

1 John 5: 1-6
John 15: 9-17
May 13, 2012
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron in one of her books, The Wisdom of No Escape offers a perspective which to me throws light on this passage from John. Her proposal is that the only way to true freedom from suffering is to remain in it and with it. There is only temporary relief from human pain through running away or trying to put distance between ourselves and our suffering.

This part we know pretty well. We are by and large expert at attempting to distance ourselves from emotional pain and we have a number of strategies. We over eat; we drink too much; we buy things on impulse; we over work; we become cynical and sarcastic; we become critical of others; we withdraw from other people; we make jokes about things that are in fact upsetting; we hide behind our intellects; we put up a barrier between ourselves and others. These are just the strategies that I have used over the years and, with the exception of drinking too much, find myself still trying from time to time. You may have others. While there is sometimes some short term satisfaction in implementing these tried and true tactics, they normally lead to more isolation, feelings of powerlessness and actually an increase of suffering and despair.

In short no one needs to tell us that when it comes to getting relief from our pain there is no geographical cure, whether that be by moving to a different location or escaping into an altered state of consciousness. I say altered, but when we try to escape we are truly seeking a *diminished* state of consciousness—a numbing of pain-- so that we do not *feel* so acutely the things that hurt.

For Pema Chodron and, as I will propose, for Jesus the secret to a lifting of the weight of sorrow, fear, guilt, shame, rage, physical and emotional addictions is not to run away from them, but to find the courage and, Chodron says, the *curiosity* to somehow live with and in the pain: to treat the pain not as an alien and hostile intruder into our lives but as a part of us that needs attention. The word that comes to us from the Gospel expressing this thought is, “abide.”

In the verses leading up to the ones we just heard, Jesus uses the word, “abide” *seven* times. The Greek word which is translated “abide” means “to remain.” This Jesus says in verse four: “Abide in me as I abide in you.” In verse five: “I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. Our reading begins this way: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

What does this mean, to *abide*, to *remain*? I propose that instead of asking *what* it means to remain we may ask, “*How* do we abide/remain?” To illustrate this, let me invite you to imagine with me a story:

A young girl lived near a forest. Her parents had warned her, “Under no circumstances go into the forest alone. It is dangerous in there. There are wild beasts and poisonous snakes and evil spirits. If you go into the woods you may never come back. Every day when she went out to play, the edge of trees and bushes at the edge of the wood seemed dark and threatening. She did what she was told. Whenever she did dare to imagine what lay behind the trees she shuddered with fright.

One day she was throwing a ball to her dog and threw the ball too far so that it went into the woods. The dog ran in after the ball. When, after a little while the dog did not return she called out. Still he did not come. While she knew she should not go into the forest, her

concern for her dog over came her parents' warnings and her own fears. She stepped past the first line of trees where the dog had gone after the ball. After a few steps she found the ball. Again she called out. No reply. Losing all fear she ran in the direction where she thought her dog might have gone. In no time she was lost. When she realized that that she did not know where she was, nor did she know how to get home the terror she had kept at bay surrounded her and filled her heart and mind. Gradually, she was aware that the trees were tall and intimidating. Their shadows were silent but unfriendly. The wind in the trees seemed to be whispering messages that she did not understand. Suddenly she recognized that she was alone and unprotected. She collapsed on the ground and wept and trembled with fear.

She so much wanted to go home where she was safe; but how to get home? She was smart enough to know that if she kept looking for a path home she very likely would only become more lost and disoriented.

Then something happened. From within she heard her mother's voice. "Darling, we are afraid for you. You are so precious to us that we have warned you away from the forest. But if you ever do enter and get lost remain. Do not go any further. We will find you. You will be safe." When she heard her mother's voice slowly she began to relax. She began to notice that, far from a terrible and threatening place, the forest was actually quite lovely. The shadows like graceful dancers swayed on the forest floor. The once threatening whispers of the breezes now brought a soothing comfort. She heard the fearless delight of the songbirds and the gurgling of a nearby stream. She was sufficiently recovered to get up and explore her surroundings—not too far, mind you! She kept the tree which had stood watch with her always in sight. It was then that she heard two wonderful sounds: the familiar barking of her dog, and the anxious, yet bursting with love calling voice of her mother and father.

It is my guess that all of us at some point in life have been lost. Maybe we have not been lost in the woods. Maybe we have not been lost in a place, like a big city or strange neighborhood. Actually one of my most fearful experiences of being lost was in a suburban parking garage. For many of us we have become lost in life. The people we have lived with for years do not seem familiar anymore. We have lost the original purpose which has motivated our lives for years. We hit a stage of life and the inner landscape looks like the Great Plains—endless with no landmarks to tell us where we are. Grief that comes with the loss of a loved one is like that. How do we find a new reason to live?

Jesus tells us that the answer is not to rush around looking for meaning. It is not to engage in behaviors which numb our sense of sense of emptiness. It is not to sink into the warm but hollow embrace of despair—that seductive spiritual hypothermia which lulls us to sleep in the icy cold wilderness.

Instead, it is to *remain, to abide*; it is to remain in and with the experience *with the trust that Jesus is present—or at the very least is looking for us*. He has left the ninety and nine sheep to find us. *He will find us!* Friends, if you are feeling this way to day, *he will found you!* Indeed Jesus remains with you in your trouble. It his very non-anxious presence which allows you to abide in the midst of suffering.

So begin to breathe. You are safe. Become curious about this strange place. There is beauty to notice. There are comforting voices to hear. May the anticipation of being found by Jesus help you to discover that when you—when we—*abide* in him, when we *remain* in him we are never lost. We are at home. Amen.