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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 98

John 15:9-17

ABIDING

One of the things Nancy and I enjoy is getting to try out restaurants we haven't been to before. There are a couple of restaurants to which we have gone that offer small servings that are called tapas. Tapas, originating in Spain, are not a particular type of food, but are an indication that we will get a small quantity, a small serving of a particular dish. That way the diner gets to taste a larger variety of dishes, maybe four or five, that could be put together to make up a meal. Sometimes, we might enjoy a particular small dish, but we wouldn't want to make a whole meal of it.

As this congregation was focused on the capital campaign over the last few weeks, with its theme of us becoming "a house of prayer for all people," we have explored the concept of God's broad welcome that is based on God's deep love. That theme continues today not as a tapa, but as an entree. The setting in our reading from John's Gospel indicates that Jesus is with his followers on the evening before he would be killed. He seems to know that his time with his disciples is coming to an end. What does one say in that situation?

Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love." People often express their love for others when the end is near. If they can do so honestly, it is a great thing to do. In the same way God has loved me, I have loved you – Jesus' words sound warm and cozy. At least they sound that way until we think about what God's love for Jesus meant for his life.

His followers had seen the passionate intimacy Jesus had with God and they wanted that too. But wasn't it God's love not just for Jesus, but also for others, that led to him being sent from a safe and secure heaven to a place where he would be misunderstood, criticized, and threatened? The One who embodied God's word would experience rejection and be accused of being demon-possessed and out of his mind. He would be inundated with those who had all kinds of physical, cultural,

and religious problems. He would be criticized for healing people and condemned for standing up for what he believed. He would have followers who did not understand him, who would desert him when the going got tough. Multiple times he would be close to being stoned to death. And then there would be the worst conceivable ending to his life – a shameful, painful death. That’s where God’s love led? It makes me kind of wish that Jesus had instead said something like, “As God has loved me - well, I will spare you all of that. I will love you differently - in a way that protects you from all that can hurt or destroy you.”

One of my favorite family pictures from my childhood is a photo that ended up being our Christmas picture of the year. I was almost four and my mother, father, brother, and I were seated by the fireplace in our den. It was bedtime and I, in my footy pajamas, was sitting in my mother’s lap, with her arms gently draped around my waist. The picture captured how loved, protected, and cozy I felt in my mother’s embrace. And yet, her love did not keep me forever on her lap, and it wasn’t just because I got too heavy to sit there. As I grew older and was trying to grow up a bit, she sent me out where she knew I could and would get hurt. Both of my parents tried to teach me how to do things safely, but they knew that there were some physical and emotional dangers from which they could not protect me. They knew there were some risks worth taking, some hurts worth hurting for. When I struck out at a crucial time in a baseball game, when someone I asked out on a date said ‘no,’ I found out my parents’ love for me was not just a sometime thing.

God loved Jesus in a way that would not perfectly protect him from harm. He did not come with a force field surrounding him. We see Jesus loving his followers in a way similar to which God loved him. When we are baptized, we are not given a suit of armor for our bodies or for our hearts. In fact, as we abide in the divine love that to a great extent defines us, it actually makes us more vulnerable to the possible hurts out there. We are called to love others like Jesus loved his followers. A love like that makes our lives more complicated. It makes it harder to just ignore other people’s pain. We hurt when other people are hurting, because we love. It makes it difficult to isolate or belittle someone who is different. It builds connections to other people that will cause us to go through their ups and downs with them. It’s not like that love is just a side dish in the Christian cuisine – it is the main dish,

every day, and in a delicious way, it nourishes our spirits that would be otherwise famished.

Those who focus only upon themselves, who greedily step on people on their way to the top – within them, there is an emptiness that drives them even as they run over others. They may think the material possessions or the attainment of power or fame will give them a great sense of fulfillment. But that's not how true, deep fulfillment comes. Those who disconnect themselves from others because they want to avoid the hurts along the way – what they do to protect themselves makes sense, but they too end up with hearts that are empty.

Jesus calls us to abide in his love. If we live in his love, we will grow to love others as he has loved us. As we abide in his love, make it our abode, we get to grow in compassion, we get to grow in kindness, we get to grow in strength, we get to grow in sensitivity, we get to grow in commitment, we get to grow in patience – o.k., that last one, we have to grow in patience. But we also get to grow in joy. Jesus tells us, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Ask those who are parents whether their experience has been difficult. But then ask them whether it moved them to a depth of experience that was all worth it. Even as Jesus was dying on the cross to live out God's deep love even for those who were rejecting him, I'm confident he would have said it was all worth it. To allow our hearts to love with Christ's love may actually make our lives more difficult. It may mean we will be sacrificing our time and energy for others, but living out that love will also make our hearts more joyful. That's what we were created for – to live in God's love and to share it with others. The first question of the Westminster catechism is “What is our chief end? It is to glorify and enjoy God forever.”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, there is an absolute feast to which we are invited, which we can relish each and every day – it is the feast of God's love as we come to know it in Jesus Christ. There are no tapas or small portions there - the helpings are so large, that we can't take it all in by ourselves – we have to share it. This is where we are called to live, to abide in God's love. It leads us to a neighbor-hood, a joyous neighbor-hood, that goes beyond any other place we could ever choose to live. Thanks be to God. Amen.