

Abiding love: John 15:1-17; 1 John 5:1-6

by [William Brosend](#) in the [May 17, 2000](#) issue

I am not an avid gardener. I like the outdoors but would rather hike or bicycle in it than work in it. So when I read, “Every branch that bears fruit [God] prunes to make it bear more fruit,” I think of my wife, whose approach to pruning is to “whack it down to the ground and see what happens.” Sometimes it works out, sometimes not.

Focusing on the gardening, however, does not do justice to the central metaphor of this passage. Jesus’s image of vine, branch and fruit is not about viticulture. It is about *abiding*, and while the language of vine and pruning may be unique to the 15th chapter of John, the language of abiding is at the Gospel’s core. From the two disciples’ embarrassed question in chapter one, “Rabbi, where do you abide?” to Jesus’s declaration about the Beloved Disciple in chapter 21, “If I wish him to abide until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” (my translations), the Gospel of John is very much about abiding—where Jesus abides and how we who believe in Jesus shall abide. Our translations add variety to the text by substituting “dwell” or “stay” or “remain,” but the Greek root is the same: *meno*, “to abide.”

The trouble is that few of us are clear about what it means to “abide in Christ.” Move to Capernaum? Not likely, though it has been tried, and visits to Israel are surely inspiring. Go to the desert, the monastery, the hermitage? If that is your calling. But for most of us it is not. What about the foreign mission field or a local Christian community, living in solidarity with the poor and dispossessed? Certainly—if that is your calling. But such suggestions are grounded in an understanding of abiding that seems more about place than presence, while I take Jesus to be talking about being present to the presence of God in our midst *wherever* and *everywhere* we are.

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has helped me as much as anyone (except perhaps Brother Lawrence) to understand what it means to practice the presence of God, to abide with Christ. It is hard to imagine being present to Christ when one struggles even to be present to the moment and to oneself. Learning to be who you are where you are seems a prerequisite to being present to anyone else, including Christ. When I returned from a three-month sabbatical last year, I was

asked what I had learned that would help the church. “The most important thing I learned,” I said in all seriousness, “is how to breathe in and breathe out.” I have not yet learned how to meditate, but I now know how to sit quietly for a few moments and breathe in and breathe out, and I am learning how, in those moments, to be aware of how Jesus sits with me and loves me. I imagine myself “reclining” like the beloved disciple, sitting with Jesus and leaning on his shoulder, abiding in his love.

Such moments of abiding are wonderful gifts, but they are not the only way to abide with Jesus: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. . . . This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus says that we abide in his love when we keep his commandments. Not trusting our memories, he emphasizes the commandment he has in mind: Love one another. The elder John had his own version of the same thought: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”

Love is not burdensome? What does John know that we don’t? Maybe this: we tend to treat love as a kind of goal-oriented affection. We love so that something will happen to somebody. I am not sure where that understanding comes from, but I am quite convinced that it’s true. And it is wrong. We do not love as a means to bring about some holy end. We love because God first loved us. Loving is the highest form of abiding, of being present for another. In *Peace Is Every Step*, Thich Nhat Hanh says, “If our love is only a will to possess, it is not love. We must look deeply in order to see and understand the needs of the person we love. This is the ground of real love.” Understanding happens when we are present to the other, when we abide with her or him as Christ abides with us. Not a burden, but a presence. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you.” What more can we ask for than an abiding awareness of the presence of Christ in our lives, and a growing capacity to abide with others?