

2009 Baccalaureate

John 15:1-8

It is the night of Jesus' betrayal, but the disciples don't know that yet.

There is no reason for them to suspect anything unusual. The night starts out with a nice meal, good conversation. Everyone is there. Jesus. Peter. Judas.

Jesus is giving a baccalaureate sermon of sorts. He is trying to let them know how to survive on the other side of what's coming, but like most folks at a baccalaureate service, the disciples have no idea what's coming.

And the irony of it is that his advice boils down to this: Stay put. Stick with me. Abide.

It's an old word that we don't use very often. "I'll go get the car, you abide here" or "I've been abiding for seventeen years to pay off these student loans."

But that is the word Jesus uses. On the evening he will be arrested and beaten, less than 24 hours before he is brutally executed, Jesus' advice is to abide.

I know you think it's time to go. Time to leave this place. There is no more time for abiding.

I know your parents have been documenting on film every move you've made since breakfast, as if you are the Sasquatch. Your dorm room is a shell of its former self, your stuff crammed into boxes or the trash can in the hall. Your Aunt Lucy is here all the way from Mishawaka, for heaven's sakes, so I don't blame you for thinking you're done.

You have a nylon robe and a silly looking hat with your name on them waiting for this afternoon. You sold all your books to that shady lady who sits in the road outside the Slice. You've already been contacted seven times by the Alumni Association. It must be time to go.

You and your friends have been particularly tender to each other, though this takes different forms depending on gender. If you are a female, you have been making scrapbooks and mixed CDs. There have been lots of sappy moments that shouldn't have upset you but you found yourself crying again.

If you are a male, there have been a lot of shrugs and silence, maybe a mumbled grunt or two, the highly evolved masculine approach to grief.

Maybe you walked through Ridgway one more time, or Graves or Koch Center or all the other places you've called home for the last four years or so, but emptied of students and professors now, they look more like a ghost town than the vibrant place you remember.

Maybe you think it's time to go because you've been caught unawares so often by memories of your freshman year, moving into a 12 by 12 concrete cubicle with a complete stranger, your mom crying and your dad just doing a lot of shrugging in silence.

Truth be told, your parents are torn—they want to see you succeed, make your way in the world, head off to new and exciting adventures, but they can't help but also see their five year old, riding without training wheels for the first time. The defiant twelve year old, who insists on wearing only black. The sixteen year old who should not be old enough to singlehandedly maneuver a 4000 pound car in neighborhoods where human beings live.

Today again, like the day you moved on campus, there are tears and shrugs from your parents, because they are excited and grieving at the same time, so it makes sense to think that it must be time to move on.

Do you remember your first college class, wondering if you could even do this? Do you remember that naïve optimism of taking the syllabus from the professor, thinking to yourself, "I am going to read every page that is assigned here. I am going to write this major research paper two months early."

There is a flash, a break in the space-time continuum, and suddenly it is 4am the morning said research paper is due, and you are still working on the cover page, having just spent the last fourteen hours taking every Facebook quiz you could find and sending it on to 700 of your closest friends.

Do you remember the first time you loved a class, I mean really loved a class? A professor or a book or a subject or all three stirring something deep inside you that you didn't know was there. That was a time for abiding, but not today.

Today you've sent your resume to 234 unrelated companies in 27 different countries, you've applied to a grad program in Raku pottery, your parents have looked at you suspiciously as you moved several pieces of heavy furniture back into their house, setting up the middle class suburban equivalent of a refugee camp, because you have to be somewhere, and all the signs say you can't stay here any longer.

Some of you didn't go the traditional route, instead of your parents, you brought your own children with you today. You have waited an especially long time for this day, you've juggled work and family and loans to get to this moment in the nylon robe, and maybe it even feels a bit like the peak of Everest must feel or breaking through the finish line tape at the Boston Marathon. So it's natural that you would, with some relief, think that you're done. That it's time to go.

No doubt there are others of you who would love an excuse to stay. You're not sure you're quite cut out for this adult thing, with its power bills and variable interest rates and you want me to show up every morning at what time? You just got the hang of college life, you're very close to settling on your seventh major, all you need are 4 to 12 more years of research.

You dreamed of this day for a long time, but now that it's really here, now that you've stepped off the plane and the real world is standing there at the baggage claim holding a sign with your name on it, you're thinking, "Am I sure that's *my* ride?"

You're trying to imagine a world without a meal plan, wondering if you will ever eat from a recognized food group again. You're trying to imagine a daily schedule that doesn't include unhealthy doses of Guitar Hero and reruns of "T.I.'s Road to Redemption."

You're trying to imagine a world without grades, which sounded wonderful two months ago, but now you wonder how you'll even know how you're doing in life without that red pen to steer your progress.

There is nothing you would like to do more than abide, but the calendar kept moving without your consent, and suddenly here we are, in the midst of one of those speeches we saturate you with on days of pomp and circumstance. In just a handful of hours, you will be receiving a diploma, shaking Dr. Jennings' hand, leaving him the ultimate vector for the swine flu.

