

“You Can Do Nothing”

John 15 & I John 4

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Before I was called to Hope Church some of you may remember I served as a co-pastor at a church outside of Philadelphia – North & Southampton Reformed Church in Churchville, PA – established 1710. When we celebrated communion there it was sometimes by intinction and sometimes in the pews – as we do here; and as here at Hope Church, when communion is served in the pews, the last thing that happens is that the ministers serve the servers, the elders and deacons in the front pew. One of the practices in Churchville was that as one minister served the bread and the other the juice – we would say some words from the Gospel of John...with the bread, from John 6: ‘Jesus said ‘I am the bread of life - whoever comes to me will never be hungry’; and then with the cup, from the passage we heard today from John 15: ‘Jesus said ‘I am the vine, you are the branches...apart from me you can do nothing.’ I liked that practice there – just as I appreciate here at Hope the singing we do during that time – but I have to admit that those words from John 15 – ‘...apart from me you can do nothing’ - NOTHING – that always got to me – I always had some doubts about it. Right there during communion, I was doubting – as I was saying the words and serving. NOTHING? – really? – apart from Jesus I can do nothing?! (I always heard it individually). That always seemed a bit offensive to me. I’m a fairly capable person, I think...seems to me I could do SOMETHING! Not that I want to, of course – I’m in favor of Jesus – but NOTHING...just seems a bit over the top.

Through the centuries, followers of Jesus have developed and debated all sorts of things about faith and doctrine, about belief and practice – and there are all sorts of things that I’m sure that you or I could bring up that we have our doubts or questions about – issues of doctrine and theological understanding. But I’m certain I doubt this: ‘apart from me you can do NOTHING’ – and I happen to believe that you doubt it too, whether or not

you'll admit it; I think there can be unity found across the theological spectrum in this doubt: who really believes that apart from Jesus you can do NOTHING?! Not that you're opposed to Jesus– 'nothing' just seems a bit over the top.

'What do you do?' It's a question we ask and are asked all the time – and it's usually asked and answered in terms of the work you do – about job/career/ vocation/work. The answer to 'what do you do?' usually puts your life, your identity, primarily in terms of what your job is – what work you do. 'What do you do?' Either you have a job – or you are student studying so you can get a job – or you don't have a job but you want to get a job – or you are at home with kids and that is your job – or you are retired from a job – or you cannot do a job. At every point of life we identify ourselves to others in terms of our jobs – you are taught to get a lot of self-worth out of what you do; and there can be a lot of struggle and difficult feelings when a job is lost or when work is not satisfying or when your abilities diminish. Your work – your job – it's a way to express your talents – a way to support yourself and others; we are capable people – we do things – that is central to our identity – we are doers, not do nothing-ers.

Jesus said: '...apart from me you can do nothing...' and I think he meant to say it to human doers – human doings – like us. When we answer 'what do you do?' in terms of the work we do or don't, the job we have or lost, our life-work ahead or happening or completed – we have a sense of just how much our identity is shaped and determined by those things.

But what if the next time someone asked you – 'what do you do?' – you answered: 'well - I abide in God & God abides in me...oh, and also...I abide in God's love & God's love abides in me.' How do you think that would go over?! Maybe you think that would sound odd to someone – or sound like you were being a religious show-off? OK , but how would that go over with you? How would it be to actually say that, and believe that, about yourself... 'this is what I do: abide in God & God in me; abide in God's love & God's love in me' ...? It's a very different way to look at what you do in life.

When Jesus says ‘apart from me you can do nothing’ – it is the ‘apart from me’ part that points to the whole idea of abiding, it’s what points to the image of ‘I am the vine’, it points to an organic, alive, life and death, connected image of who Jesus is and who Jesus’ disciples are. And it does so by taking a step back from doing, to identity – to being; it says before we talk about what you do, let’s talk about where you abide. ‘Abide’ is all through the gospel passage in John 15 and all through the letter of 1st John – ‘abide in God...abide in me...my word abides in you...abide in my love’ Jesus says; ‘abide in God’s love...God’s love abides in you...God abides in you...abide in God’ John says. Lots of abiding.

