MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME
Scripture: John 15:9-17

FOCUS: We are called to make ourselves at home abiding in God’s love and allowing God’s love to abide in us as we respond to being loved by loving unconditionally.

***“Ya’ll come right in and make yourselves at home!”*** That is how we roll here in the deep south. Call it hospitality, call it being mannerly, call it being friendly. I bet you have said that more times than you could possibly count. But what exactly did you mean? I don’t think you meant it too literally. You certainly didn’t mean to pick out a bedroom and bring in all your stuff.

But there is a ring of companionship and grace in those words, the flavor of genuine relationship and comradery. We don’t offer them to everyone who rings the doorbell do we? When the UPS guy shows up we generally are cordial but we don’t invite him to make himself at home. When the political candidate comes to the door with campaign material seeking votes we don’t generally invite them to “be at home”, we are not really interested in having them hang out for the whole evening. When the Jehovah’s witnesses come by with their tracts we may be gracious, but chances are we are not going to invite them to “come on in and make themselves at home.”

It is a different story when that dear friend from out of town drops by unexpectedly, or as favored guests arrive for a dinner party, or when your favorite neighbor drops in just to share some conversation. Then we most likely will offer that comforting welcome as we encourage those folks to come in and to feel at home. In The Message translation Jesus’ says to the disciples, ***“I’ve loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love.”*** These words are from of what is known as Jesus’ farewell discourse, a message intentionally crafted to instruct the disciples in matters of eternal importance.

Jesus is painfully aware that soon his earthly ministry will come to an end. He knows that the disciples, like all future disciples for all time, like us, will be called upon by God’s Spirit to carry on the work of God’s kingdom without the physical presence of the one they seek to follow and to honor. In more traditional translations Jesus speaks, not of being at home in, but of abiding in his love. We talked about abiding last week as we considered the mutual relationship we are called to develop with God. We were challenged to abide in the Spirit of Christ and to allow that same Spirit to abide in us.

In today’s passage we hear expressed again, in the words of Christ, the importance of abiding in him and in his love. He offers as an example of such love the love that the Father has for him. We best not skim too quickly over that model lest we miss the full scope of Godly love. The Father God’s love for his son was no mushy, feel good, isn’t everything wonderful kind of thing. It was not about removing all challenges, eliminating all pain, conquering all suffering. On this Mother’s Day I recognize much similarity between the love of godly mothers and the kind of love to which Jesus is pointing us in this scripture.

A Godly mother knows that while it is a good thing to protect her children, especially as they begin life and are quite defenseless, it is not such a good thing to be over protective. We read horror stories of the embarrassing antics of so called helicopter parents, those who hover over their children no matter where they are, no matter what they are doing, no matter how old they get. While well-meaning in most cases, such parents are generally doing their kids a real disservice. Not only are they embarrassing them, more damaging is the fact that they often are so protective that the kids are temporarily sheltered from life’s hard lessons and as a result fail to develop important coping skills.

Godly mothers offer that special kind of love which incorporates a good measure of freedom. Godly mothers allow children to learn from experience some of life’s tough lessons, lessons which can only truly be learned in the school of hard knocks. That doesn’t mean that godly mothers are cruel, it doesn’t mean that they are neglectful, it means that they are wise enough to know when to protect from overwhelming danger and when to allow learning experiences to play out even as they know that there will be consequences. That is real love, love that truly seeks what is best for another. It may not be easy. In fact it isn’t easy for the child who will have to suffer but will hopefully be better in the end for the experience, and it will not be easy for the mother whose heart hurts whenever she sees pain and suffering in the eyes of her child but who is wise enough to see the ultimate good which can be born from the pain.

So it is when it comes to being a child of God. So it was for Jesus and for the Father as the Son came to be among us for those few years. Jesus suffered, he wept, he knew loss, he got hungry, he was humiliated, and he responded. He even expressed, for all the world to hear, the feeling of being forsaken by the Father as he suffered on the cross. And God’s heart broke as he witnessed what Jesus was enduring. But God knew that in the end the result of his Son’s suffering would be unimaginably good news, not just for the Son but for the whole world.

So what about us? We read the comforting words about abiding and being invited in, but then come caveats which cause us to pause. We are thrilled to know that we are loved. Not just loved but loved in the same way that God the Father loved Jesus. Then we are reminded of the true nature of that love, a genuine love both bright with promise and fraught with the clear potential for sacrifice.

We love to talk about unconditional love. And we are thrilled to know that we are the beneficiaries of just such a love, born of God and offered through the Spirit of Christ. But just as the rebellious child who is still loved by grieving parents will inevitably suffer the consequences of foolish choices, being unconditionally loved by God does not mean that we get off Scott free. Foolishness and rebellion will always eventually bring consequences. Being unconditionally loved does not eliminate thme. And being loved unconditionally does not mean that we have no responsibilities. Indeed the very fact that God loves us so much should awaken in us a desire to be more, not less obedient. That is what real love is all about. Loving obedience.

