

**Reverend Shelly White Wood  
May 14, 2006**

**Introduction to May 14 Sermon**

It's a five hour drive from Cedar Falls, Iowa to Springfield, Illinois. A few months ago on the day I was given an offer to serve as Pastor of Cedar Heights Community Presbyterian Church, as my husband Blake and I were driving home, about an hour out of town Blake said, "It's going to be really hard to say good bye to" – someone, I can't recall who he said, it could have been any of you. But that sentence triggered a flood of tears that did not stop for over four hours. I could not stop lamenting as your faces, one by one, came into my mind. As this sanctuary, this sacred space came to me, as I thought of the privilege of working with Dale, and Mark and Lonnie. About ¾ of the way through my grieving I said to Blake,

"I feel like Dorothy leaving the Wizard of Oz. The congregation is my lion. You, the congregation are the one who has given me courage. You instilled a belief in me I could not see and you challenged me to raise the bar of expectations of myself. You have given me the courage to follow God's call.

To the youth, their parents and youth leaders, you are my tin man. You are the one who reminded me what the very heart of ministry is all about. It is with you that I have been the most real, the most vulnerable and the most honest. It is with you that I have laughed the hardest and cried the most tears.

And just like Dorothy, the scarecrow is the hardest to say goodbye to. Lonnie, you are my scarecrow. You are the one who has given me knowledge. You have nurtured my ministry like kite flier as you have watched me be guided by the winds of the spirit, you have held on from below, gradually letting the line a little by little, making sure I don't get tangled in something I cannot get out of. You have been guide, my support, and have given me the greatest gift, any young pastor could ask for. The gift of knowledge. Thank you.

But do not let your hearts be troubled. Remember that Dorothy wakes up and finds that although she is longer in Oz, her lion, tin man and scarecrow are still very much with her. And so you will be for me. You will always be the place I call home. I hope and pray that I in some small way have been there for as you have for me. God bless you.

And now let us focus on the word of God before us. As we read our second scripture reading for the morning, which comes from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John verses 1-8.

**The Kissing Hand**

## John 15:9

Last year, about this time, there was great anxiety in our household as our family was preparing for some big changes: we were preparing for the transition of preschool. Our oldest daughter, Maclean was going to start preschool in the fall, and we were collecting books, pamphlets and magazines on how best to transition a child into starting school. One of our resources was a children's book called, *The Kissing Hand*, by Audrey Penn. The story is about Chester Raccoon who doesn't want to go to school--he wants to stay home with his mother. She assures him that he'll love school--with its promise of new friends, new toys, and new books. Even better, she has a special secret that's been in the family for years--the Kissing Hand. This secret, she tells him, will make school seem as cozy as home. She takes her son's hand, spreads his tiny fingers into a fan and kisses his palm--smack dab in the middle: "Chester felt his mother's kiss rush from his hand, up his arm, and into his heart." Whenever he feels lonely at school, all he has to do is press his hand to his cheek to feel the warmth of his mother's kiss. Chester is so pleased with his Kissing Hand that he--in a genuinely touching moment--gives his mom a Kissing Hand, too, to comfort her when he is away.

Every time I read the fifth chapter of John, I think of Chester Raccoon and his mother's kissing hand. For in this chapter, like the mother raccoon, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his leave and assuring them of his love. These are his final words according to the Gospel of John after the Lord's Supper,

Abide in me as I abide in you.  
I am the vine and you are the branches  
As the Father has loved me,  
So I have loved you;  
Abide in my love. (John 15:4a,5a,9)

We see a similar theological perspective in the writer of 1<sup>st</sup> John who is also summing up his instructions as he writes, "God is love and those who abide in God, also abide in him (1 John 4:16)."

The word "abide" is used many time in these two readings this morning, and yet it is not a commonly used word in our daily language. To abide means 'to remain, to stay, live, dwell, last, to continue.' In our gospel reading, sometimes this verb refers to the branch staying connected to the vine and sometimes it refers to disciples staying connected to Jesus. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit if it is disconnected from the vine, neither can disciples bear fruit if they are disconnected from Jesus.

What does it mean for us to abide in Christ? – How do we stay connected to Christ in ways that our lives are enriched and fruitful? I do not believe we necessarily abide with Christ, by building our Christian résumé. There is a concept in our culture that suggests that some people are bigger or better Christians because of what they do. However, I would suggest that your faith value is based more on the time you are intentionally present with Christ.

