

The Dude Abides

1 John 3:16-24

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I.

I might be mad as a hatter, but this morning's sermon might be the moment we all look back on and say, *that* was the beginning of the end. When quirky started bending toward crazy, and amusing began to brush up against the absurd. What I am about to say to you today certainly has me pondering such thoughts, but who am *I* to decide for all of *you*. Ultimately, I am just the minister and, truth be told, after all these years here on the Park I have lost a certain perspective on the whole situation and I seriously doubt I could ever gain it back; or, would wish to even if it were possible.

So, I am just going to preach the sermon and allow you to decide for yourselves; as I always do. Afterward, if you think it is time to start figuring out which lucky few of you are going to come have THE TALK with me, take comfort in knowing I will be expecting the knock at my door and, in a strange way, be welcoming of it.

II.

Unbeknownst to you, Christie and I have been secretly working on the content for a new church website. Mostly in fits and starts, but we are making headway. The real challenge to doing so, for me anyway, is thinking about how we would like others to be thinking about the church when they visit the site. While most websites seek to provide answers to obvious questions, I am hoping our site will challenge folks to consider asking different questions about what a church could be and should be; which is also the case with the new sign.

This, really, has been the hold-up; that, and trying to heed the words of the 18th century French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire who, borrowing from an Italian proverb, famously opined, "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." Or, said another way, many things worth doing are worth doing badly. *(Please remember the concept as it will be used liberally if any future defense of this sermon proves necessary.)*

III.

Most people walking around in the world have their own notion of “church”; be it accurate or not. Further, most people have differing notions of “church”; even, and sometimes especially, within the very same church. Some may understand “church” as a standard bearer of tradition, orthodoxy, values or morality; be they good or bad. Others may understand “church,” variously, as service provider, do-gooders, secret cabal, safe-haven, social group or opiate of the masses. These do not even *begin* to exhaust the list.

From my perspective, though, “church” is a life-style choice put into practice and motion. While most people will almost certainly visit the new website and focus on one of the many component *parts* which comprise our church (worship time, stream, email address, etc) what I would like the site to convey is the *flow* and the *rhythm* of our church; how the *whole* moves through time and space. Because we do flow, and we do have a rhythm; and if you do not get that, you will not get what this particular church is all about.

IV.

One such point in our flow and rhythm is the rummage sale. Over the past 25 years, I have witnessed it go from a fundraiser, to a wide-ranging group endeavor (it is amazing who donates and helps), to something of a congregational mixer, a bonding experience, a rite of passage, a social event and, at the Sneak Peek, a celebratory feast where kids toddle, run around and are made to feel welcome. All the while, we are getting goods and clothing into the hands of folks who really need them, and raise no small sum of money for the church.

Beyond this, for a certain kind of person, the deals and steals offered by a good rummage sale is nothing but fun. (*Buy it at full price, no way. For a buck? You bet.*) I myself am that certain kind of person, so when Linda came home last week with a t-shirt she found while sorting (one of the perks of helping with the set-up) I was beside myself with giddy delight.

(T-shirt taped to front of pulpit; see below.)

V.

Here, now, is where the sermon gets a bit hinky. Never in a *million* years would I have *ever* imagined using, or daring to select as a sermon illustration, the movie, *The Big Lebowski*, of which I am a fan. A 1998 Coen brothers dark comedy with a Western tinge which centers around *Jeff* 'The Dude' Lebowski, a hapless, profoundly casual, but big-hearted character played by Jeff Bridges and pictured on the cover of today's bulletin, who is mistaken for another, very wealthy *Jeffrey* Lebowski, aka *The Big Lebowski*; with all kinds of zaniness and humor ensuing, as well as great attention paid to bowling as metaphor. Over the years, the movie went from counterculture favorite to mythic status espousing a philosophical perspective centered on the movie's mantra, "The Dude Abides."

To be clear, the movie is for adults **ONLY!** It is *well* deserving of its R rating and, frankly, if you knew the movie you'd be shocked, **SHOCKED** I tell you, that I even mention it in a worship service. But, there it is and here we are.

VI.

