

“Abide in me as I abide in you.” Jesus gives us this command...to abide in him, just as he abides in us. But what does it mean to “abide”?

To abide means to live with, walk with or live into something. God abides in us, God walks with us, and Jesus is telling us to do the same. Let me explain this a little differently. Our bishop, Bishop Jim Arends, once talked about something called “thin places”, which to me is very similar to abiding.

In simple terms a ‘thin place’ is a place where the veil between this world and heaven is *thin*, and heaven is more near.

Mahatma Ghandi in his Spiritual Message to the World in 1931, speaks of this.

*“There is an indefinable, mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power that makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses”*

Simply put, a thin place is a place where one feels the power of God. Have any of you ever felt like you were in a thin place – a place where God was near? A few years ago Matt and I travelled to Maine and went to Acadia National Park. We got up really early in the morning and drove to the top of Cadillac Mountain, which is the highest point on the eastern coast. Then we watched as the sun rose over the water. But it wasn’t just the sun rising that was so spectacular – it was the fact that as the sun came up, all the fog that was over the water and in the valleys disappeared. The scenery was beautiful, but we didn’t get to see it until the sun dispersed that fog. That was a thin place for both of us – a place that was breathtaking but at the same time, holy.

Describing the meaning of thin place is like describing love, fear, the feeling of holding your newborn child, the existence of God. All attempts are feeble and all talk is cheap.

Memorials - made by humans - have been marking thin places for thousands of years. Ancient people, especially in Ireland and Britain were forever marking spaces as sacred and worth remembering, as if to say, "something special happened here."

The landscape is littered with monuments, markings and ruins that once boldly stated, “This is a thin place. This is holy ground.” The very ground itself seems to call out, “Come here and be transformed.” In a quiet moment, a visitor to Ireland and Britain today can feel the connection with the people whose spirits first marked these spots, and all the pilgrims who have visited since. They are vivid reminders that we are all joined inside and outside of time.

Mindy Burgoyne, an author who writes about thin places describes her first experience with a thin place. She says, “My first experience of a thin place was in Ireland, my first trip there many years ago. I was with some friends driving south into Tipperary. We were doing the typical things tourists do in Ireland, frequenting pubs, historical sites, finding places to listen to Irish music, and frequenting more pubs. Not a spiritually focused group, us.

Along the way, the friend who was driving pulled over to look closer at the map. We stopped directly beside the ruins of an old monastery. Curious, I got out of the car. I wandered around the ruins and began to feel strange, almost creepy. I recall there being an old tower with a window. When I looked up at it, I could almost sense the presence of someone there looking out, not looking at me, just looking.

Then I began to wonder as I walked, “who lived here before? Who touched these same stones and walked across this field? Who prayed here? What kind of yearnings did they have? Who died here? Why did these monks choose this site, in this place to build this monastery?”

For some reason, the window in the tower continued to draw my attention, and propel my mind into a state of wonder. My friends eventually called out to me asking me how long I was going to keep them waiting. When I

returned to the car, they told me I'd been walking amidst the ruins for almost half an hour. I did not sense the passing of time."

Thin places aren't just in Ireland and Britain, or places that are far away. Thin places are right here, in Holmen, Wisconsin. Thin places can also become thin experiences, where something happens that you just know that God's Spirit is walking with you.

There are two other examples of where I have experienced thin places or experiences. The first one happens during worship, not every week, but maybe every few weeks. As your worship leader, I am usually very focused on what comes next in worship and I make sure all our worship volunteers are in place and that things go smoothly during our time together. But every once in awhile, I completely lose track of the order of worship. I don't pay attention to what comes next. It seems like my sense of time and agenda are completely gone, and I am simply in the moment of worship. Sometimes it happens when we're singing a certain hymn. Other times it happens when I am reading a scripture verse or when we say a prayer or when I hear a solo. It doesn't really happen at the same time of worship. But that thin place is revealed to me every once in awhile when I can simply forget about what comes next and instead abide in the presence of God.

Maybe you've had a similar experience. Maybe something in worship has moved you that you forget about time. Or maybe something outside of this church has moved you so much that you forget about everything else and just simply rest in the experience. Those are times when we are abiding in God. Those are times when we can throw away our agendas and lists and schedules.

The second experience just happened a few nights ago. We have been very lucky as parents because Logan has pretty much slept through the night since he was a few weeks old. But a few nights ago, around 11:30, Logan woke up and started crying. So I went into Logan's room, and there he was, staring up at me, holding his arms out. And I picked him up. And I held him to my chest and he put his head right over my heartbeat and immediately stopped crying and let out one sigh and completely relaxed. And we stayed like that for I don't know how long.

It is rare that Logan ever sits still long enough to cuddle like that, and so I cherished that moment. But there was something deeper that happened in those moments, and I'll try to explain it the best that I can. A lot of times we talk about how God holds onto us, even when we can't hold onto God. I totally believe that. But that night, it seemed that I was the one who was holding onto God. Now I'm not saying that Logan is God, don't misinterpret what I'm saying. But it felt like I was holding onto something much deeper than a fussy baby. It felt like I was holding onto innocence and purity and unconditional love. I think I was holding onto grace.

I think that was the closest I have ever come to actually abiding in God's love. Most often, it is the other way around, where we find places and experiences where God is abiding in us. And maybe that's where the good news comes in for this morning.

Maybe it's placing a lot of pressure on ourselves to try and seek out those thin places of God's love. Maybe for today, it is good enough to simply remember that God is always abiding in us. No matter where we are or who we are or what we are doing. God is always with us. God always walks with us. God is always with us. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can live as forgiven people and with the promise that God never leaves us alone.

It is also my prayer that we are able to each have those experiences of finding thin places. Because our faith lives will be nurtured because of them. And so maybe we can each pray today that God would show us some of those thin places. And maybe you can already name some of those places or experiences that could be termed a thin place. Maybe we can each pray that we become more intentional about seeking out those thin places. Because thin places are stopping places where we can pause to wonder about what lies beyond the mundane rituals, the grief, trials and boredom of our day-to-day lives. Thin places are places where we can take a deep breath and simply rest, simply abide, in the presence of God.

May God show you those thin places in your own life. Amen.