

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 10, 2009

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Sermon: "Applied Christianity"

I remember during my years at Catawba College I had two courses in psychology. The second class was in Applied Psychology. The warning from Professor Roberts still rings in my ears. He told us in very terms that what we read and learned in his class we were not prepared to use. We had to avoid the temptation to practice our new found learnings in psychology on family, friends and the student body. We weren't trained to apply it.

Yet, this morning we are surrounded by practitioners of one of the most powerful heart and mind changing faiths in the world. On this Festival of the Christian Home, I am thankful for moms (Happy Mother's Day) and dads who apply the teachings of Jesus Christ in the richness of their homes. I know that I am thankful for a mom and dad who applied Christianity to my developmental years.

We are all practitioners of applied Christianity. We take seriously the idea that God is in love with us and has sent his only son to show that love to the world in which we live. Applied Christianity is all about love.

The gospel text for today underscores the idea that the vine (Jesus) abides eternally with us (the branches). This is the last "I am" passage in John and the implication is that Jesus is the true vine as opposed to other false vines. In Jesus, God comes close to us in love like the proximity of the branch to the vine.

The great Easter hope is that Jesus will not let us go. I am always reminded of the plea of the thief hanging next to Jesus on Calvary. He asked to be remembered and Jesus told him that he would be in Paradise with him. The words of Paul in Romans 8 are a reminder to us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Jesus told the disciples in the Upper Room to love one another. Love brings with it the fullness of joy. This is what it means to abide in our Lord Jesus.

In Jesus Christ, God's salvation and endless love meet. God has reached down and in the person of Jesus has brought salvation to the world. It is the love that mothers share with their children. It is the love of mothers who never stop praying for their drug addicted children. That is applied Christianity. It is the love that brings wholeness to the family in good times and difficult times. That is applied Christianity. It is the love that binds families together as they lose homes to frustrating economic times, sing songs of hope and deliverance together in Sunday worship, and trim the dead branches of greed, covetousness, and ill will from their lives. That is applied Christianity. Salvation is the nearness of the branch to the vine and the way that is made known to us in the Christ who dwells in our hearts. Jesus will abide with us and God will abide with us no matter what.

As the Nicene Creed puts it, in the coming of the Christ, and all Christ did and said, and his death and rising, were all 'pro nobis' 'for us and our salvation.' 'He came down from heaven for us men and our salvation,' is how the Nicene Creed characterizes Christ, the Incarnation. To be near us, Christ had to come to us. This implies a certain distance between us and God. We are not with God in heaven, much less are we gods. Even though we were created by God, God must risk something, overcome something in order to come near to us. God comes, becomes Immanuel,

becomes fully human, ‘God with us,’<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning of the Gospel of John, we are told in a very beautiful and powerful way that God came to us as the word was made flesh in Jesus Christ. Our applied Christianity starts with belief in a God who is a personal and loving God. We know this God in the person of Jesus Christ, Son of God. When the Muslims speak of God (Allah) they speak of a highly lifted up and distant God. Even the Jews, our kindred in faith, never reach the level of humanness, friendship and closeness with God that we reach with Jesus the Christ. Our applied Christianity is incarnational (in the flesh), familial, and fellowship (Christ’s body) oriented.

God does not want to be alone Jonathan Edwards wrote in *Miscellanies* and the reformer John Calvin noted in the *Institutes* that we were created for God’s sheer delight. God has a thing for you and me. Through creation, the words of the prophets, the teachings of the law, the birth of Jesus Christ, apostolic teaching—the entire Bible—God wants to be close to us. Our applied Christianity is about the close and loving relationship God wants with men and women.

It is a loving relationship that abides. Like branch and vine, God stays with us. The personal and passionate God stayed with Israel through thick and thin. God stayed with us as we killed our Savior. Our God stayed connected through the darkness of the tomb into the light of that first glorious Easter morning. Our God stayed close to the fearful disciples as they sought to regain

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, “Abiding in Jesus,” *Pulpit Resource*, May 10, 2009, 30.

their spiritual balance and their sense of being called to Christian ministry. Jesus spoke to the misguided Saul and brought him to new life as Paul. Our God revealed the wonders of heaven to John as he wrote to the churches from the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. I believe God spoke to the Protestant Reformers as they sought to recover the wonder and guidance of Holy Scripture. God's loving relationship abides in our United Church of Christ as we envision a glorious day when God's people will know peace and justice will be granted to all people.

Moms, I believe this God who abides so close to us is able to strengthen you as you guide your children to make wise decisions in this fast paced and complex world. God stands next to you (like branches and vines) with the new life that will bring you to the gates of everlasting life. Our families, young, middle-aged, and old, can know the joy of never being forsaken or disconnected from the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Applied Christianity is about love. It is about living the new life Jesus brought to us as he exited the tomb of death. Applied Christianity is about resurrection which can happen every day of our lives if we are faithful to the One who conquered death and lives eternally with the Father in heaven.

Applied Christianity is about God wanting to be near you every day of your life. Dear Christian families, on this Festival of the Christian Home and as we honor moms on this Mother's Day, let us be open to growing this relationship for ourselves and our children and our grandchildren. As our homes are blessed with God's spirit, so our community and nation will be strengthened. Let us burn

the branches of faithlessness and unproductive discipleship and share with the nation around us the rich good news that our God has not abandoned us. May we apply Christianity's best teachings to the wounds of our people and trust in God's ever present love. Then we will find new life.

Listen to Jesus, "I am the vine and you are the branches . . . abide in me." Amen.