

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
**RCL Lectionary, Year B**  
**Acts 8:26-40, Psalm 22:24-30, 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8**  
**May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour**  
**Mill Valley, California**

**Learning to Abide**  
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

I had the privilege just the other day of sitting in conversation with a group of spiritual leaders from Southern Marin. We were gathered to compare notes and discuss the challenges faced in our various communities. Among them was Kol Shofar's Rabbi Lavey Derby, who is a delight to get to know if you get the opportunity. He's incredibly funny at times, and I found myself chuckling with him throughout the meeting. There we were, cutting it up like old friends - even though we had only just met. Amongst the usual challenges of ministry here at Church of Our Saviour, I shared I'd been pondering the implications of swine flu on administering communion, to which he promptly replied that his community didn't have to worry about swine flu. . .It just wouldn't be kosher! But one of his favorite one-liners was to preface a pipe-dream or his own community's not-as-yet realized plans with: "When the Messiah comes..." and then he would turn to me and add, "...or for the second time..."

I thought of Rabbi Derby and the Kol Shafar community this week as I reflected on the theme of "abiding" in Jesus' words in today's Gospel reading. Kol Shafar is presently meeting and schooling in an exile of sorts - the Kol Shafar Diaspora they call it - during an 18-month renovation of their facilities. All of their life and ministry is now conducted offsite. Shabbat is held in one location. Hebrew school in another. And Rabbi Derby tootles around the roads of Marin with much of his library in the back of his SUV. The upheaval this arrangement has brought to the Kol Shofar community raises deep questions about where each member and the community itself truly abides. They've lost fifty families since the renovation started. The stress of being without a spiritual home manifested in a building is simply too much for some.

It might or might not be a surprise to you that Rabbi Derby's kvetches about ministry in this part of the world are very similar to mine, and indeed similar to that of many shepherding spiritual communities on this or that side of 101 and the Golden Gate. We are sometimes -- or often -- viewed simply as peddlers of spiritual products - whether barmitzvahs or baptisms - by folk who have been taught by our consumerist society to turn away from community and struggle on their own...who are here not to abide, but to consume alone and unaided, relying on their own fortunes and mettle. In this way, spiritual traditions and rites of passage join the long parade of items to be purchased on the shopping list of life, not at all the conversions like the one we hear about today so vividly in Acts when Philip meets and then baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. It's frustrating trying to build communities of transformation when self-satisfaction and entitlement rule the roost.

So how do we call spiritual consumers into community? How do we challenge the false god of material success and teach our people the deep abodes of Torah and faithful practice; of communion and prayer?

Christ teaches us to abide. Not to merely consume. To find our true home in God, to join the vine of community and open ourselves to the pruning grace of God, the transforming power of divine love, that we might bear much fruit.

We are called to abide. Many of us, in a highly mobile world where walking away is made easy can forget how to abide, but the truth is that we all know how in our bones.

Today is Mother's Day. Our first abode, the first place we abided was in our mother's womb. This reality was never lost completely in our tradition, even while patriarchal language grew to dominate our theological metaphors.

In the ancient language of the Church, Mary became *theotokos*, mother of God, literally the God bearer. Incarnation begins in a mother's womb - the grace that abides with us first abode in a mother. Mystics like Julian of Norwich went even further and referred to God in Christ as "mother" as they abided in a divine, mothering embrace through devotional disciplines, sacrificial service, and prayer. Divine wisdom is depicted in Hebrew scripture as a woman setting the table, building a home of hospitality for all who would come and partake. And Jesus refers to himself at one point in Scripture wanting to gather the children of Jerusalem - a hoped-for vision of the city of God - together like a mother "hen gathers her brood under her wings."<sup>1</sup>

And even today in the most conservative Christian parlance, you can still hear talk of "mother church," the bride of Christ, and the Body, too, of our savior. As today we remember motherhood as an unassailable, abiding experience of all the human family, the metaphorical language becomes blurred even when it comes to gendered talk of our God.... because if we truly abide, we cease to know exactly where the boundary is between the branch and the trunk, the trunk and the roots. We cease to be identified, in Paul's words, as male or female, Greek or Jew, slave or free.<sup>2</sup> We come into a oneness very much like the biological oneness with our mothers, who nourished us as we grew, even after we departed the womb, and the womb became a house, the home became a family. As we grew, what nourished us in our mother's blood became the milk of infancy, became the solid family food of the dining room, became the spiritual food of community in the bread and wine. Where would we be without motherhood as creatures and people of God? Nowhere, of course. Our mothers taught us how to abide.

This week, one of our beloved brothers in Christ in this part of the vine passed into greater life. Fred abided here with us for so many years, knowing this abiding was a reflection of home, our true home in God, where we are wrapped up like babies in the womb and fed at table like family. We miss him this day in the same way we notice an empty chair at the table when a family member leaves home.

Fred knew what Jesus means today by abiding. We all abide somewhere. We must abide or we cease to be fully human and our true identity withers like a branch cut from the vine. Better we abide in community where we are held and nurtured than alone with our own ideas and whims. Better to gain our wisdom from stories of generations than merely rely on our own mettle and a few decades of experience. Better to set up our household with the God of the cosmos than simply play god at home and abide with the anxieties of our limitations. Truth is, we make very bad gods when left to ourselves. But we risk being transformed into God's image when we gather together and abide as the Body of Christ.

And in Eastertide, we are reminded that even learning to abide in this house is but a taste of what awaits. Our sojourn here prepares us for abiding forever in the One who made us, for the Resurrection that has come and is coming.

And how do we wait?

"Abide in me as I in you," Jesus says. In this we practice our faith. We are not made to simply consume abstractions or ideas and call them faith, nor spout platitudes about the way life should be. No, we are called to abide in this Body, and eat the bread and drink the wine, because this is where true life and love is offered and embraced...and bearing the fruits of justice and peace, building up the abiding household of God for when the Messiah comes...or for the second time! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23.37

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 3.28