

## *Christianity: It's Not for Wimps!*

**I**n our reading from *The Acts of the Apostles*, we encounter what I can only describe as a truly singular character. He's the only Ethiopian mentioned in the Bible; he's the only eunuch mentioned in the New Testament, and one of only a very few mentioned in the Bible— and if you don't know what an eunuch is, you're on your own; I'm just not going there— and, this Ethiopian eunuch is being talked about in a book of the Bible that we only get to hear from during the Season of Easter. *And we're in the Season of Easter!* And so I'm thinking that this is almost the “perfect storm” of indicators from God that I'm supposed to preach on this passage; so I begin to do some research.

However, when I go to one of the principal resources I turn to when I'm preparing a sermon, it quickly becomes clear that the main purpose of this story was to describe just how diverse and inclusive was the early Christian community. And while I could certainly deliver a sermon on the benefits and blessings of being part of a diverse and inclusive community, it'd be like preaching on the benefits of water to an aquarium full of fish. That's stuff we already *know*, because that's stuff we already *do*. And so, after all that, I decided to take a pass on *The Acts of the Apostles*.

And so, I began scanning the other readings— mostly the *Gospel of John* and *The First Letter of John*, because I almost never preach on the psalm— when I came across that place in our gospel where Jesus says to his disciples “Abide in me.” They're lovely words, and familiar, but when I really began to think about them, I suddenly remembered a quote I read by the author Dorothy Sayers.

Sayers was a well-known English writer who lived from 1893 to 1957. She's most famous— and likely for people of my generation— for her Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels. But she was also a member of the Anglican Church, and wrote a fair amount on theology and spirituality. In her book *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged*, we find this quote:

“We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him ‘meek and mild,’ and recommended

him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.”

And what she was commenting on— and complaining about— was the fact that, in her day, Christians apparently tended to favor a portrayal of Jesus as an easygoing, gentle, and approachable Savior, who didn’t place too many demands on his people.

I’m not sure I’d *entirely* agree with her assessment, but I would acknowledge that people probably tend to prefer the Jesus of the Beatitudes, to the Jesus who kicked the moneychangers out of the temple; and who prefer the Jesus who welcomed the little children, to the Jesus who said “I come not to bring peace, but a sword.”

And so, when we hear Jesus telling his followers to “abide in me,” it’s easy to think “What wonderful words of invitation! Isn’t that nice? Jesus is inviting us to rest in the security of his gentle arms.” But is that really what’s going in our gospel? Actually, it’s not, because, as I’m sure you recall, “abide in me” is only the first half of that particular verse; the whole of it is “Abide in me *as I abide in you.*”

In other words, Jesus isn’t just issuing an invitation; he’s also expressing his expectations of us. And when we take the time to explore some of the expectations he has of his followers, Jesus doesn’t look quite so meek and mild after all.

For one thing, Jesus expects us to take up his torch. He expects us to continue his ministry. And that means that everything we see Jesus doing in the first century, are things we’re supposed to continue to do in the twenty-first century.

Let me give you a few examples of what Jesus had in mind. Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus told his followers, “*do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*” And when he taught his followers to pray, he included these words: “Forgive us our sins, *as we forgive those who sin against us.*” And among the last instructions he would give his followers, Jesus said “As I have loved you, *so you must love one another.*”

And the point he’s making? Simply that the life of a Christian is a two-part deal. The responsibility goes both ways. There is mutuality, reciprocity, and an even-exchange. Just as Jesus is not the meek and mild savior, neither are we expected to live as though he were.

This is the time of year, when people who enjoy gardening begin planting seeds, or shop the local nursery for bedding plants, or tend to the shoots that are emerging from the winter soil. But we know that just because we *want* something to grow doesn't guarantee that it will. It takes a lot of work!

If we want our roses to bloom, we have to cut back the canes. If we want our tomato plants to grow, we have to pinch off the gangly stems. And if we want that second bloom from the Impatiens, or the pansies, or the sweet peas and Zinnias, we have to cut back the early flowers. (I really don't know gardening; I just read about this stuff.) But my point is that gardening is not an armchair activity, *and neither is faith*. There are choices to be made, and sometimes the work is difficult.

Now, in addition to the imagery of abiding in God and God abiding in us, our reading from John's gospel also utilizes the image of the vine-dresser and vineyard to describe the relationship between God and Christians. And the language here includes words such as "gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." So, what's going on? Simply this: when God is at work in our lives, enabling us to bear good fruit, sometimes he has to do a bit of pruning and trimming. And it's not easy work, either for God or us.

Next Sunday is Mother's Day. And anyone who knows anything about the job of a being a mother, knows that it involves cajoling, guiding, and giving— as well as taking away, in the form of being grounded, or being put in "time out," or being sent to our room. And in many ways, the role of a mother is similar to God's role as our Vine-dresser.

God tends, mothers guide. God counsels, mothers teach. God prunes, mothers takes away— or puts us in "time out," or does something else to indicate that certain behaviors need to change. In both cases, the aim is to enable good fruit. The aim of our Moms is that we become strong and wise and educated and courageous and ethical and use very good table manners. For God, well, his aim is for us to abide in him; for us to find our home in him; and eventually to even *be* like him. On the surface it sounds easy, but it really isn't.

My own faith journey started in the early 1970s, when, as a young teenager, I decided to take my relationship with God seriously. Because of my involvement in a particular Episcopal church in San Antonio, my faith journey took off in a particular direction.

But in the late 1980s, when I began my studies at Virginia Seminary, my faith journey began to change course. Where seminary really challenged me was

in regard to my approach to scriptural interpretation, and in my attitude towards a certain segment of our population.

For the three years I was in seminary, God— who was working on me through my seminary professors, as well as through my wife and family— began to prune and trim my theological presuppositions and attitudes. And even after seminary, it took another ten or fifteen years of fertilizing and soil-turning before I settled on the course on which I now find myself.

And the process I went through wasn't easy— either for me, or for the people closest to me— because deeply ingrained beliefs and attitudes do not get changed quickly or easily. But standing where I am right now, I'm glad I've made this journey, and would do it again if I had to.

In this Easter season it is good to remember that even for the earliest Christians, their journey of faith had the same two components that ours' had: We pursue God, and God pursues us. And for them, as for us, it's a relationship that's sometimes a struggle, and which can include the occasional pruning and trimming. But then, as now, it was a relationship whose goal was bearing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And so, the next time we hear Jesus saying, "Abide in me as I abide in you," we'll realize that these words don't mean that we can relax and finally settle down.

Rather, we'll remember that they're not only an invitation, but also a challenge; because Jesus is not only telling us that it's time to get busy, but he's also reminding us that Christianity— that following the path that Jesus walked— is not for wimps.

Amen.