

April 28, Easter 5B (John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21)

## **In biblical Greek, the word we translate as “abide” is active rather than passive.**

by [Austin Shelley](#) in the [April 2024](#) issue

The hymn “abide with me” dates either to the impending death in 1847 of its author, Scottish Anglican priest Henry Francis Lyte, or to the death of his longtime friend William Augustus Le Hunte 27 years earlier. Those who espouse the earlier date tell the story of Le Hunte’s repeatedly uttering the phrase “abide with me” as Lyte sat by his deathbed. Some believe both dates are valid, positing that Lyte first wrote the hymn on the occasion of Le Hunte’s death but later remembered the words and added to them as he himself lay dying from tuberculosis.

The hymn draws its main scriptural allusion from the narrative of the disciples’ walk to Emmaus and their post-resurrection encounter with Jesus, whom they do not recognize on the road but nonetheless urge to “abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent” (Luke 24:29). The Greek word translated as “abide” is μέννῳ, which means simply “remain” or “stay.” But the word yields deeper meaning as well. In the New Testament, to abide is to participate in an ongoing process of renewal through one’s presence intermingled with another’s; in biblical Greek, the word is active rather than passive. It reflects not merely existing alongside another as a static entity but rather sharing in a common fellowship and mission. To abide one with another is to remain an active part of the whole community in an iterative fashion, over and over again, so as to maintain a life-giving, ongoing bond that will sustain a shared mission and purpose.

Two books of the Bible far outrank the rest in the sheer number of attestations of *abide*. The Gospel of John wins the overall count at 41 uses of the word in its various forms, and the much shorter 1 John comes in at just over half that number but with more density. If one were looking for a characteristic representation of these books’ ample use of the term *abide*, this week’s lectionary texts would not disappoint.

As in last week's gospel reading, John 15 begins with one of the seven "I am" statements that proceed from the mouth of John's Jesus. This time Jesus' alignment with the great I AM of Hebrew scripture takes the form of vine, vine grower, branches, and the relationship among them. It's not much of a stretch for the reader to imagine how this particular metaphor functions. The vine grower creates the vine and all that sustains it; the vine in turn draws nourishment from sun, rain, and soil, thus sustaining the branches. The branches either produce fruit or do not; both fruit-producing branches and nonproducing ones are subject to pruning for the sake of the continued health and ongoing life of the whole plant.

Equating each branch with a singular person is a mistake I hope those called to proclaim good news will avoid. Instead we can think more holistically, regarding the branches cut away as the parts of our shared mission that no longer bear fruit, such that pruning them redirects nourishing resources to branches that still hold potential for thriving.

This passage is part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, and the metaphor of vine grower, vine, and branches provides instruction for the time soon to come when Jesus will no longer be physically present with his community: "Abide in me as I abide in you." These words hold both invitation and promise. The promise is that Jesus will continue to provide sustenance through the life-giving presence of the Spirit. Set before his disciples, then, is an invitation to abide in this assured continued sustenance, and to produce fruit in turn.

Make no mistake: fruitful or not, pruning will come. In this description of branches cut away entirely or pruned to bear more fruit, Jesus doesn't skirt the reality or inevitability of human suffering. Rather, he offers to his disciples of every time and place the comfort of situating our suffering within the abiding, life-giving, life-sustaining presence of God.

The accompanying lectionary passage from 1 John 4 takes the promise of the Lord's abiding presence to heart and goes a step farther. Abiding in God's love, we are equipped and freed to love one another. It is Jesus' ongoing love for his disciples that frees us to love one another in his name. Thus may we pray for God's abiding and promised presence, through an oft-omitted verse of Lyte's hymn:

Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word,  
But as Thou dwell'st with Thy disciples, Lord,

Familiar, condescending, patient, free.  
Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.