

May 10, Sixth Sunday of Easter (1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17)

An ancient definition of God says that God is an intelligible circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

by [Susan Palo Cherwien](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

After leaving the captivity of Egypt, the people of Israel continued to look for sacred things to worship, sacred places to worship, a home for God. The Israelites have assimilated the practices of the Egyptians—their images, their rites, their prayers for appeasement—in spite of the Abrahamic covenant. It has, after all, been about ten generations.

God leads the people Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness, accompanying them (a new thing!) as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God is in the midst of the people, leading them, dwelling in their midst. And yet the people continue to forge images to worship, to look for God on holy mountains, to look for God at sacred springs. Even as God is speaking the words, “I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God,” the people at the mountain’s foot are casting the golden calf.

The temple in Jerusalem becomes for many once again the place where God dwells. Even the disciples at the transfiguration of Jesus want to build a shrine to the event. The inclination to limit God to one place, one location—perhaps to one nation, one people, one creed—is strong.

An ancient definition of God says that God is an intelligible circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. We often try to circumscribe, compartmentalize, confine God, but God cannot be limited. In Psalm 139, the psalmist calls us back to understanding: “Whither can I go from your spirit? Whither can I flee from your presence?”

In John 15, the Twelve have just eaten together with Jesus, and Jesus has washed their feet and given them a new commandment. After declaring, “I am the vine; you

are the branches,” Jesus repeats the new commandment: “Love one another. Abide in my love.”

The Greek word translated as “abide” is *meno*—to sojourn, to tarry, to lodge. The community of Christ will lodge in love, sojourn in love. And this will be the sign, *semeia*—a word so important to John—of abiding in Christ: love. The whole arc of John’s writing seems to move toward this commandment of love.

Agape is the noun “love” used by John. Mark never uses it; Matthew, once; Luke, once. But it occurs seven times in John, mostly in chapters 13–15, and 18 times in 1 John, which is almost a parergon of these discourse chapters. *Agape* is an intentional love that expects nothing in return. It is the sign of lodging in God, sojourning in Christ. First John pushes further: “God is love.”

A tenth-century hymn for Maundy Thursday (New Commandment Thursday!) begins with the words *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*. Where charity and love are, there God is. When one abides in or dwells in God’s love, God is truly present.

There is no end, no limit to God’s love. As Gertrud Mueller Nelson writes, “Love does not deplete itself.” It is like the flame of the new fire at the Easter Vigil. It enters the dark space, a single flame. As other candles are lit from it, its light is not depleted: each candle flame is the same, and the light spreads through the space until the room is full of light. “We sing the glories of this pillar of fire,” says the Exsultet, “the flame of which is not diminished, even when its light is divided and borrowed.”

Agape is a conscious, intentional, selfless love, a sign of the indwelling God. It is “I in them and them in me.” It wells up from the undepleted love of God, changing us, changing life, changing the world. And 1 John 3 elucidates just what this love entails: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin believed that the natural movement of God’s creation is toward Christogenesis, toward becoming Christ—and that every act of our daily lives has the potential of moving the world toward Christ’s reign. For if God is love, and Christ is in God, then every act of love increases Christ’s sway on the universe. All of our smallest acts, lived out of love, have the potential of helping God’s reign come, of causing “the very marrow of the universe to vibrate,” as Teilhard put it.

“See,” we are told in Revelation, “the dwelling place of God is among mortals.” In Nikolaj Grundtvig’s hymn “Built on a Rock,” we sing this: “Not in a temple made with hands / God the Almighty is dwelling . . . Yet he who dwells in heaven above / Deigns to abide with us in love, / Making our bodies his temple.”

Perhaps, like the people at Sinai, we would like to be excused from such intimate converse with God. Send up a prophet; we are no prophets! Send up Christ; we are no Christs! The vulnerability of love can be frightening. But Christ has made this commandment to us, as branches of the true vine: Abide in me. Love one another, as I have loved you.