Being intentionally present with anyone or anything, let alone with our prayer life, is difficult when we get swallowed up in busyness. We say we value Jesus Christ but our true values are revealed in the way that we set priorities—or allow priorities to set themselves. We know we should spend more time with God, and making our spiritual lives a priority, but there is an event at 2:00, a meeting at 4:00, dinner at 6:00, another meeting at 7:00 and laundry at 10:00. Jesus will have to wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow becomes next month and next month becomes next year until suddenly we realize that our souls are dry and withered like fruit on a vine, and we wonder where God went. We wonder why our children aren't involved in church activities and why we find it so difficult to pray out

loud. But, by the grace of God, even in our withered state, we are still part of a vine of strength that hangs on to us, hoping we do not fall away.

Sometimes people ask me how I can balance what I do, and they assume because I am a minister that it must be easy for me to find time to pray. I confess it is not always easy. A friend of mine gave me a small pillow on string that has the word, “breathe” on it. I have it hanging on my rearview mirror in my car. Every now and then when I am at a stop light, it will come into my sight, and I will remember to stop and take breath and to feel the hand of Christ touching my mind. It lasts five seconds. But in that moment I know that my breath is Christ’s breath. That is the moment I receive Christ’s kissing hand. Similarly at night as I lie in bed and to-do lists swarm over me like dragon flies, I close my eyes and take a breath and remember that I am sitting with Jesus, leaning on his shoulder, abiding in his love. And I conclude, every day of my life, that I cannot do this on my own—So, yes, I need help. I need the vine. I need the nutrients and energy and power of God’s love. I need God’s love to empower my own meager love. These are moments of grace. They are not thirty minute meditations or intense Bible studies, or moments of great sacrifice, which would all be great things to accomplish, but these moments remind me of whose I am and from where my strength comes. This is not the entire way we abide with Jesus. Abiding in God’s love is not achieved solely by remembering that God is with you.

If we only hang on to God, like a branch on a vine, but do not blossom into something more, we are not truly abiding in him. We abide in God’s love is by loving another. Jesus says, beloved, let us love one another as I have loved you. This kind of language is so common, it has become cliché and glib, however for the Greco- Roman culture of the first century, and for many Christian religions today it was and is still radical. Throughout Old Testament history, God has been defined as power, judge, righteousness, creator and king. And now Jesus gives a new metaphor – God is love. God lives in us as we love others. We do not love as a means to bring about some holy end. We love because God first loved us. Loving is the highest form of abiding, of being present for another. In his book, *Peace Is Every Step* Thich Nhat Hanh says “If your love is only a will to possess, it is not love. We must look deep in order to see and understand the needs of the person we love. This is the ground of real love.” Understanding happens when we are present to the other, when we abide with her or him as Christ abides with us. Love is not an emotion, it is an action, it is a gift. When the New Testament talks about love it means Jesus Christ, and its symbol is not hearts and flowers, it is a cross, it is sacrifice.

People say there is no stronger love than that between a parent and a child. That strong connection gives us glimmer of understanding into the kind of love God has for us. So it should not be surprising that we find God portrayed throughout the Bible as a parent. God is like a mother who cannot and will not abandon her nursing child; God is like a mother hen, sheltering her chicks under her wing; God is like a father, running down the road to welcome home his prodigal son; God is like a mother who leans down and picks up her children.

On this Mother’s Day we are mindful of how our mothers have abided in us. How they have been a constant in our lives: Here is a poem about mothers that reveals the kind of love that God requires of us: This is for young mothers stumbling through diaper changes and sleep deprivation. And mature mothers who have learned and are still learning, to let go. For working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. Single mothers and married mothers, grandmothers whose wisdom and love remain a constant. For their grown children and their children’s children. This is for mothers whose children have gone astray, who can’t find the words to reach them. For all the mothers who bite their lips sometimes until they bleed. When their 14 year old dies his hair green....this is for all mothers whose head automatically turn when a little voice calls “Mom” in a crowd, even though they know their own

offspring are at home or grown up. What makes a good mother anyway? Is it patience? Compassion? The ability to nurse a baby, cook dinner, sew a button on a shirt, all at the same time? Or is it the heart?

Chester the Raccoon's mother is telling him, "I will be in your heart, and you will be in mine no matter where you go, what you do, or how far apart we are. I will be there. So go to school and learn new things and treat others kindly." Jesus is telling his disciples, "I will be in your heart, and you will be mine no matter where you go, what you do, or how far apart we are. I will be there. So go out and love your neighbor and you will bear fruit and be nourished your whole life." It is through the human heart that we abide with Jesus Christ and with each other.

In the words of William Wordsworth,

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.  
Amen. (*Ode. Intimations on Immortality*)