

**SLD05.14.07 Fifth Easter Mother's Day Recognition of Graduates
EPC
I John 4:13-19, Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-12
Jill Oglesby Evans**

“Safely To Abide”

There's a lot going on in today's service, a lot of celebrations and comings and goings. It's Mother's Day so we want to specially honor our mothers. We're receiving a special offering to support all the aging mothers out at Presbyterian Homes. We're also receiving a new affiliate member today, Matt Schlageter, who is a candidate for ministry. And we're blessing our high school and graduate school graduates. And finally, we're saying goodbye to one who has become a dear friend of this church, the Rev. Sharon Taylor.

There's a lot going on in today's service. Matter of fact, there's a lot going on at Emory Church in general these days – lots of celebrations, and changes, and comings and goings. To mark the end of school and the beginning of summer, we celebrated the gifts of our young people at our Young Artists' Concert last Wednesday. In just a week, our youth director, Adam, will be graduating from seminary, and leaving us a month or so later to seek a full-time call. Just this morning Session approved our hiring of the Rev. Deedra Oates to become our new Youth minister, starting sometime mid-summer.

Other recent changes - we've enjoyed welcoming a number of new members here of late – but also been saddened by the departure of several long-time friends. Time is passing. Change is happening, all the time. Won't be long before you'll have to take down that sign out front 'cause I won't be the 'new'

pastor anymore, just the pastor. In fact, before either of us knows it, I'll be the old pastor.

Another change - the focus of the church has been shifting for the last year or so – we've been reaching out more to the community, and we're fixin' to reach in more to cultivate our personal relationships with God.

So many changes, all around us, all the time. In our church, in our families, in our workplaces, in our world, in our bodies, hearts and minds. You've heard it before – “only change is constant.” No matter how we feel about it, change never stops. Nothing is static or fixed. Everything is fleeting.

Another word for change is “impermanence,” which the Buddhists call the first principle characteristic of human existence.¹ But if “impermanence” is the first mark of human existence, so is our perennial resistance to it.

Remarks American Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, “everything is in process. That's the ordinary state of affairs. We know that. Yet at the level of personal experience, we (tend to) resist this basic fact (because) it means that life isn't always going to go our way. It means there's loss as well as gain. And we don't like that.”² And why don't we humans much care for change? Because we're all born with a fundamental craving for predictability and control, for resolution and security, for know what's going to happen next, and how things are going to turn out. And that craving for stability governs our thoughts, words and actions.³

¹ Pema Chodron, The Places That Scare You, Shambala Press, Boston, 2002. p. 17.

² *Ibid.* p.18.

³ *Ibid.* p.21.

Moms, for example, know all about the challenge of constant change and how hard it is to keep up with. You have a kid and arrange your whole life around what your kid needs, but darn if what he needs doesn't keep changing! So you rearrange your approach and schedule and expectations accordingly, only to discover she's not the kid she was last year, or last month, or yesterday. One minute your child's life depends on your monitoring his every move; the next, he's shouting at you, eyes blazing, to back off. Soon as you get the house renovated to keep everybody sane, the kids go off to college and you're knocking around in an empty cavern. A pediatrician told me once that, developmentally, moms typically operate about 6 months behind their younger kids. And as the kids grows up, that gap of arrested development increases geometrically.

Change happens, all the time, to everybody. But it's hard to keep up with, hard to adapt to, hard, sometimes to endure. So we want permanence. Our natural tendency is to seek security. In fact, says Chodron, most of us "use our daily activity as a shield against the fundamental ambiguity of our situation, expending tremendous energy trying to ward off impermanence and death. We don't like it that our bodies change shape," she says. "We don't like it that we age. We're afraid of wrinkles and sagging skin. We use health products as if we actually believe that *our* skin, *our* hair, *our* eyes and teeth, might somehow miraculously escape the truth of impermanence."⁴

So much change going on in all our lives, all the time. "And what," asks Chodron, "what do we do when we feel we can't handle what's going on? Where do we look for strength, and in what do we place our trust?" A Buddhist nun is

⁴ **ibid.** p. 18

asking the question; how do we, a Christian community, answer her? The way I see it, today's service and all the changes it notes and blesses presses the same question – as members come and members go, as kids grow up and leave home, as adults meet crises in their lives, as people move, or marry, or suffer, or die, as the perennial impermanence of our lives burdens or overwhelms us, where do we Christians look for strength, and in what do we place our trust?

