think that because trees are all the same basic type in an

area, they thought that you couldn't have different types of trees growing together. But then, she went into areas where they'd been burned over and she did all this research, and what they found was that in the burned over areas, multiple different types of trees came up together. She found that all those trees were sharing the same root system, and there was actually more diversity in the area after the burn than there was before. I thought, what a great picture of the church. You look at a church and you think, how could all these diverse people come together? It's because they're all sharing from the same source, and that's Christ! See, if we're not sharing from Christ, if we're not abiding in Him, then we become homogenous and we only worship with people that look just like us. When we worship with Christ, because He takes everyone, then the body begins to become diverse as we all abide together. So, it's abiding in community that produces this fruit. As we live in community, we bear this mark of sacrificial love for one another. We can't do it perfectly, and we certainly can never do it by ourselves. If it was up to us, we couldn't follow our great example to love one another the way Christ has loved us. We can't do it, can we?

That's why it's so important, and I love how Jesus says this, it's so important to remember the first part of verse 16, here: "16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit." Jesus chose us. It wasn't because we were smarter than everybody else. It wasn't because we were more passionate than everybody else. It wasn't because we were more beautiful than everybody else. It wasn't because we were morally better than everybody else. Jesus chose us because He loved us. He loved us because He loved us. And when we realize that Jesus loved us because He loved us, we realize that we have no self-righteousness. None. If Jesus chose you because you were more intelligent, because you were smarter, because you were better, because you had more passion or discipline, then you would feel self-righteous toward those people who are less intelligent, less passionate, less disciplined, less moral than you. But because we were accepted by the sheer grace and mercy of God, we have nothing to boast in. It's all of Jesus. So, we're a community of people who have been loved by God's grace. We are here because of His sheer grace, and His sheer mercy, and that allows us to love everybody with that same grace and mercy that Jesus has loved us with. Jesus says, "Ask the Father in my name that He may give it to you." So, we're going to pray that Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would make us a community that abides in Him, that bears His fruit, and that experiences love, joy and peace together. Let's pray.