

‘FRAUDULENT CHRISTIANS’

John 15:1-8; Acts 8:26-40

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When I was in high school, my best friend, confidant, mentor was an Episcopal priest named Jerre Parks. Many of you have heard me talk about him before. Often in the afternoon after school, I would wander over to the church and just hang around. There was usually work to do. I got really good at copying, collating, and stapling; and when Jerre had time, we would sit and chat, sometimes about things important, sometimes about not much at all.

One day, I realize now it must have been a sermon writing day for him, I went into his office and he threw his Bible at me, saying in frustration, “I hate the gospel of John.” I was shocked. I didn’t know a priest was allowed to hate any part of the Bible. And then he had me read for him some typically wordy and circuitous passage from John, and we laughed together about its convolutions.

It was my first significant lesson in adult biblical study. It’s OK to not like parts of the Bible. It’s OK not to understand them, or to disagree with them. At the time this new knowledge seemed deliciously subversive to me. For I believed in those days that I wasn’t a very good Christian; and in fact, since my questions far outnumbered my affirmations, I wondered sometimes if I was no Christian at all. Jerre’s implied permission not to like John came as a great liberation to me. For if there was any part of the Bible on which I stubbed my toe, it was John’s gospel.

I associated John with “nice girls.” In my youth, I was not a nice girl. I was a rebel and an intellectual, and I went to the Episcopal church youth group where we worked in the public hospital in downtown LA and raised money for the Episcopal draft counseling service. Nice girls went to the Presbyterian church youth group, had secret prayer partners, and passed notes to each other during sixth period biology with such encouraging messages as John 3:16 or John 4:13 or John 15:4. I’m sure there were citations from other places, but mostly I remember them being from John. So, on the one hand I was suspicious of John; on the other, I wondered whether, if I were really a Christian, I wouldn’t be wearing tidy cardigan sweaters and passing little notes of biblical encouragement also.

Maybe it was all that early conditioning that has made an appreciation of John’s gospel a long time coming for me. I tend too often to read it and dismiss it, not paying close attention to the words. Like this morning’s text from John 15—a favorite of the nice, popular, cardigan-sweatered girls of my youth. “I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you.” The vine and branch metaphor has never been compelling to me; and until last week in lectionary class, I have always just glossed over the choice of the verb “abide” in the text. “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Not believe in me or follow me but abide in me. It’s an interesting word choice, don’t you think?

I looked up the word “abide” in the dictionary. It comes from the same root word as “abode” or “home.” It means to remain, to stay, to rest, or to wait in expectation. We Christians, we are asked to abide in Jesus Christ, which means we make Christ’s church our home; and we stay there, and rest there, wait there, in expectation.

Notice there’s nothing in the abiding language that sets up any test of believing or not believing. There’s nothing in the abiding language that penalizes us for having doubts, or disliking this and that part of the Bible, or questioning where the church has been and where it’s going. We don’t have to fully believe or fully understand or even fully commit if we abide in Christ, but simply agree to make our home within the community of the Christian Church and live there with integrity.

I’m hoping that this comes as a relief to many of you. For if there is one disease that I perceive as rampant among liberal Christians, it is the fear that they are really fraudulent Christians. That they don’t really believe enough or understand enough. They’re not really pious enough. I’m not the only one who has worried about the nice girls in the cardigan sweaters passing notes. Too many of us carry some misbegotten image in our minds and hearts of what “real” Christians look like. And for all that we have the integrity to be honest about what we believe and what we don’t yet, what in church theology or tradition is troublesome to us, still we wonder whether there really is some arbitrary dividing line, and what we have is not enough.

Abide in me as I abide in you. To be authentically Christian means simply taking Christianity as our spiritual home and taking our fellow Christians as our family. The language of home and family works well here. We don’t have to like everyone in our family. We all know that even the best of homes and families include squabbling, controversy, petty jealousies, and real dissent. We know there are days and weeks, sometimes even years, when we are not in love and charity with that which is home. But if we use the paradigm of abiding, then life in Christian faith becomes not a catalog of beliefs to which we lend our assent and then try to obey the rules, but a commitment to relationship where we allow the possibility both to create change and to be changed ourselves.

The possibility both to create change and to be changed ourselves. The richness of our life in faith is dependent on both these elements. I’m going to take a brief excursus here into the reading from Acts. It was a struggle deciding whether to preach on John or Acts this morning because both texts are wonderful. The Acts text concerns the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. This man had been a Jewish God-fearer, one of those who studied Judaism but was not a convert. In the Eunuch’s case, he could not convert to Judaism because he was not a “whole” man. When he asks Phillip, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” it was a real question. When Phillip baptizes him, change is created in the Christian community. The lines of inclusivity are drawn one significant circle wider. I know there are times when the church—with a capital C—seems slow, almost impervious to change; but the fact is that the church has changed and continues to change, and what makes for change is the action of church people pushing against doctrines, boundaries, practices that seem wrong. In this spiritual home in which we abide, we have the power to effect change. It is both our right and our responsibility. And we should never forget that.

But we also need to be open to the possibility that, at times, it is not the church but we who need to change. Thomas Jefferson, I am told, took his Bible and cut it up, keeping the important parts and throwing the rest away. This is not an exercise I would advise all of you to undertake. For most of us, in the course of our lives, the parts of the Bible that seem important and helpful to us will change. As our faith matures, as our perspectives change, passages that were formerly opaque to us or difficult for us will be seen with new eyes and changed hearts. I, as one example, seem to be overcoming my resistance to John, finding meaning in those gospel words particular to him, and even—God help me—coming to find John’s wordy convoluted style endearing rather than infuriating. And that is equally true for other parts of the thought and spiritual world that is Christianity.

To be authentically Christian is not to pass a litmus test of belief, but to commit to an on-going vital relationship with our faith where we are open both to pushing and to being pushed, teaching and being taught, opening the eyes of others and discovering that we ourselves have been blind about this piece or that. To be authentically Christian is to abide in Christ’s abode, to share life and faith with all of our Christian brothers and sisters and, God willing, to grow in faith and understanding throughout our lives. If we are here, if we intend to stay here and think and learn and act from here, then ours is a faith that is true. Thanks be to God. Amen.