

But First, Float

While photos of children with new backpacks and Target ads threaten to race me headlong into back to school season, I am determined to hang on to summer as long as I can. I'm insisting on savoring every bit of the warmth, the fresh peaches and tomatoes, the longer days, and even the humidity (I do not have to shovel it), but summers are different for me now than they were when I was growing up. Summers as a kid were spent chasing lightning bugs, going to a camp or working at a camp, roping my brother into the occasional lemonade stand, and swimming. As the daughter of a Florida native, it was a given that my brother and I would know how to swim, so some of my earliest memories are of swimming lessons in Mrs. Campbell's pool.¹ When we arrived for our lessons, our mom or dad strapped us into a belt that held a bright orange Styrofoam bubble on our backs. The bubble was intended to keep us afloat, but it also encouraged us to swim on our bellies and put our faces in the water. The thing is that with one of those bubbles on, it is impossible to float on your back. At some point the bubble must have come off, which is good, because one of the most crucial things you can learn in swimming is how to float. Thanks to Mrs. Campbell and my dad, I am a decent swimmer, and on my good days, I even remember how to float.

I recently saw a silly meme that quoted a pastor who insisted he could not take a day off because the devil does not take a day off. And some wise person—or smart aleck, depending on your perspective—responded, “You might want to get a different role model.” We aren't intended to follow the workaholic ways of the dominant culture. As we heard earlier this morning, we worship a God who rests. The creator of the universe creates for six days and rests on the seventh. We are not God, of course, but we are made in God's image. If it is good for God to rest, it must be good for us, too, even in the midst of so many things to do and get done.

I am sure you have heard—and maybe even uttered—the saying, “Don't just stand there; do something!” We are a community of doers. We are a group of hard workers. We take care of children, grandchildren,

¹ Names have been changed.

spouses, neighbors, friends, siblings, pets, and parents. We volunteer, plan, create, work, drive, cook, teach, fix, sew, organize, and on occasion play golf or bridge or Uno. We *do* things. Good things. Important things. Necessary things. We earn our way and mind our p's and q's. So it may be difficult to hear that saying turned on its head a bit, to hear Jesus tell the disciples, "Don't just do something; stand there. Stay here." The word translated here as "abide," may also be translated "remain" or "stay." The passage from John comes from Jesus' farewell discourse. He and the disciples are still in the upper room where they have shared a meal, and Jesus has washed their feet. Judas has already left, but only Jesus knows what Judas is up to. There will be plenty for the disciples to do in the coming days, but for now, Jesus insists that first, they stay, that they abide in his love.

This invitation to abide sounds almost like an invitation to float. Neither one is easy; both are counter-intuitive, especially for those of us to want to *do*. In order to float, I have to lie back, relinquish control, relax a bit, and trust that the water will hold me up without my kicking or paddling or doing much of anything at all, other than breathing. This call to abide is much the same. Throughout our passage for this morning, Jesus emphasizes what *he* has done—not what the disciples have done. He has loved them; he has called them friends; he has told them all that the Father has told him. For those of us who know where the story is going, he also speaks of what he is soon to do for them. Within mere hours, he will lay down his life for them. He is the one doing; they are called—at this point—simply to remain in him, to stay in his love.

Often when we read this passage, we hear Jesus' commanding the disciples—and by extension, us—to love one another, and he is. But biblical scholar Mark Davis wonders about a different understanding. There is a little word in the Greek that shows up throughout this text. It can be translated "that," but it may also be translated "in order that." Now I know we are moving dangerously close to yawningly boring language-nerd territory, but I think this little word may be trying to tell us something important. What if we read verse 12 with this change?: "This [abiding in my love] is my command, in order that you may love one another just as I loved you."² What if the command is to abide in Christ's love so that we *can* love one another? This shifts the emphasis away from our doing to our *not* doing, to our abiding, our staying before we *do* anything at all. If we understand our loving one another as the first thing, we still have a bit of agency, a fair amount of control. We

² <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/05/in-order-that-you-love.html>

can get the impression that we can will ourselves into loving one another, that this call to love is something we can make ourselves do, like learning a new skill or strengthening a muscle. But if we hear Jesus' commanding us to abide first, then we begin to realize that before we can love, before we can give, we must trust in, rest in, and receive his love first. In other words, we have to float before we can swim.

My friend Emily's son Sam loved the water as a little boy. He loved to splash and kick, but he flunked his first round of swimming lessons. He could do almost everything required: blow bubbles, kick on the kickboard, and even dog paddle enthusiastically around the shallow end. But he absolutely refused to float. His instructor tried everything. She cajoled; she challenged; she bribed; she even shamed and yelled a bit, I'm afraid, but nothing worked. Sam simply refused to put his head back and rest in the water. It seemed a bit silly really. If he could do all the other things, couldn't he just move on to the next level? No. Because learning to float is a crucial skill. Thankfully, Sam's mom was able to find another teacher, one who worked to build trust with him and teach him one-on-one. It took a while, months, in fact, but over the course of weeks of lessons, his teacher Megan broke through. With her hand resting gently under his back, Megan got Sam to lie back and float. He was hesitant but not flailing. And then when she sensed that the time was right, Megan slowly pulled her hand away, and Sam began to float, buoyed by the water he had learned to trust. His smile was immense. His mother and father's tears were profuse, all because Sam learned to float, to let himself trust that the water could in fact hold his little body up.

Learning to float, to trust the water to hold us up is essential. Learning to float allows a swimmer to rest when needed, to catch our breath before swimming again when we're far from the shore. We cannot flail or fake our way through. We have to learn how to float in order to swim. Likewise, we have to abide in Christ's love before we can go and do. The resting, the trusting in God's love for us in Jesus Christ comes first. Maybe we need permission to pause. Maybe we need to be reminded that it is ok, and in fact good and holy to stop *doing* all the time. Maybe we need someone to stand by with a hand under our back while we try resting our head in the water, but it is essential that we learn how to float, that we find a way to rest, to pause and be reminded that God's love in Christ is more than enough to keep us above water.

The call to Sabbath is a call to rest, and it is also a call to reconnect, to remember the love that claims us first, the love that surrounds us, the love we can trust to keep us afloat. Each time we gather around the font, we are reminded that God loves us before we can do a thing, before we can even think about loving God back. Each time we gather around this table, we are fed, nourished, given what we need. Here we are reminded in a fundamental way of just how essential our life in Christ is and what a gift that life is. We do nothing to earn it. We receive it. It is given to us. No matter how much we flail and flounder, no matter how strong our wills are, no matter how weak our efforts may be, Christ gives his life to us and for us. It is that love that frees us to love; it is that gift that enables us to give.

So often, too often, we buzz through life at breakneck speed, eager to check things off the list and pat ourselves on the back that we have accomplished what we needed to. But all that doing and checking comes at a cost if we neglect to tend to our connection with Christ, the very one who enables us to do anything worth doing in the first place. And so that call to Sabbath comes again: “Rest in me,” Jesus says. “Trust that my love is enough to carry you, to lift you, and fill you. Just for a moment, lie back and float. Abide in my love. Remember that I am with you, always. Then you can swim. Then you can do. Then you can love. But first, float.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.