

## Fifth Sunday of Easter (5-2-2021)

Abide in me as I abide in you. What does that mean? In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us this image of himself as the vine, and us as the branches. He portrays himself as the life force who flows through us, the branches. And to abide is to remain in, to dwell in, to live in. He invites us to soak in his presence, to soak in his love.

As I was reflecting on this passage for this week, I found myself thinking about how do we soak in love? And I thought of the image of an abused child adopted by a loving family. How does that child learn what love is when they've never really known love before? They discover what love is by being loved day after day after very ordinary day. Soaking love in one hour, one minute at a time. Being nourished by consistent, constant love. And by being loved, they learn not only what love is for themselves, but how to love others. And we can see that in life around us as we think about our ordinary human experiences of love.

Jeanne St. John shared a powerful story with her mailing list, and it fits so perfectly with today's readings. I know it fits with a book that the adult discussion group has been reading and discussing, too. But it fits so perfectly with today's readings that I'm going to share parts of it here. And if anyone is interested, let me know and I will share the whole thing with you. But these are pretty substantial excerpts from it.

It's called Mr. Tayer, and it was written by Jean Houston as a reflection on an experience she had as a child or as a young woman. She writes,

When I was about fourteen, I was seized by enormous waves of grief over my parents' breakup. I had read somewhere that running would help dispel anguish, so I began to run to school every day down Park Avenue in New York City. I was a great big overgrown girl (five feet, eleven by the age of eleven), and one day I ran into a rather frail old gentleman in his seventies and knocked the wind out of him. He laughed as I helped him to his feet and asked me in French-accented speech, "Are you planning to run like that for the rest of your life?"

"Yes, sir" I replied. It looks that way."

"Well, Bon Voyage!" he said.

"Bon Voyage!" I answered and sped away.

About a week later I was walking down Park Avenue with my fox terrier, Champ, and again I met the old gentleman.

"Ah." he greeted me, "my friend the runner, and with a fox terrier. I knew one like that years ago in France. Where are you going?"

"Well, sir." I replied, "I'm taking Champ to Central Park."

"I will go with you," he informed me. "I will take my constitutional."

And, thereafter, for about a year or so, the old gentleman and I would meet and walk together often several times a week in Central Park. He had a long French name but asked me to call him by the first part of it, which was "Mr. Tayer" as far as I could make out.

The walks were magical and full of delight. Not only did Mr. Tayer seem to have absolutely no self-consciousness, but he was always seized by wonder and astonishment over the simplest things. He was constantly and literally falling into love. I remember one time when he suddenly fell on his knees, his long Gallic nose raking the ground and exclaimed to me, "Jeanne, look at the caterpillar. Ahhhh. I joined him on the ground to see what had evoked so profound a response that he was seized by the essence of caterpillar. "How beautiful it is," he remarked, "this little green being with its wonderful funny little feet. Exquisite! Little furry body, little green feet on the road to metamorphosis." He then regarded me with equal delight. "Jeanie, can you feel yourself to be a caterpillar?"

"Oh, yes." I replied with the baleful knowing of a gangly, pimply faced teenager.

"Then think of your own metamorphosis." he suggested. "What will you be when you become a butterfly, *une papillon*, eh? What is the butterfly of Jeannie?" (What a great question for a fourteen-year-old girl!) His long, Gothic, comic-tragic face would nod with wonder. "Eh, Jeannie, look at the clouds! God's calligraphy

in the sky! All that transforming, moving, changing, dissolving, becoming. Jeanne, become a cloud and become all the forms that ever were.”

It was wonderful. People of all ages followed us around laughing--not at us but with us. Old Mr. Tayer was truly diaphanous to every moment and being with him was like being in attendance at God's own party, a continuous celebration of life and its mysteries. But mostly, Mr. Taylor was so full of vital sap and juice that he seemed to flow with everything. Always he saw the interconnections between things--the way that everything in the universe, from fox terriers to tree bark to somebody's red hat, to the mind of God, was related to everything else and was very, very good.

And she talks in her remembrance about this, about meeting people when she's out walking with Mr. Tayer and about his close observation of people. And he'll start talking to them and then connect them with someone else and relationships just blossom around him. And then she says,

but perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Mr. Tayer was the way that he would suddenly look at you. He looked at you with wonder and astonishment joined to unconditional love joined to a whimsical regarding of you as the cluttered house that hides the holy one. I felt myself primed to the depths by such seeing. I felt evolutionary forces wake up in me by such seeing, every cell and thought and potential palpably changed. I was yeasted, greened, awakened by such seeing, and the defeats and denigrations of adolescence were redeemed. I would go home and tell my mother, who was a little skeptical about my walking with an old man in the park so often, “Mother, I was with my old man again. And when I am with him, I leave my littleness behind.” That deeply moved her. You could not be stuck in littleness and be in the radiant field of Mr. Tayer.

The last time that I ever saw him was the Thursday before Easter Sunday, 1955. I brought him the shell of a snail. “Ah. Escargot.” he exclaimed, and then proceeded to wax ecstatic for the better part of an hour. Snail shells and galaxies and the convolutions in the brain, the whorl of flowers and the meanderings of rivers were taken up into a great hymn to the spiraling evolution of spirit and matter. When he had finished, his voice dropped, and he whispered almost in

prayer, "Omega... omega... omega." (And for those of you who aren't familiar with that, it's the last letter of the Greek alphabet.) Finally, he looked up and said to me quietly. Au revoir Jeanne."

"Au revoir, Mr. Tayer," I replied, "I'll meet you at the same time next Tuesday."

Well, Jeanne came again every Tuesday and Thursday for the next eight weeks. But she didn't ever see Mr. Tayer again. Years later, she found out that he had died that Easter Sunday. And years later, someone handed her a copy of a book without a cover. The book was entitled The Phenomenon of Man. As she read, she felt a strange sense of familiarity with the ideas in the book. And especially when this author started talking about the Omega Point. And finally, she asked to see the jacket. There was a picture of her friend. Mr. Tayer was Teilhard de Chardin, the paleontologist who was also a priest, a poet and a mystic.

Jean Houston reflected on her experience and concluded that

Pere Teilhard had what few church officials did--the power and grace of the Love that passes all understanding. He could write about love being the evolutionary force, the omega point that lures the world and ourselves into becoming because he experienced that love in a piece of rock, in the wag of a dog's tail, in the eyes of a child. He was so in love with everything that he talked in great particularity, even to me as an adolescent, about the desire atoms have for each other, the yearning of molecules, of organisms, of bodies, of planets, of galaxies, all of creation, longing for that radiant bonding, for joining, for the deepening of their condition. for becoming more by virtue of yearning for and finding the other. He knew about the search for the Beloved, his model was Christ. For Teilhard de Chardin, Christ was the Beloved of the soul.

I read that and I thought Teilhard de Chardin knew... knew... and lived daily what it meant to abide in the vine. He soaked in Christ's love daily, experiencing that amazing holy divine love in everything that is and in every person he encountered. And that love overflowed from him to everyone around him, even to a 14 year old girl who was so desperately in need of it.

Now very few among us have the kind of intellect that Teilhard de Chardin did. He was an extraordinary human being. But every one of us can soak in Christ's love. Everyone has the possibility of doing that. It's there for us daily. Waiting for us to absorb it, until we are so steeped in love that like sponges soaked to the saturation point, we can't move without exuding it.

That's the image that Jesus is imparting to us with his image of the vine. That we are to be soaked in his love. As 1st John says, God is love. And those who abide in love abide in God. And God abides in them. When we abide in God and God's love abides in us, it overflows. And we love in word and in action because love becomes the essence of who we are. Amen.