Jesus tells the disciples that the only way to remain at home in his love, the only way to truly abide in his love is by keeping his commandments. ***“So this unconditional love is conditional after all?*** It could be seen that way I suppose. But I think this whole issue is a bit like the ever popular debate over faith verses works. On the one side you have those who proclaim loudly that, as Paul so clearly spelled out in his letter to the Ephesian church, ***“Salvation is a gift of grace achieved by faith and not the product of any works.”*** There are others who vehemently assert that the truth is found in the words of James who warned that ***“faith without works is dead.”*** I am convinced that salvation is not an either or matter, rather it is both and. I am fully aware that I am incapable of so living that I deserve salvation. So I cling to the wonderful assurance that I gain my salvation by grace alone. Yet I am equally convinced that if I am truly born again of the Spirit of God I will not be able to avoid the compulsion to be about works of love and compassion. The works are in response to the grace which has been so freely offered, and they are unavoidable.

Jesus says clearly that we abide in that unconditional love ***if*** we keep his commandments. Or as The Message puts it, we remain intimately at home in his love ***if*** we obey. Jesus understands how difficult it is to be obedient. He was tempted, he knew bad days, yet he remained faithful. He remained obedient. It was not easy. Jesus asked in the garden that what he called the cup of his suffering be removed if possible, then offered those defining words, ***“Yet not my will but yours be done.”***

It is like the faith and works things. It is not unconditional love or obedience, it is obedience in response to unconditional love. Daily we encounter terrible, distressing, stories about neglect or abuse of a child or children. And just as often we often we encounter tales of horrendous acts carried out by children or youths. But have you noticed that underlying many of those tales of so called delinquent youths are the tragic stories of how they have been neglected or abused or both. You see neglecting a child is not the way to have the child grow into a responsible adult. Abusing a child is not the way to teach a child compassion and love. There needs to be love and there needs to be direction, there need to be rules. There need to be consequences. It is absolutely true that children will instinctively seek to test limits and will go as far as the limits of parental guidance allow them to go. And for them to mature they must be allowed to test those limits. But for their own good there must be limits somewhere, there must be rules that are meant to be honored. Oh kids will be kids and limits will be tested. But in the end encountering limits builds character and protects tender lives.

So it is with we who are mere children, seeking to understand what it means to be citizens of God’s kingdom, children of God. We need rules or we just might wander beyond the bounds of the kingdom. We need commandments, or at least a commandment to guide us on this remarkable journey of faith which we share. Notice that Jesus speaks first of abiding in his love by obeying the Father’s commandments. Then later he refers to his commandment, singular. Here in his farewell address Jesus points us back to the lesson he taught earlier in his ministry, the truth that all of God’s commandments can be summed up in the commandment to love.

Having commanded the disciples to be about love Jesus expounds on the effects of being loved and loving. He first points to the benefit of joy. It is truly a joy to be a part of God’s kingdom. But joy is a complex state of being. It is not the same as happiness. Happiness is generally a surface emotion based on what is going on at the time. We are happy when things are going well, when life is good, when we are enjoying our lot in life. But joy is a trait not a transitory feeling. It is that deep conviction of being OK in all circumstances which comes only as we accept the grace of God, recognize that we are God’s children, and offer ourselves to God unconditionally no matter what. Real joy is about an eternal relationship. And real joy will inevitably lead to real service. That is the fruit Jesus speaks of in the morning text, fruit which will last, the fruit of love and compassion.

There is a wonderful declaration in the middle of the passage we have been pondering this morning. What comes from obedience? Joy to be sure and the source of that joy is the fact that as we become obedient we discover that our relationship with Christ is not that of a reluctant servant forced to carry out the orders of a tyrannical master. Rather we become those who respond willingly to the desires and directions of a loving and compassionate friend. Indeed we come to declare as the old song tells says ***“What a friend we have in Jesus.”*** In response to that friendship we are called to live day by day, hour by hour wrapped in the love of God as we pass that love on to all whose lives touch us all day long.

The story is told of an old abba, a desert monk, who was asked what it was necessary to do to be a faithful disciple of Christ. He was sitting making rope. Without glancing up, he said, "You're looking at it." Just as so many of the mystics have taught us, doing what you're doing with care, presence, and intention is prayer, the very way to transformation and wholeness. That I think is the essence of what it means to abide in Christ. That is how we come to make ourselves at home in Him and in his love. True discipleship is a matter of the whole being. True discipleship ought to be reflected in our every move, our every action, in every word we speak and in all our attitudes.

Brother Lawrence wrote of how he practiced the “presence of God.” He spoke of being “united with God during ordinary activities” He was assigned to the monastery kitchen where, amidst the tedious chores of cooking and cleaning at the constant bidding of his superiors, he developed his rule of spirituality and work. In his Maxims, Lawrence writes, "Men invent means and methods of coming at God's love, they learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God's presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of him?"

Most of us are familiar with the beloved passage from Revelation in which John writes words he was instructed in his vision to relay on Jesus behalf. ***“Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone will hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with them and they with me.”*** It is a wonderful and challenging passage depicted in that iconic painting by Warner Sallman of Jesus standing at what he calls the hearts door knocking. It is a helpful depiction of one side of that message about abiding. Christ earnestly and deeply desires to enter our hearts and to abide there, but he is not about using battering rams. We must open that proverbial door from the inside.

But today I also see another image. It is that reciprocal image, the one that calls us to abide in Christ. As I think of those words from The Message, as I reflect upon that good old southern greeting I picture Jesus on the inside of a warm and inviting cottage, responding as we come to his door with our hurts, our needs, our brokenness, with our hopes, our dreams and our joys. And I hear him saying as we stand on the threshold, ***“Ya’ll friends come on in and make yourselves at home, right here in my love.”***

For your sake, for the sake of those we are called to be at home loving, and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who beckons us to be at home in his love, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.