

Abiding in Christ  
John 15:1-8

What is man's primary purpose? Those of you who are elders and deacons may know. If you have read through the "Westminster Shorter Catechism," which is in your *Book of Confessions*, you may remember that the first question is, "What is man's primary purpose?" The answer is surprising. "Man's primary purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever." Man's primary purpose . . . to enjoy God forever. You and I and every person in the world is here to enjoy God forever. Incredible! Have you ever thought about what it means to enjoy God? Do you enjoy God as much as you enjoy a hot fudge sundae? As much as a romantic relationship? Those who wrote this catechism did not snatch that idea out of thin air. It came out of the Bible. 1 John 1:4. "And we are writing this that our joy may be complete." 2 John 1:12. "Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete." Jesus himself tells us that his purpose for coming is that we may be filled with joy. John 15:11 "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

The Apostle Paul talks about joy, and he talks about glory, and about reward. But as often as not, when he speaks of them he treats them like a distant dream, a far away goal, something that is out of reach for the time being. Jesus, Paul tells us, endured the cross, despising the shame for the joy that was set before him. (Hebrews 12). But when Jesus talks about joy; when Jesus talks about eternal life, he does not mean joy only when we die; he does not mean joy only in heaven; he does not mean joy only in some distant future, which we may or may not attain. No! When Jesus talks about joy he means joy, strength, hope, beauty and forgiveness now, today, and every day of our lives. Jesus says, "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." Those who abide in me bear much fruit. Those who abide in me. But what does it mean to abide in Christ? In *The Book of Common Worship* you will find this prayer, "Eternal God, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendor of creation and in the beauty of human life. Touched by your hand, our world is holy. Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us, to share our blessings with our sisters and brothers, and to experience the joy of life in your presence. Amen." Help us to experience the joy of life in your presence. What does it mean to abide in Christ? It means "to experience the joy of life lived in God's presence." To abide in Christ is to live in the strength and beauty and joy of Christ's presence. To abide in Christ it to find power and joy.

Part of the reason that it seems incredible to many that our purpose on this earth is the enjoyment of God. . . part of the reason that it may sound strange to many that abiding in Christ means joy is that for many people religious duties have not contained much joy. William J. O'Malley has written a wonderful little book titled, *Daily Prayers for Busy People*. This is a priest. This is a man of God. This is someone who has even forgone marriage for the service of ministry. And yet, in the introduction he tells how, in his first twenty-five years as an ordained priest, he found no joy in his prayer life. Each and every day he prayed through the breviary. My prayers were "a routine, obligatory, and barren chore to be gotten out of the way of my real jobs. It was, for one thing, too long. For another it was—quite frankly—boring. I felt hard put to find a single prayer or hymn in it capable of moving the human mind or heart or spirit." (Saint Mary's Press –

1990 – p. 6) I've been down that same road. When I was a student at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, I tried hard to have a quiet time each day. I would read the Bible and write notes in my journal. One year, when I was feeling at loose ends, unsure of my worth, unsure of whether I was really doing the job studying that I should and where I should go with my life, I went to my quiet time hoping for spiritual refreshment and guidance. The book I was reading that day was the book of James. I would very much have liked some joy at that moment. Instead, this is what I got. "He who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord." Translate!?! Self assured people who have their act together can expect that God will hear them, but if you are uncertain or troubled, don't bother to come. If you don't need God, God listens. But if you really need him, don't ask. You can't expect anything. Have you ever had an experience with prayer, or with Bible reading, with devotions or with worship like that? The sky of your intentions and the reality of your life are so far apart that you feel hopeless. Prayer, worship, Bible study, Christian fellowship--all of these things ought to be sources of joy and strength, but for many, like for William J. O'Malley, they are only chores, duties, responsibilities to get through. Many would not do them if they didn't have to, if it were not a sin to omit them. Were it not for the obligation of it all they would be out somewhere in the world looking for that joy that they do not find in God's presence.

Sometimes the devotional material that we read, the prayers, the quiet times that we have bear no fruit. Whatever they do, they do not bring us into the presence of our loving and supportive shepherd, Jesus Christ. Other devotional materials, other prayers, other ways of worship and praise do bring us the joy that we need if we are to fulfill our primary purpose on this earth—to enjoy God forever. Listen to paraphrases from two different devotional readings and see if you can sense a difference in them.

My son, you are never secure in this life. If you do not defend yourself you will be wounded. You ought to manfully face every situation. You will only receive bread from God if you overcome. If you do not overcome, count on experiencing lots of misery. If you seek to rest in this life, how do you expect to make it to heaven? When you are in pain, when you are injured, when you are reproved, when you are confused, when you are humiliated, when you are despised, you should be cheerful. Do you think that God will always comfort you spiritually? Forget it! The saints never had it that easy. They had afflictions, temptations, forsakenness. But they bore themselves up patiently. Do the same in your life. (My own subjective and selective paraphrase of from a paragraph of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas Kempis.) Imagine waking up to that every morning.