Today's gospel and epistle texts offer the same simple answer. Jesus says, "Abide in me." "Abide in me." In the midst of all the unpredictability and impermanence of his disciples' lives, Jesus says, "Abide in me." Not "believe in me," or "pray to me," or even, this morning, "follow me." Just "abide" in me.

The first meaning listed in the dictionary, for "abide" is to endure without yielding, to withstand, to bear patiently, tolerate. As in what my mother *didn't* mean when she said, "I just can't *abide* that man!"

The second meaning for "abide" is to dwell, to remain, to last. Puts me in the mind of that gentling Girl Scout song about the little cabin in the wood, little man in the window stood, saw a rabbit hopping by, knocking at my door. "Help me! Help me! Help me!" he said. "Or that hunter will shoot me dead!" "Little rabbit come inside, safely to abide." That's how I hear Jesus' invitation: "in the midst of the challenging changes of your lives, abide, rest, settle, center, safely, in me."

There's no escaping the heart-filling, heart-breaking rollercoaster ride of "impermanence." But what do we people of faith do when we feel we can't handle

what's going on? Where do we look for strength, and in what do we place our trust?" Jesus says, "Abide in me."

But what does it mean to abide in Jesus? I John tells us, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."(4:16b) He goes on, "by this we know we abide in God and God abides in us, because God has given us of God's spirit." What has God given us of God's spirit? How do we experience God's gift of the spirit?

Here's how I describe it: when my heart abides in God, I feel a certain calm beneath the chaos. A certain calm and a certain confidence that everything will be all right. I feel less fear and more openness to new ideas or risks. When a person or group is abiding in God, what I notice is a kind of looseness or flexibility of identity, a certain lightness of being, perhaps even an air of playfulness. When our hearts abide in God, surrender to life's challenges and trust in God's providence seem to come more easily. When our hearts abide in God, it becomes easier, somehow, to "go with the flow," because it's the flow of the Holy Spirit.

Take today's story, one of the nuttier acts of the apostles, in which Jesus' disciple, Philip, goes, spontaneously and courageously, with the flow of the Holy Spirit. Post Jesus' death and resurrection, the lives and the futures of his disciples are in total upheaval. Nobody knows exactly what to do or where to go. Rumors abound about divine appearances and healing miracles. Everybody's all on fire with the good news but nobody knows exactly what comes next.

Suddenly an angel shows up to Philip and says “go south, young man,” so southward Philip goes, on “a wilderness road,” says scripture. Comes across an Ethiopian eunuch – powerful, sure; in charge of a Queen’s treasury, but a foreigner, and worse to observant Jews of Philip’s day, an “unclean” foreigner – a eunuch, a man castrated in service to his master. Ordinarily Philip would have nothing to do with such a man.

But the Spirit tells Philip to join the eunuch, so he climbs on the royal chariot, only to discover the man is reading holy scripture, the prophet Isaiah. “Do you understand what you’re reading?” asks Philip “Nope,” says the eunuch. “Need some help here.”

So Philip explains his understanding of both the Isaiah text and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Must have mentioned something about being baptized, too, ‘cause as they’re passing some water, the eunuch points to it and says, “so what’s to prevent *me* from being baptized?”

And what Philip does *not* say, bless his heart, is “gee, maybe you might had better meet with the pastor.” Or “I’m not sure your profession of faith jives yet with mine.” Or “a puddle on the side of the road? That’s no place to get baptized!” No. What Philip says to the eunuch is, “Okay. We got me, you, the Holy Spirit and some water – I say let’s go for it!” And he baptizes the eunuch. Whereupon the Holy Spirit snatches Philip away and deposits him some place else to do the Spirit’s work.

So much changing in the world of Jesus' disciples. But Philip handles the social, relational, and religious challenges with which he is confronted with a calm and a courage and a grace that surely reflects a heart abiding in Jesus.

So many changes in all our lives, all the time. Where do we look for strength, and in what do we place our trust? Says our resurrected Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, "Abide in me." And by this we know that we *are* abiding in Jesus, when in the face of the perennial impermanence of life, we steady our hearts with God's steadfast love.

To the glory of God. Amen.