

Abide in me, and I in Them

Rick Bryant

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Proper 15
Year B

[John 6:51-58](#)

Jesus promises us that we can come to abide in him, and he is us. It's not obvious to me exactly what that means. This morning I would like to explore an answer. In doing so, I plan to avoid solutions that rely on exotic metaphysics or fancy theology. Day to day, in the real world as we lead our lives, what can it mean to abide in Jesus, and for Jesus to abide in us?

I would like to approach this by thinking through the notion of salvation. While salvation can be understood in many different ways, the basic idea stands behind all religious traditions.

Let me start by reminding us: we of the West tend to think of salvation as an extraordinary, heroic act from outside the system to fix a problem with the world, or with humanity, or with us as individuals. Recall the familiar words of the Eucharistic liturgy: "When we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you...sent Jesus Christ...to share our human nature...and to reconcile us to you."

Our foundational story setting the table for the problem of sin and the necessity of salvation is, of course, is the story of the Garden of Eden. The idea is that something is broken. Maybe it has been broken from the beginning. We aren't sure how it got broken, but it is. Maybe we had something to do with the breaking, and are accountable for it. Or maybe somehow we inherited the brokenness from others. But, in any event, it needs fixing and we know it.

And, of course, the traditional Western answer to the problem of this brokenness is that God, working through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ, fixes the problem, and we benefit from that. Often, the idea of an expiating sacrifice is at the heart of the salvation solution. We all know the Eucharistic language: "This is my body, which is given for you." "This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

I surely don't want to minimize this tradition; it is powerful and has its virtues. But it also presents its challenges. Just how is it that the death of one individual can work salvation for all of humanity, or for all the creation? People of other faith traditions who look at our religion from the outside often find this to be beyond comprehension. And this

understanding of salvation too often has been read as closing the door to salvation for the majority of humanity kind, which of course isn't Christian

Today I would like to approach the question of salvation from a different perspective. Salvation as understood in the Greek Orthodox church is where I would like to begin. And I suspect that this understanding of salvation is one with which many of us are not familiar. I think the Orthodox understanding of salvation gives us a terrific resource to explore the question of what it may mean for Jesus to abide in us, and for us to abide in Jesus.

The Greek understanding of salvation is called *theosis*, which means becoming divine. Our lives rightly led as Christians are a process of growing in godliness, becoming divine. This is the path of our salvation.

To understand this alternative conception of salvation, let's imagine that the way Jesus saves is not by *fixing* something, but by *showing* something. In the words of the theologian Paul Knitter, Jesus' task is, and here I quote: "to reveal or show humanity that God's love is already there, ready to embrace and empower, no matter how often humans have lost their way in selfishness and narrow-mindedness. In other words, Jesus shows that the 'bridge,' or relationship between God and humans, already exists; they just don't know where to find it or are not able to trust that it can be found. If we understand Jesus as someone who paid a price that could not otherwise be paid, or fixed a rift that could not otherwise be fixed, we will understand salvation as a one-time event. If, on the other hand, we hold that Jesus saves us by powerfully manifesting God's reality and love, we will expect—or at least be open to the possibility—that there are other, even many, manifestation of that love."

In other words, the key to understanding salvation is to focus not only on Jesus' death and resurrection, but also on Jesus' life. It is Jesus' life that shows us how we are called to live.

Let me approach this from another angle. My preferred definition of salvation is healing or making whole. We sense that somehow we are separated from life as it should be, and we wish to overcome this breach or separation.

We also confess that there is something saving about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Just what is this? I suspect that at least some of us do not find the idea of blood sacrifice to be the answer.

Does that mean that the gospel has lost its saving power? I think not. I think we need to take another look at just what it is about the gospel that is saving. That is what Paul Knitter is talking about. For many, it may be that what is saving is not that Jesus fixes a problem through a blood sacrifice. Rather, it is that Jesus shows us the shape of a life led in thrall to God's love.

This concept of salvation opens the door for us to understand what it might mean to abide in Jesus and for Jesus to abide in us. Jesus' saving activity isn't a cosmological rescue operation. Rather, it is the revelation of God's abiding love and abiding presence, which is always poured out for us.