To be clear, I am *not* endorsing the movie, and you do not need to be familiar with it in order to grasp the finer points of today's sermon. That said, if you want to get a sense of it I have included a link to a G rated video clip taken from the very end of the movie in the emailed version of today's sermon: [The Dude Abides](#)

After Linda showed me the t-shirt, which says, "The Dad Abides," I put it on right away, had her take a photo, and we sent it to our kids on the family group text; to which all the kids immediately responded with enthusiastic approval. This story would have ended right there, and probably should have, except for the fact that, by happenstance, right after Linda showed me the t-shirt I sat down to look at today's sermon text which I had selected two months ago.



VII.

Reading from 1 John 3:16-24, hear the word of the Lord!

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey God's commandments and do what pleases God.

And this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey God's commandments abide in God, and God abides in them. And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that God has given us.

VIII.

Now, I will admit, a rummage sale t-shirt is not much of a burning bush upon which to base a sermon. But, like Moses, we should be less concerned with the bush, or t-shirt, and more interested in the voice which arises from it, and what it has to say to us. This morning the voice we hear, from both t-shirt and the sermon text, calls us to consider the notion of "abiding."

We are all quite familiar with the definition of the English word "abide": to tolerate, bear, stand, put up with, endure, suffer, accept, cope with, live with, brook, support, countenance, face, handle; informally, to stick, swallow, stomach, hack, or wear. However, the *practice* of "abiding" seems to be increasingly rare in our modern society which is always pushing us to "GO! GO! GO!" For most folks, belief in those good things promised by waiting is a fool's errand. Everything has to be "NOW! NOW! NOW!" or they fear it will NEVER be. Worse than this, *any* inconvenience, however minor, is a deal breaker. Simply waiting is hard enough, but to suffer or tolerate while we do so? No way, Jose.

IX.

Interestingly, in the Greek one of the roots of the word “abide” has nothing at all to do with tolerating or suffering but, rather, to lodge, to reside, or to dwell with. Hence, a more accurate comprehension of today’s sermon text, requires us to understand “abiding” not only as bearing, supporting and tolerating, but *also* as “aboding,” to lodge or dwell with. As I said earlier, the notion of “church” is a life-style choice, one which decides to both love those with whom we live, and live with those we love.

It is not a one-time choice, however, it is a choice we must make again and again *over time*; flowing with people as they change (and we do) and as the world changes (as it will). Even when quirky starts bending toward crazy, and amusing began to brush up against the absurd. Because, in a church, we are going to find all of that, and much, much more.

X.

While we certainly understand the beginning of today’s text as a reference to the sacrifice Christ has made on the cross for our behalf in having laid down his life for us, the passage goes on to implore that we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Though this may have literally been the case when the passage was being written and the early church was under threat of persecution, we need not go nearly so far.

As the passage clearly articulates, when we have the means to help those we love and with whom we live, and do so, we can understand it as proof that God’s love is abiding *in* us and aboding *with* us. We are told, “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” It isn’t so much that we are being charged with laying *down* our lives but, rather, with offering *up* our lives as a gift to others and, often more of a challenge, to *receive* their lives as gifts to us.

XI.

Please understand, this is not any kind of keen insight I am trying to teach *you* this morning. Instead, it is a lesson that this congregation has been endeavoring to teach *me*, patiently and, when required, *relentlessly*, for the past 25 years. Whatever perspective I had on the church when I first arrived in Canton has been lost and, mercifully, it is never coming back.

In its place, you've shown me what it *really* means to have God, the Great Dude In The Sky, abide in a church and her people, and to do so over the flow of time set against the backdrop of the truth and action of our lives together with its rhythm of strikes and gutters, ups and downs; as Jeff Lebowski says at the conclusion of the movie in the video clip I provided.

XII.

At the end of today's sermon text we read, "And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that God has given us." Here, on the Park, that Spirit reveals itself in a spirit of compassion, a spirit of welcome and acceptance, a spirit of nurture and support, a spirit of celebration, and in a spirit which abides and abodes with *every* child of God sent our way. Because it is God who has sent each of us here to be this church and her congregation. Now, we joyously await all those whom God will also be sending but have yet to arrive, those who will be the next new beginning to the great ends of the church; that we might abide in them, as *the Dude abides* in us.

"Well," as actor Sam Elliot says in the video clip I mentioned, "that about does it; wraps her all up. And, it was a pretty good story. Catch you on later down the trail." Amen.