

This week I have had quite a few profound learning experiences. We are always learning new things, but some weeks it seems that you learn the same lesson many times!

Over the last two weeks I have been participating in a training program for Mental Health First Aiders – it was helpful in lots of ways – but I was struck by two themes or truths which kept re-emerging throughout the course. The first was that the most important thing we can do for anyone is listen! We all live our lives on a continuum of good and bad days, and the ability to be heard in this experience – and heard without judgement is one of the greatest gifts we can be offered. The second theme was the notion that Recovery, in any form, is not about going back to same. Life moves on, and after any change in our lives, whether an illness, experience, or trauma – to continue to grow and be healthy we cannot hope to recreate where we were, rather we have to embrace where we are going.

We spoke a little about this last week, as we plan for the future of the parish – we are not returning to ‘pre-pandemic’ because that time does not exist anymore – we live in a new space a new opportunity.

As I was pondering this, the value of listening and moving forward I read a fantastic interview with one of the residents who lives in my cousin’s care home. Gladys turned 108 during the week and she was interviewed about her life experiences. She spoke of making the most of what you have, of recycling, and being creative with limited resources – and she ended her interview with this phrase “Love one another. Love your neighbour. Just be as kind as you can to one another. It does help!”

These three themes for me of listening, of moving forward, of loving seem to me to not only to be messages for life, but also are at the heart of the three readings we hear today.

In Acts 8 we hear the story of an Ethiopian who was reading from the book of Isaiah, about the suffering servant – and this gave Philip the opportunity to tell the Ethiopian about Jesus. The race, nationality, or sexual identity of the person did not seem to matter to Philip. Rather he wanted them to look at Isaiah in a new way, in a way that shared the love of God as seen through Jesus. Phillip is so good at listening and helping to move forward ; and the desire for this love becomes so great that all are baptised!

The Gospel reading from John, and the reading we hear from the first letter of John pick up on this message of love. *Abide in the love of God and be fruitful!*

The verb *abide* like the phrase *bear fruit* appears over and over -- eight times in four verses here -- and will be repeated in part two of the passage next week when we learn that abiding in Jesus means abiding in Jesus’ love.

Abiding is important in John, where love of God means mutual indwelling¹. I love this image – it always reminds me of trying to stir oil into hot water and swirling them around – they are together yet separate, and contained together. Abiding, depending on the context, can be positive or negative – it is both the acceptance of a situation or the inability to tolerate it!

Abide is one of the two imperatives of the passage and I would like to suggest that it offers two imperatives for us as a community also.

We are called to abide in God – that is to accept that God is at the heart of all things, at the heart of all creation, of this community and of ourselves – to listen for God and move forward. But we are also called to abide the evil of this world, to not tolerate injustice, to be heard and to be a voice which challenges all that destroys or harms God's creation.

Like oil and water, these two imperatives cannot or should not be separated. Like the one who attends the vineyard we need to both sustain the source of life, while pruning or removing those things which limit this life. This is not necessarily a comfortable or easy image. We are called to not shy away from being confident in God – to not feel shame in our faith – to use our gift of love to hold the space for the community in which we live.

The equal challenge of course is that this means that we have to have a voice to challenge how we live as a community. That means asking hard questions of ourselves as a congregation and how we live in this community, but it also means holding our church and civic leaders to account. That means that we have a responsibility, not just as citizens of this country, but as people of faith to ensure that we vote on Thursday, and that we encourage others to vote as well. In our society, this is one of the keyways which our voice can be heard. So if we are being Christ's ambassadors, if we want to ensure that we can challenge or affirm decisions, then that starts with us exercising our democratic right and responsibility. It is part of tending the plant to ensure that it bears the best fruit – to steel another analogy from today's gospel.

I was reading an article my Meda Stamper about our gospel reading and she reminded me that we bear fruit not by squeezing it out of ourselves but because we are extensions of the vine, pruned by the gardener-God who wants us to be fruitful and to be drawn into the unity of the God the Creator and inspirer. God's love, presence, and pruning are gifts. Or as I was reminded during the week – the importance of listening and moving forward.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2434

If we want to bear Jesus' fruit, then we choose to abide in God, and maybe this is our greatest challenge. For to abide in God's love we must allow God to love us, and even more challenging we must learn to love ourselves and others – as Gladys reminds us – it helps!

God is the source and the definition of love. God is love. 1 John emphasizes that God's love is not some abstract concept. It is passion expressed in action. God's love is a truth more basic and reliable than the ground we walk on and the air we breathe.

If Jesus shows us what God's love is like, then there can be no doubt how far our love for others must extend: to every single human being – and it is in this love that we abide!

It is this love that we are called to abide in this week. We are God's family, connected to one another. This invites to make space to engage with our neighbours, hearing the stories of our friends, fulfilling our responsibilities as a community, and having the courage to see a new future building on our experiences not longing for the past.

It can be challenging, but through God's grace and love we are called to Abide.
Amen.