To abide in Jesus, for Jesus to abide in us, is quite simply for us to move along the path, so long as we human creatures are capable, of becoming like Jesus, of becoming divine. In doing so, we are being saved. Not to say that doing this isn't difficult; surely it is. But the basic idea is that simple.

Here is another way to think about this, without using religious symbolic language. My wife earned a masters degree in Human Development at Vanderbilt a few years ago, and has tried to explain to me what she has found to be the most compelling model for therapy. This model is named cognitive behavioral therapy.

The model claims that we perceive, think, experience emotions and behave simultaneously and interactively. If you change one domain, over time this changes the other domains. These domains of human existence are related and interactive. The assertion is that cognitions, emotions and behavior interact, and have a reciprocal cause and effect relationship.

Let me state this too abruptly. If you asked a practitioner of cognitive behavior therapy for advice, here would be the prescription: If you aren't happy about how you feel, make a determination to lead your life differently. As you behave differently, emotions and perceptions will change.

That, I would like to suggest, describes in human developmental language what is going on here under the theological rubric of abiding in Jesus and in becoming divine. As we do, as we choose behaviors that model those of Jesus, we become divine, not only in the behavior, but in the other dimensions of existence. Likewise, as we alter how we feel and perceive in imitation of Jesus, we affect how we behave.

How, practically, might we do this? Let's keep it simple and focus on two things: behavior and cognition; what we do and how we think.

First, behavior. What might we do in imitation of Jesus, to the end of our growing in participation in the divine? Well, this morning's gospel is clear on one point: participate in the Eucharist. As we reenact this ancient ritual, we walk the path of two millennia of Christians who came before us, and we walk the path of Jesus and the first disciples. This theology of participation is a robust sacramental theology, and ought well to find a happy home in the Episcopal Church.

What else, again thinking of behavior? I believe we all know the answer. We are called to lives of self-giving love. Matthew 25 is as good a road map as any: feed the hungry; give

water to the thirsty; welcome the stranger; clothe the naked; care for the sick; visit those in prison. As we do this, we grow into the fullness of participation in the divine in emotion and behavior. As we follow this path, we abide in Jesus and Jesus abides in us. As we do this, we are saved.

There is nothing esoteric here. This is the work of this and many other congregations. As we support the work of Magdalene and Thistle Farms and Mobile Loaves and Fishes, the missions in Ecuador, and the work of our congregation in Botswana; as we comfort the sick and the bereaved; as we come together to sing and pray and laugh and cry, we abide in Jesus, and Jesus abides in us.

I have been speaking of behavior. Next, let's think about perception and emotion. How are we to walk the path of Jesus in this regard? Let me just touch on this.

Here is my favorite approach. Early in the history of Christianity a group of monks fled to the desert and pursued strict ascetic disciplines to tame the emotions and stabilize the thoughts. While the desert will not be the path for most of us, one of the goals of life in the desert can be. The state of mind the desert monks were seeking is known by the Greek word *apatheia*. This, I think, also reflects the mind of Christ.

Apatheia does not mean apathy, which is not caring. *Apatheia* is caring deeply, but not being controlled by thoughts and emotions. I have heard the state of *apatheia* described as like being in Montana. You feel all and see all and from miles away, and nothing sneaks up on you. You live in a state of deep consciousness and awareness of all that surrounds you, but you remain centered on the depth and source of being and life. This, I think, is a fair reflection of the thoughts and emotions of Jesus, from what we can tell of the New Testament narrative.

No doubt, for most of us, this will remain an elusive goal, known probably fleetingly and episodically perhaps through centering prayer or mindfulness discipline. Nonetheless, as we imagine living the example Jesus gives us, I think it worth the while to try to catch this wind.

Abiding in Christ and having Christ abide in us is no more or less than following, in so far as we are able, in behavior, thought and emotion, the example Jesus gave us. We can call it *theosis*, we can call it becoming divine, we can call it the imitation of Christ. It is our salvation, and it is how we abide in Jesus and how Jesus abides in us.

Frederick L. Bryant

Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*