Listen now to this paraphrase of a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

I cannot open my eyes in the morning without you being there ready to catch my morning sacrifice. What is a heart, Lord God? Is it silver, or gold, or precious stone, or star, or a rainbow, or is it a little of all of these things mixed in one. What is a heart, Lord God, that you would so eye it, so woo it? that you would pour all your art into it, as if you had nothing else to do. Man whose life consists of serving you . . . he did not create heaven or earth. Yet he studies them and has no thought or time left over for you, who created them. Teach me to know thy love, so that this beautiful morning light that I see may reveal to me both the work and the workman, the creation and the

creator. When that happens, then by a sunbeam I will climb up to you. (Paraphrase of "Mattens".)

Or listen to this prayer. "Living God, like Cinderella, I'm unaware of the magic in ordinary things: the work, the people I share it with, and, not least, myself. Help me understand that the commonplace is what you've given me to alchemize. God, let me find you wherever." Amen. (*Daily Prayers for Busy People*, p, 63)

It is my hope that all who name the name of Christ will find in their prayer, in their worship, in their scripture study a joy, a sense of fulfillment, a sense of being loved by God, a sense of call, a sense of direction that meets the deepest needs of their lives, because when that happens, we want to abide in Christ, not as a religious duty, but because in the presence of Christ is the joy that fills life, and abiding in Christ is the nourishment that makes us fruitful. Last week, we sang, "Your still small voice in this frantic world." Abiding in Christ is not about poetry or about language. It is about prayer and worship that (unlike William O'Malley's boring prayers) have the power to move our human spirits and touch our human hearts. It about encountering wonder, beauty and strength in God's presence, let in for a brief moment, into a frantic day. It is about practicing God's presence so that, even in the most mundane or most painful tasks, we somehow sense that God is beside us and working through us, all around us. It is about abiding in Christ.

Abiding in Christ means confiding in Christ. Did you know that when you abide in Christ, you abide in God. Christ is God. Christ is the fullness of God. If we are to abide and confide in Christ, we need to know two basic truths. First, we need to know that God love us. Marjorie Thomson says, "This is not a general rule to which you, personally, may be an exception. It is not a conditional rule that applies only when you are good, pure and loveable. God's passionate and personal love for each and every human being expresses who God is. . . . God loves us with an overwhelming love that none of our sins can erase. While we can grieve and disappointing this love, nothing we do or fail to do can alter its depth or reality." (*Soul Feast*, copyright 1995 by Marjorie Thomson, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 84) God is the one who moves in our lives. All we can do is to respond to this love and receive it into our lives.

Christ says, "I am the vine." It is the vine that produces grapes, not the branches. Our walk with God is not really our walk, it is God's. Our desire to abide with Christ begins with God. God has been working in our lives from before we were born. "God chose us in him before the foundation of the world." If we make a move toward God, it is only the evidence that God is already moving in us. To abide in Christ is to rest in Christ. It is not to come to do great work. It is not to accomplish anything. It is to glorify God and enjoy God. Often we think that as we abide in Christ, we must change ourselves. If so, we forget that it is God who changes us. By abiding in Christ. In prayer. In service to others. In self examination. In confession. In journaling. In these spiritual practices, we become aware of ourselves in a new way, and we become aware of God in new ways. That awareness, by the Holy Spirit changes us, transforms us.

What about time? Where is there time? That was William O'Malley's problem, too, or so he thought. "For a long time, I believed that I did not have enough time for prayer, what with classes to teach, papers and preparations, plays to direct, writing, counseling, and games to attend. My list of alibis would make you weep. . . ."

“Suddenly God dealt me a heart-bruising blow, the kind that brought me to my knees—which is, perhaps the best place from which to see who we truly are, and who God truly is. For days I couldn’t not pray, even if most of it was imploring that ‘this chalice pass from me,’ . . . Since that dark time, I know that there is always time for God, no matter how cluttered and chaotic my day gets. There must be time. Not for God’s sake. For mine.” (p. 8)

There are so many ways in which the practices of faith can become a joy and a power. There are so many ways in which we can become aware of God’s presence. But there is so little time. Our world more and more measures a persons worth on how busy they are. Do we dare take the time, even if we wanted to? They asked our Lord Jesus Christ, “What is the most important commandment?” The most important commandment? “Love the lord your God, with all your heart and mind and soul and strength.” So little time. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” “I 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.”