

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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VI Easter, John 15:9-17

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your love. *Amen.*

Good morning.

We can hear the sounds of the alley: bowling balls rolling, bowling pins falling, beer taps pouring. And, as the camera surveys this scene, the lens comes to rest on a slender gentleman lifting a sparkling blue orb from the ball-return machine. There's a cut, and now he stands with the electric ball held high in his hands. He sighs. Arching his back, he takes three deliberate steps forward, raises his arm in a high back swing, and – woosh! – sends the ball spilling madly into the lane. Spinning. Spinning. Spinning like crazy. And now, turning. Standing on one leg he stretches left, telekinetically tugging at the ball, working against gravity and momentum and inevitability until – crash! – ten pins fall.

The camera sweeps from the satisfied bowler and finds The Dude walking to the drink counter. Sure, he may have been given a good Christian name, but now he demands to be known only as “The Dude.” He likes it that way and so do we. Gary The Bartender sets a napkin on the countertop and asks, “Whatlller be, Dude?”

Standing there in his bathrobe and slippers, a dirty t-shirt and pajama bottoms, The Dude replies, “Two oat sodas.”

“How things been goin?” asks Gary.

“Ahh, you know. Strikes and gutters, ups and downs,” replies The Dude.

They discuss the upcoming bowling tournament until The Dude's drinks arrive and Gary offers, “Well, take it easy, Dude. I know you will.”

“Yeah, man. Well, you know, The Dude abides. *The Dude abides.*”

We watch as The Dude goes about abiding and returning to his lane, two beers in his hand (though he will bowl alone). A narrator then repeats The Dude's words, savoring the sentiment if not even the sounds: “The Dude abides.” The narrator continues, “I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that. It's good knowin' he's out there, The Dude, takin' her easy for all us sinners.”ⁱ

Nine years ago this week, on my second Sunday here at Good Shepherd, we read this same Gospel lesson, and I shared an illustration from this Coen brothers' 1998 film, *The Big Lebowski*. Man, *nine* years of “abiding:” as difficult to believe as I find *that* number, other metrics have reached triple digits: more than 100 weddings, 200 funerals, 500 baptismsⁱⁱ...big numbers during what will soon be a decade spent together. Approaching this anniversary each year – remembering at that time my son was entering kindergarten, and now he's readying for high school; my daughter was entering preschool, and now she's readying for middle school – I give thanks to God and for the blessing this community has been for my family and for me.

And as I give thanks to God for that tenure, I give thanks, too, for those whose lives, like The Dude's, challenge such orderly conventions. See, I'm sure glad those folks are out there... abiding...like The Dude. I'm glad they're doing what they do, so that I can attend to what's in front of me. And sometimes – when the sun rises just so, or sets the way it sometimes will – I'm bold enough to wonder:

Which of us is it that's really crazy? Is it The Dude, who sleeps late and spends his nights at the local bowling alley, or is it us, subscribers to *Poor Richard's Almanac*, going to bed early, rising earlier, setting our hopes on health and wisdom and riches, and yet spending our days alternating between shiny metal boxesⁱⁱⁱ and sheetrock cubicles?

Which of us is it that's really crazy? Is it my red-headed friend, Rugger, who once lost his glasses and last dollar wagering on camel races at the edge of the Sahara (that's a true story), or is it us, working and working and working, everyday leaving the people we love most in the name of getting somewhere, getting ahead, getting to where we think we need to be in order to get out of wherever we've been.

Which of us is it that's really crazy? Jesus speaks into such curiosities: "Abide in my love."^{iv}

Risking the oversimplification, consider that the mainstream of ancient Jerusalem assessed Jesus as a flake no more viable than The Dude. That pious collective dismissed Jesus because what he said and taught and did disrupted their sense of good order: Jesus loved the unloveable, led the unleadable, and raised up the theretofore mostly incapable. I suspect if The Dude were – right now – to walk through the doors of our church in his customary dress, the way he might be received here would be akin to the religious leaders' initial reception of Jesus: not so much animus, as annoyance...confusion.