You'd love to abide, but you know as well as I do that you have to go. You've tried every possible way to stay, but it's time. All the signs point to this being over, the big day finally here and all, time to go, not time to stay, but that is the word Jesus uses. Abide.

Frankly, the word makes even less sense for the disciples.

In fact, immediately prior to the verses we read, Jesus says, "Rise, let us be on our way." How can they be on their way and abiding at the same time?

How are they supposed to abide in him when Jesus is only moments away from being arrested? How are they supposed to abide in him when we who have read ahead in the story already know that every one of them will abandon him when it matters most? How are they to abide in him when this is the last time they will see him before he is killed?

And the rest of his speech is not exactly comforting.

Something about vines and pruning and the wayward branches being thrown into the fire. My initial title for this sermon was "Some of you will be thrown into the fire," but I thought that set up sort of a negative feel for the rest of the day.

Good gardeners know, however, that the best fruit comes from the branches closest to the central vine. Vines that are left to grow untamed will never produce great fruit, because the nutrients are too spread out. Someone has to cut back the branches to make room for new life, to make the plant stronger.

During our Spring Break two years ago, my cousin Wes tragically died of a drug overdose. He and his parents were very close, and the last thing he did that afternoon, before going out for the last time, was to prune back their pear trees in the front yard.

Wes was an aggressive pruner. I can't make anything grow, because I don't have the stomach to cut back branches that look healthy to me.

Wes, however, left those trees looking more like tall stumps. As we crowded into that house to pay our respects, the naked emptiness of those trees, Wes' legacy on earth, seemed like salt in the wound.

But the truth of it is, for life to flourish, sometimes we have to be cut back. In Hebrew, the word for pruning, zamir, is the same word for glad singing. Those two don't seem to go together, but the witness of scripture is that those who sing the most joyful songs are the ones who know what it is like to be cut back.

Jesus is speaking a truth we need to hear. A truth the disciples need to hear.

Their world is about to unravel and everything they thought firm and stable and good is about to slip out of their hands. They are about to go through hell on earth, every last one of them, and yet Jesus wants them to hold onto their hope. To stay with him, to cling to him, to abide in him even when they can no longer see him.

Jesus wants them to see the bigger picture, that when life feels like it is cutting us back to tall stumps of our former selves, we are just being prepped for new life to flourish. That the darkness of Friday afternoon is no match for the light of Sunday morning.

It is one of the mysteries of human existence, one that we rarely deal with on days like today, because we would rather this feel like a coronation ceremony. We want it to feel as if you have arrived.

And you should be deeply proud of yourselves this day of all days, but there is a reason we call it a commencement. A beginning. Something starts today.

But how will we know when we are fruit bearing, and when we are just kindling waiting to be cut back? On this day of all days, when we are churning up this precious garden of community we've built over the last few years, when we are pruning back all the relationships we've thrown ourselves into, when we are all trading in our 1800 Lincoln Avenue addresses for some scattered new place, what does it mean to abide?

It means that we have to make our homes in Christ, not in Newburgh or Mishawaka or any other place with a mailing address.

It means that no matter what comes, no matter good day or bad, light or darkness, college graduate or high school dropout, we cannot make it on our own any more than a branch can live apart from the vine that gives it life.

“Abide in me,” says Jesus.

“When you feel as if you are no one and you are going nowhere, abide in me.

“When you feel as if everything is right and life is bursting with possibility, abide in me.

“When it feels as if we are far from each other, that I have forgotten you, and vice versa, hold on, abide in me.

“To be healthy is to be willing to risk everything for the sake of what is most dear, in order to heal you must be willing to hurt, to thrive is to undergo pruning. So even when it feels like there are much better shelters than what I can offer, like the promise is wearing thin, stick around. Abide in me,” says Jesus.

The promise of abiding in Jesus is not a promise that everything will work out, that there will be no seasons of loss or grief or apathy or despair—instead, it is a promise that we won’t be alone. That even on days like this, when the world is turned upside down for some of us, the vine is just being made ready for something new.

I know you think it’s time to go, and you couldn’t be more right. There is a world to see, there is a life to be lived. It is time, as Jesus says, to rise and be on our way.

But let me leave you with a word or two of advice.

As you’re choosing a place to live, a place to make a new home, as you’re sorting through the awkward stuff of being an adult in the so-called real world, remember what you’ve learned here.

Remember this day, with all its silly hats and nylon robes and endless ritual. Remember what you’ve learned about yourself on this holy ground the last few years, in all the miracles and mistakes of college life.

Remember what Jesus told the disciples on the eve of all that change, what he tells us even now. That life is about more than success, it’s about more than making it on your own, it’s about dwelling in what matters most. It’s about clinging to the source of life in all seasons.

And when times are tough, when the promise seems like it’s wearing thin, and fear crouches in from every corner, remember a front yard in suburban Atlanta. It’s the house my cousin Wes grew up in.

If you ever drive by it, you’ll know, because the front yard is filled with the most glorious pear trees you’ve ever seen.