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Abide in Love

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In the Lutheran tradition in which I am formed and trained, and with which I still deeply identify, preachers are cautious in their preaching that nothing we say might be construed as “works righteousness”

“Works righteousness” is a phrase that harkens back to one of Martin Luther’s key points in his 95 theses against the Roman Catholic Church, namely that as followers of Jesus we do not need to earn God’s love and grace by doing anything as the Roman Catholic tradition had taught - i.e. our works make us righteous

Rather we are saved by grace through faith, as Paul’s letter to the Romans proclaims, and so anything in a sermon that might even hint that, as Christians, we need to go out and “do” anything might make the hair on the neck of some true, purist Lutherans go up

My fear has been that any time I was tempted to put the words “go,” “do,” or “we must” in a sermon that someone in the congregation would wag their righteous finger back at me and say “eh eh eh, works righteousness”

And, they’re right – I don’t want to give anyone the idea that I think that any of us have to earn God’s favor, or earn God’s love

But, I struggle, then, on mornings like this one, with the desire to say “go,” “do,” or “we must” in response to a lesson like today’s gospel reading from John: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (vs. 12-13)

If I can’t preach a sermon that uses the words “go,” “do,” and “we must” in response to this compelling commandment from Jesus then what, truly, does loving one another as Jesus loved us look like?

I think, sometimes, the theology police can go a little too far in their assumptions that the words “go,” “do,” and “we must” are necessarily pointing towards “works righteousness”

But, I can understand why – mainline Christianity, even mainline progressive Christianity, hasn’t totally rid itself of the idea that we have to do, be, or produce something to be worthy of love, and in particular worthy of God’s love

Some interpret the scriptures like this morning’s gospel in such a way that they believe God is asking for such a charitable life that people will sacrifice themselves on the cross not remembering that the blood has already been shed, the gift already given

So, in one aspect, not preaching “go,” “do,” and “we must” might lead to the kind of Christian identity that says: so long as you show up on Sunday mornings, participate in the sacraments, and identify personally as a Christian you’re good – it’s all been taken care of in the past, we don’t need to *do* anything

On the other end of the spectrum, preaching “go,” “do,” and “we must” can lead some to think that to be a true Christian you must daily be in the trenches of the world, fighting the fight of justice and literally taking off your coat and pouring out your wallet for the sake of your neighbor so that God will welcome you into heaven, we have to *do* everything

Nichola Torbett, author and creator with Enfleshed ministries wrote a commentary on this morning’s gospel that broke this binary thinking for me and she did it by backing up in the gospel to the first line of the text: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”

“What strikes me as crucial is that this love,” Nichola writes, “as it is portrayed here, is not something you have to drum up. It’s not an *effort* to abide in something; you’re not making anything happen. It’s a resting state.

The love is already there and holding us and flowing through us into the world, and all we have to do is stay.”¹

Stay – Abide – “Abide in my love” Jesus said.

“The work is God’s,” Nichola continues “not ours. We need only stay connected to the love that already holds us.”

The love to which Jesus calls us is the air we breathe as Christians, it is the water we swim in

The love to which Jesus calls us in this passage is not the labor of our faith it is the essence of our faith

Abide in my love – “Make my love the house, the tent, the shelter in which you dwell and move around in”² – let it be the air we breathe, the water in which we swim

Nichola’s writing opened up for me a new way of embodying what it means to follow Jesus’s commandment to love as he first loved us

Away from this fear that if we talk at all about “go,” “do,” and “we must” that we are falling into the trap of works righteousness and must therefore live stoic, complacent, apathetic lives

Away from believing that “go,” “do,” and “we must” are the mandatory sacrifices of a faithful life and that you are not loving if you are not suffering

Nichola helped me acknowledge, that acts of love are not justifications for our worthiness

¹ Nichola Torbett, *Liturgy that Matters*. <https://enfleshed.com/>

² <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/abide-in-love-easter-6-b-may-9-2021/>

Acts of love are extensions of the abundant life God has promised to all creation

Acts of love are not obligations

Acts of love are gestures of a truth offered first to us in the love of Jesus Christ

Acts of love are not badges of honor or bandages from a battle

Acts of love are the minimum those who abide in God's creation are entitled to

Love is the air we breathe, it is the water we swim in, it is our essence

Love is the truth in which we dwell

"The work is God's," Nichola said "not ours. We need only stay connected to the love that already holds us."

Yesterday, 42 people from our congregation participated in the St. Bart's Day of Service – that's over half of our regularly worshipping community!

42 of us set aside the time yesterday and I know many of you set aside time regularly in your own lives to do acts of charity and service in our community

God be praised!

And please know that we do not need to extend ourselves in these ways to earn any kind of credit with our Creator, but is it not totally understandable that we would want to extend the love, the generosity, the kindness, the joy, the forgiveness, and the grace in which we abide?

And in extending that love, that generosity, that kindness, that joy, that forgiveness, that grace are we not reconnected, again and again, to the source of those things, the root of our vine?

Are we not resettled to abide ever more deeply in the love and grace of God when we extend the love and grace of God?

No, we do not get a better grade or a promotion in heaven because of our day of service or our acts of love

But we do get the satisfaction of knowing that parts of God's creation who do not regularly know how much they are loved can breathe the fresh air of God's forgiveness which we breathe, swim in the vast sea of God's grace in which we swim, and abide in that great, great love in which we abide.

That is God's love flowing through us because it is God's love in which we stay, in which we are held, in which we are nestled, in which we abide.

To God be the glory! Amen.