

## Sermon

March 12, 2023 [Gospel: John 4:5-42]

*Abide in Me*

Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace, from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is that life of God in the world. Amen.

Recall the last verse of the Gospel reading. “<sup>42</sup>They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.’”

This is the first time in John Jesus is called “Savior.” In fact, this is the *only* time in John that Jesus is called Savior. Both of which raise, for me, questions, like, “What *makes* Jesus the Savior?” Now, the most popular answer to the question of “what makes Jesus the Savior” is that Jesus is prophet, Messiah or Savior because “he knows everything.” (Imagine how well he would do on “Jeopardy!”) He knows, in this case, how many husbands the woman at the well had, and he knows, presently, that the woman is in a relationship with a man to whom she is not married. Based on these revelations or disclosures, and presumably others, the woman at the well tells her fellow Samaritans, as we read in verse 29, “Come and see a man who told me everything I’ve ever done. Could he be the Messiah?”

The same thing occurs later in the Gospel of John, when Peter encounters the risen Christ on the seashore. Peter says to Jesus in that scene, “Jesus” (or Lord in this case), “you know everything!” But so what? Just because Jesus knows everything, according to the woman at the well or Peter – a view at odds actually, with what Jesus says himself in Matthew and Mark – doesn’t make him Savior of the world, does it?

So what does? Surely there must be another reason, right? But what could it be? What makes Jesus “Savior”? Well, first we have to ask the question, “What does the word *Savior* mean?” In Greek the word *soter*, from which we get “savior,” can also be translated, “deliverer.” Okay, so the question then is: Deliverer from what? From what does Jesus deliver us? From what does he save us? For what are we saved? And for what are we delivered?

Obviously, the claim that Jesus is omniscient, which means he knows everything, does not *deliver* us from anything. So is there another clue in the text that would help us answer the question, “What makes Jesus Savior”?

John 4:40-41 may offer a clue: “So when the Samaritans came to him,” it says, “they asked him to stay with them and he stayed there two days and many more believed because of His Word.” Do you notice anything? If I were teaching the evangelist how to write, I would say “you’re being redundant. You’re using the same word too close together.” In this case, that word is *stay*. “Jesus stays.” Now, why would John use this repeatedly? Well remember that the audience to whom John was writing was mostly

illiterate, so they would be hearing the text just as you heard earlier. Repeating a word is John's way of saying "this is important:" "Jesus stays," and then "Jesus stays," repeated again. Jesus stays with the Samaritans, we see, for two days, after which they believe or trust in Him because of His word.

But really the pattern I see is that it's his *presence* first, that calls them out of their isolation as a people and into fellowship with him, rather than simply his word. Why? Because again, the emphasis is on "he stays." He remains. His presence. Think about it. The way you know me as Messiah, Jesus seems to be saying, is to gather in my name, or, to use the language of our Hymn of the Day, to abide with me; to stay.

In verse 40, which again says, "So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them and he stayed there two days." The same word here is the Greek word for abide. And this is the first time the word stay, or abide, appears in John's gospel. Abide – that is, remain – with me. Dwell with me. Stay with me. Be in my presence, Jesus implies, and I will deliver you from your isolation.

So, the calling here is to be drawn out of isolation, whether it's individually or, in this case, collectively. The Jews and the Samaritans were estranged from one another; Jesus, traveling through Samaria, encounters the Samaritans, and calls them back into fellowship. "Abide with me," he says. This, it would seem, is the way to answer the question of what makes Jesus "Savior." He calls us out of isolation, and draws us into relationship.

Now, John uses the same word in chapter 15, even though the translation there is rendered not as stay, but *abide*. Listen closely. "Abide in me as I abide in you," Jesus says. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me, you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burn. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified in this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I love you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Wow, totally redundant! "F" as a college essay – but as a speech: powerful. Those who hear the speech are going to remember that word *abide*. And for our purposes, I think it's better translated "be *present* in me." Dwell in my presence, remain in my presence, just as I remain in yours. Notice again, the effect: Jesus delivers us from ourselves and out of our isolation by calling us into fellowship with Him. Abide in me, he says.

Now, here's my question to each of you: That's great Jesus, but *how* do I abide in you? Obviously, that's not language that you use ordinarily, "Let's go abide in Jesus." What does that mean?

Well, the answer is all around you. Right here. You abide in Christ by gathering together in his name. By stepping away from commitments and your calendars to be, however briefly, in loving fellowship with one another. We are the reconfigured Body of Christ in the world, called to love one another and give witness to Christ's presence by bearing one another's burdens, to use the language of Paul, and living for each other, that is, the common good, instead of simply ourselves.

Abide in *me* is all about *we* – together in fellowship, and you know the passage from Matthew 18, "where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am." When we do this, Christ lives in us and we abide in Him.

Now. Does this mean that we can't find Christ outside the sanctuary where we gather? Well, to use language from Paul, I would say, by no means! The pandemic certainly made gathering in Christ's name difficult, if not impossible. As you can see, its effect lingers in terms of our lower attendance. But the pandemic has also given us, I believe, an opportunity to stretch our understanding of what it means to dwell or abide in Christ's presence through our relationship with one another. After all, the word abide, or dwell, or remain, is not a place, it's a *verb*! It's an *activity*.

So how do we abide in Christ outside the sanctuary? We abide in Christ and He in us whenever we reach out to others who may be experiencing isolation or loneliness. Whether that's a simple phone call or a visit, whether it's a card or simply a kind word, the Christ presence dwells in you when, as Martin Luther put it, "you give yourself as a sort of Christ to your neighbor." Isn't that beautiful?

"The Christ presence dwells in you when you give yourself as a sort of Christ to your neighbor." *This is how Jesus saves*. This is how he delivers: not by fortune telling, or magic, or getting you out of hell, but through *being present to others*, lifting them out of their isolation; by acknowledging them, and inviting them into the fellowship we are fortunate enough to share this morning.

Therefore, I invite you today to do two things over the coming week. First, look around you. See who's missing. And invite that person, over the coming week, back into our fellowship where Christ, as the body of believers – and Bonhoeffer says this is how Christ exists in the world, as the congregation – so Christ, as the body of believers, dwells or abides, just as He did with the Samaritans in our story today.

Next, I invite you to reach out to someone you know who is hurting. Be Christ to them as he is through others, to you. Bring Christ's presence to them, dwell with them, stay with them, be present to them, abide with them.

Now over the last week, because I'm no longer writing out my sermon manuscripts and have a little extra time, I've been using that to fulfill the other aspect of my call, which is to visit people; and I have had several wonderful experiences simply by, as the pastor of the church, reaching out. Some of you may know of one person in the congregation whose entire little home is filled with clocks. This is an amazing space. And this person has an amazing little cat, his name is Pete; I love cats. (They say that men who like cats are gentle men. And that is so true. I am a gentle man – and a gentleman) and this person has a wonderful little cat, all these ticking clocks and was great company. I was able to abide with her for a couple of hours in conversation and then with communion, and I invite each of you to do the same. In fact, two of you sitting here today, actually four of you, had been to this person's house within the last couple of weeks, and she spoke quite positively of your visits.

So, abide in the homes of those who cannot be with us on Sunday morning. And for those of us who can, invite them back into this fellowship. *That* is how Christ saves. He delivers us from ourselves by calling us into genuine Christian community.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, dwell among us as Christ.

Amen.