And the thing is, when’s the last time you’ve used the word ‘abide’...? anyone? I’m not sure I ever have in a conversation...it’s not exactly an every day sort of word that we use – ‘hey, this looks like a good spot on the beach – let’s abide here...!’ But I kind of like that it’s not a common word for us – it allows us to explore some meaning in it that can have particular resonance for us. “Abide” – I came across a commentator that gave away of grasping the meaning of ‘abide’ as it is used by Jesus and John, by saying that ‘abide’ is a WHERE word and a WHEN word. Abide is a WHERE word because it gives a sense of place regardless of place – abide says that wherever you are, here is really where you are: present to God, and God present to you – present within God’s grasp and God’s Spirit present in you; a place within God’s love and God’s love having place in you. Abide always tells you where you are – tells you where you always are.

Abide is a WHEN word too because it gives a sense of time regardless of time – abide says that whatever circumstance of life – time of life – in any moment this is true: present to God, and God present to you – present within God’s grasp and God’s Spirit present in you; a place within God’s love and God’s love having place in you. Abide brings that truth to any when – to every circumstance.

That sounds good - that WHERE and WHEN of abide – the constant of God’s presence and love. But the thing about that word abide is that it is not a passive thing –

abiding doesn't just happen – it takes an act of will – a choice – a continuing. I wonder if we ever think that about God – that God's presence and love are an ongoing choice for God – an act of will...? Does God just HAVE to be with us? HAVE to love us? Is it just God's job? It is the nature of God to be in relationship with Creation and to love us, but it is also the eternal choice of God to do so – God's presence and love are freely given and God wills to continue to do so – God abides. I find that very meaningful to understand that God's presence and love is a choice. And it points us to what abiding is for us as well: abiding in God – abiding in God's love. I've been thinking about it this week and the best I could come up with for what abiding is, is 'active staying' ...does that make sense? – 'active staying' – in the WHERE and WHEN of life to choose to stay within the identity of God's presence and God's love – because the pull of so much of the WHERE and WHEN of life is to lose hold of, let go of, God's presence and love. Abiding is choosing to remain there.

Jesus said: 'apart from me you can do nothing', and when we understand abiding, we see that what Jesus is saying, revealing, insisting on is that the only things with true substance in life, in our lives, come from a place with God and within God's love – only there is the source of what is life-giving and enduring, what is substantial and strong; it's not just that God loves or that we love – it's that God IS love – so the only thing that has true substance at all is the creative power of love.

Why do I doubt what Jesus says? why do you? I'm sure it has something to do with our own self-importance at times – our own need to justify ourselves. I'm sure it has to do with our own competition to prove ourselves and our worth. But I think it mostly has to do with a deep misunderstanding of doing and of love at all – forgetting that love IS what we do: that from birth to death it is relationships of love that are life; that whatever we do in life, it is love that gives substance to life; that whatever our own abilities and accomplishments, love sees the value of all people in all circumstances and all abilities;

that to be a loving presence to someone in life, in the face of death, in the face of what is deadly, is to be and do what makes us truly human.

God knows there is a lot to do in this world – in our busy lives – in our broken lives – in our not-busy lives; a lot to do in this world – this glorious world - this broken world - this violent world – this needy world. God our Creator, Lord Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit knows there is much to do – knows there is much for us to do as followers of Jesus Christ – so much good fruit that is needed. So what shall we do? – ‘abide in me - I in you; abide in my love – my love in you’ – is that enough to do?...it is the only way to do anything at all. When Jesus says ‘apart from me you can do nothing’, it is Jesus inviting, admonishing, challenging us to believe this wisdom – this truth – this reality: that it is only the power of God’s love – the creative, life-giving power of God’s love that will give us and this world what is needed – only God’s love that will give us the courage and strength and wisdom for all there is to do – only God’s love that gives the fruit of healing and hope, reconciliation and forgiveness, true peace and prosperity, true joy and purpose.

There is so much to do – how would it be to actually say, and believe this about yourself: ‘this is what I do: I abide in God & God in me; I abide in God’s love & God’s love in me’ ...? It would mean that wherever and whenever in life we would not doubt this good news, but abide in Jesus said: ‘apart from me you can do nothing’ AMEN.