

For five weeks, we've heard about Jesus as the Bread of Life. And each week, my response in the sermon has been, "It's about more than bread." Well, today, it's not even going to be about bread. It's going to be about *relationships*.

Because Jesus has been talking as much about relationships as he's been speaking about bread. Throughout John chapter six, Jesus has been making clear the *relationship* that exists between him and God; making clear that those who come to him are involved in his relationship with God, because those who eat his flesh become part of him and he part of them in an eternal *relationship*.

Listen to Jesus describe the relationship between him and the Father throughout this chapter: "[F]or I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me."

"Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away."

"No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me."

"Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me."

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

John has a special word he uses for this relationship, a word which first appears in our reading today: ABIDE. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide* in me, and I in them” Throughout the rest of his gospel, John will emphasize this ABIDING: “Abide in me as I abide in you,” Jesus says in the 15th chapter, “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit”; “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”

Abiding means simply “to be in.” “To be with.” “To be in relationship with.” The relationship that Jesus describes, this act of abiding, is a remaining with. It is learning to love Jesus and other people, and then living that love out through steadfast commitment forever.

And abiding, true abiding, is difficult *to do*. Being in real relationship with Jesus, whose teaching, the disciples openly admit, “is difficult,” is demanding and burdensome. “Does this offend you?” Jesus asks. The answer is yes: The life that Jesus imagines and brings is too radical, unsettling, and illogical to easily accept. Christ’s gift of eternal life makes demands upon our daily lives. Christ’s signs of abundance conflict with how we manage our limited resources. Christ’s offering of free grace challenges how we earn our livings.

It’s not only that being in abiding relationship with JESUS is hard; it’s also that being in abiding relationship with ANYONE is hard. Abiding goes against our sense of individualism. Abiding means admitting that we’re not the protagonist of our story, but rather part of an ensemble cast.

Our default setting is to turn inward upon our own self, to NOT abide with each other, or with God. So here, Jesus asks for something that's contrary to our human tendency, even if abiding is something we deeply want and need. Here, the Bread of Life has the words of eternal life but boy, are they difficult to stomach.

Because of this, John reports, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” Abiding is going to take work. It may even be unpleasant. So they walk away.

Yet that is where abiding can make all the difference. That is when *real relationship* can work new life: where and when people walk away.

Nowadays many people who follow Jesus are concerned that an entire generation seems to have walked away: young people, on the whole, are not coming to church. The reasons are myriad; no one knows precisely *why*; a quick Google search of the question, “Why do young adults not go to church?” yields 900 million results.

In light of this reality, there are those worried about the future of the church, those fretting and fantasizing about innovative solutions, and then there is a congregation like Immanuel Church of the Nazarene in Landsdale, Pennsylvania and a 78-year-old member there named Bill Wallace.

In Bill’s own childhood, adults failed to show up for his important events,

so, as an older man, he resolved that no young person at Immanuel would experience the same on his watch. So, he recruited a core of senior adults, and they began showing up for young people, not only at church, but all over Landsdale. They came to their Bible Studies and their basketball games. To their children's little league tournaments and band concerts. They showed up to cheer on young people, to ensure that they know they matter, and that they have a home at Immanuel.<sup>1</sup>

Most churches complain about how young people have stopped showing up to their church. But Bill realized that the *church* had stopped showing up for the young people long before the young people gave up on the church. So Bill and his cadre of seniors dedicated themselves to practicing the art of abiding. Of being in real relationship. Of learning to love and then living that love out through a steadfast commitment of sharing life together.

Abiding is not a program. Abiding is not a worship style or a new-fangled ministry. No, abiding is much more essential: it is a commitment and an honest caring. It is real relationship in Christ and real relationship with one another. And it is the work of the Spirit.

That's the good news about abiding: we have everything we need to practice it. For Jesus says, "it is the spirit that gives life" and "words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." So, with the Word of God, the words of eternal life that we gather around every Sunday, and with the flesh and blood of God's

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<sup>1</sup> From <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/september/meet-churches-engaging-and-keeping-young-people.html>

own Son broken and shared among us every week and with the Holy Spirit that makes the words and the flesh come alive for us, we have all we need to practice the radical art of abiding.

So what if we did it? What would it look like to foster *real relationships* here today? What would happen if we at LCOS practiced Bill's kind of abiding?

One thing that might happen: we might begin to believe. For some, abiding leads to believing. Some folks need to belong before they believe, and finding a place and a people with whom they belong, they meet the God in whom we believe.

For others, abiding strengthens their belief. At the end of our passage today, we land on Peter's confession: "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Having been in a real, constant relationship, having been abiding with Jesus *and with each other*, the twelve not only come to believe but also to know.

And all who abide will see God: See God through Jesus, the Holy One of God; See God through the diverse community of disciples that God calls together, beyond our individualism; See God through word and spirit, abiding and giving life to the world.

AMEN.