When my father died, my mother and I sat down to pick the hymns for his funeral. The first two were easy to choose: “The Strife Is O'er, the Battle Won,” because of my father's long illness and “Thine Is the Glory,” because of its emphasis on Christ's victory over death. I wasn't so sure about the third choice because I had always thought it was so melancholy, but my mother said it was one of her favorite hymns so I agreed. That third hymn was “Abide With Me.” After we sang it at the funeral, I came to see the hymn as a hopeful prayer of God's presence with us in life and in death.

“Abide With Me” was written in the mid-1800's by a British pastor named Henry Francis Lyte. Lyte served a small fishing village in the south of England and, in 1844, was diagnosed with tuberculosis. After preaching his final sermon to his congregation, Lyte went home and wrote “Abide With Me” as a poem. Shortly after that, Lyte departed for a trip to Italy to get away from the cold and damp of England and died a few days later. The story is that the hymn was first sung at Lyte's funeral service.

The hymn really is a prayer, a plea to God to be always present, especially in times of trouble and deep sorrow.

“Abide with me, fast falls the eventide,

the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.

When other helpers fail and comforts flee,

help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.”

Abide with me. It could be our daily prayer, lifted up at the beginning of each new day as we ask God to be with us in whatever the day may bring, and prayed at the end of the day as we implore God to stay with us through the mysteries of the night.

Abide with me. Memories of the hymn came back to me as I read the lessons for this morning because the word “abide” appears in the readings from 1 John and John a total of 14 times. “Abide in me as I abide in you.” “God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God and they abide in God.” “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” The dictionary definition of “abide” is to stand fast, to remain, to stay, to go on being. Substituting those meanings, we read “Stand fast with me as I stand fast with you.” “God stays with those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God and they stay with God.” “Those who remain with me and I with them bear much fruit.” These are statements of faith based on a relationship of mutual dependence and trust. Commenting on the verse from 1 John, “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them,” Augustine wrote, “There is a mutual indwelling of the One who holds and the one who is held.” Augustine's words conjure up for me beautiful images of a parent holding a child or a person comforting a loved one who is suffering.

Augustine speaks of the One who holds. In Christ, God holds us in the strong embrace of love, a love that strengthens us when we feel weak, that endures for us when we think we're at the end of the road, that extends into every single aspect of our lives, even those we might try in vain to hide from God. As those who are held by God, we see in the wonder of God's great design that God loves all, yet loves each one of us with all the love God has to give. God's holding is fashioned especially for each one who is held. It is like that of a mother comforting her child or a shepherd bearing a lost sheep home. Through the gift of faith, we are able to see ourselves as that child or that sheep as we discover a strength that enables us to abide in God just as firmly and passionately as God abides in us.

Jesus used a vivid image to illustrate that kind of tenacity. “I am the vine, you are the branches.” The image of a vineyard with its vines carefully tended by a vinegrower would have been very familiar to the people of Jesus' day. These Mediterranean people were keenly aware of the importance of grapes and wine for family life and community celebration. In those days, grapes were not planted in neat, orderly rows or tied upright to stakes Instead, huge and ancient vines grew close to the ground and covered large areas. Vinegrowers had to check the branches frequently. The vines with heavy fruit had to propped up on little supports to protect them from mice and other hungry creatures. A watchful vineyard worker had to prune the vines carefully to remove the wild, wandering shoots which sapped the strength of the vine and kept it from pouring all its energy in to the fruit.

The disciples would have understood this. So, on the night of his arrest, Jesus blessed a cup of wine, the fruit of well-tended vines, poured the wine into their cups, and told them to think of his life's blood poured out for them. Then he sat with his disciples and John tells us he stayed with them deep into the night, helping them understand more deeply the meaning of this union – this abiding – between his life and theirs. He told them, “I am the true vine and my father is the vinegrower... Abide in me as I abide in you... I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” In these words we hear the story of God's love for us, a love that gives us all we need for an abundant life, a love that patiently prunes away all that is not faithful in us, a love that joins us to the living vine so that we might abide with him forever.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Jesus' first miracle involved turning water into wine. The life-giving vine to whom we cling has the power to transform us just as miraculously as what happened at Cana. In the words of an ancient saying from the early church: “We were water. He changed us into wine!” In our baptism, you and I have been grafted onto the vine of Christ. Our lives depend on the careful pruning and tender care of the vinegrower. Without him, we are wild, wandering shoots that produce nothing. With him, we have full, fruitful life, life we could never have achieved on our own.

And so we continue to pray, “Abide with me,” sure of the ongoing, loving care of the vinegrower. We ask for his protection from the predators of our day: greed, prejudice, persecution, pride and numbness to the need around us.

As Lyte wrote for us to sing:

“I need thy presence ev'ry passing hour;

What but thy grace can foil the tempter's pow'r?

Who like thyself my guide and stay can be?

Through cloud and sunshine, oh, abide with me.”

Amen.