Of course, we should distinguish between the eccentricity of The Dude and that of Jesus [and pay special attention, for this is the most important paragraph of the sermon]: while The Dude's freedom allows Jeff Bridges' character to careen into a countercultural oblivion unburdened by either expectation or responsibility, Jesus' abiding in the Father's love affords him the freedom to love and to serve. The Dude's freedom – as compelling as it may seem – ultimately sinks into an empty narcissism, while Jesus' abiding aspires for the salvation of the whole world. Indeed, the Dude is free *from* concerns for anyone but himself, while Jesus is free *for* the work of God's Kingdom.

See: **God purposes our abiding for the sake of the world: in *being loved*, God call us to love.**

In the Rite 13 ceremony we will pray this morning, we celebrate with the families of our most recently minted teenagers, and we mark their shared rite of passage. We announce that while God freely shares with all of us the gifts of manhood and womanhood, we each must *earn* our adulthood. In response, we as a church community covenant to support these young people's journey to social and spiritual maturity.

To our candidates, know that we are proud of you, and know that you can trust Good Shepherd's support of you: whatever you do, wherever you go, whomever you become, you can trust that you will always have a home here...and, as you journey, I invite you *to abide*.

Now, I suspect that there will be seasons when the quality of your abiding resembles more The Dude than The Lord, and I hope you will trust, too, that the people of God make room for such explorations. As I readily admit, I took a wide turn into the Church parking lot, and I bowled enough at the old Southgate Lanes in my hometown that I can tell you Patsy Cline's "Crazy" was number 183 on that jukebox (also a true story). Even so, remember that a *little* adventure can go a *long* way, and that your truest fulfillment will be found in service, and not in selfishness.

Hear again: God purposes our abiding for the sake of the world: in *being loved*, God call us *to love*.

I don't know how it is for you all, but I find that the greatest obstacle to my willingness to love is fear. I am afraid to love – afraid of being foolish, afraid of being hurt, afraid of being turned away – and, at some level, I fear that these rejections will expose me as unloveable. Abiding in God's love, however, we need not fear unworthiness anymore! For once we are God's beloved, we are beloved forever.

This mode of abiding reminds me of a summer camp song I've sung more times than I can either count or remember:

*Little cabin in the woods,
Little man by the window stood,
Saw a rabbit hopping by,
Knocking at my door.*

Help me! Help me! Help me! He cried.

*Lest the hunter shoot you dead,
Little rabbit come inside,
Safely to abide.*

In the context of the camp song, "to abide" is "to rest easy." Jesus loved so powerfully because he knew that he was powerfully loved, and he found incredible courage and freedom in that knowledge. For us, abiding in the vine – abiding in Jesus – means resting assured that *we* are loved, cradled in the arms of the loving God who made us.

Candidates, about this reassurance I will tell you a secret that old people will continue to tell you until you are old enough to tell other young people: life goes by *fast*, too fast to waste it on worrying. You all are between my Michael and Ginna – nine years ago, you were somewhere between your preschool and elementary days – and I still carry enough of my own childhood (believe it or not) to remember how slowly time may seem to move for you now. Even so, you can count on that pace quickening, and, as a parent, I encourage you to go easy on *your* moms and dads: for them, these days are long, too, but the years are bittersweetly short. They remember cradling you as though your infancy was no longer ago than last night. And when you worry about your own worth – worrying whether or not you are loveable – I encourage you to give yourself permission to imagine how it must have felt when you abided in your parents’ arms. I promise you they remember how it felt to hold you that way, and you can trust that in their hearts, they *still* carry you, even as grown up and independent as you have become.

In these Rite 13 prayers, we as the Body of Christ covenant to carry you as well, taking heart once more that God purposes our abiding for the sake of the world: in *being loved*, God call us *to love*. In this service before selfishness, our joy will be complete.”^v

In the name of the God who loved us first.
Amen.

ⁱ *The Big Lebowski*. Coen, Ethan & Joel. Polygram Films. *The Big Lebowski*. 1998.

ⁱⁱ More exactly: 221 funerals; 133 weddings; 526 baptisms. After preaching the sermon, I realized I had missed a book of baptisms, and instead of 300, learned that we have baptized more than 500 since I arrived in 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Police. “Synchronicity II.” *Synchronicity*. A&M. 1983. Of contemporary life, Sting suggests: “Another working day has ended, only the rush hour hell to face. Packed like lemmings into shiny metal boxes, contestants in a suicidal race.”

^{iv} John 15:9.

^v John 15:11.