

## Uncle Joseph's Wisdom

Sermon to the convention of The Diocese of Central Gulf Coast

February 5, 2004

The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls

Uncle Joseph is the oldest of my mother's siblings. He might be thought of a little odd in a number of ways. He never had a whole lot of formal education, but he worked successfully in the Ford factory near home for nearly his entire adult life. He is now married for the fourth time, but he has never been divorced. He has quite a knack for outliving spouses. But perhaps most peculiar of all, he is someone that I was taught growing up was a religious fanatic. Now, granted, my parents had a very low threshold for what it took to be a religious fanatic. Going to church every Sunday qualified. Anyone who pledged, to say nothing of tithed, qualified. And most certainly, anyone who knew as much about the Bible as my Uncle Joseph did qualified. Uncle Joseph is one of those people who would intimidate most of us Episcopalians with his ability to quote the Bible chapter and verse. I suppose it is an ability most of us could acquire with some effort. It is just that most of us don't have the desire to acquire it in the first place, preferring to read the Bible more as a whole than lifting verses out of context. Still, he was very proud when I became a bishop, although I know he harbored some doubts about whether being an Episcopal bishop qualified as being a real Christian. I suspect, no I know, that he finds it all a little bit perilously close to being a Catholic. It is perhaps for this reason that I avoid discussions about religion with Uncle Joseph. I avoid those discussions, not because the Bible isn't important to me, even if I wasn't brought up for it to be. It is. It is just that Uncle Joseph and I speak completely different languages when it comes to the Bible, church, religion, and faith. It can seem harder to translate between us sometimes than it is to translate the Scriptures themselves from Hebrew and Greek into English. I don't see Uncle Joseph much anymore, just as I don't see most of my family. But I do hear from him from time to time. Last year, when my son Andrew went to college, he sent Andrew a graduation gift that included a roll of quarters for use in the dormitory washing machines. I thought it was pretty clever. Now and then he calls to make sure we're all OK. He always begins a telephone conversation the same way. "Hello, Stacy (although sometimes he says Tracy), this is your Uncle Joseph." As if it might be someone else's Uncle Joseph. There is an unavoidably endearing quality to him, at least as long as you stay away from religion. I didn't know if I was looking forward to seeing Uncle Joseph at our annual family reunion last August. It was a couple of weeks after General Convention and I could well imagine what Uncle Joseph thought about what had happened there, particularly with regard to issues of sexuality. I'm quite sure that most of my family would agree with him, but Uncle Joseph was the one I thought might express displeasure with me personally. I had decidedly mixed feelings about showing up. Well, as God would have, it Uncle Joseph was the first person I saw when we got to the reunion. He stood up and greeted me warmly with a two-handed handshake (which is how men in my family express particularly warm affection). We talked. He did not raise "the" issue. Neither did I. It was enough in that moment to be family. That is, after all, what we had both come to the reunion to do. That was enough. I learned something

important. Part of it was about family. Family is family. Even if religion wasn't important in my home growing up, that rule about family being family was. It isn't that religion isn't important, but it is that actually being family transcends everything else. That was the first lesson. The second is that, for now, just concentrating on being family is enough. Uncle Joseph and I, I suspect, will eventually have the discussion about what happened at General Convention concerning homosexuality. I expect that Uncle Joseph will tell me with great concern that he is going to miss me in heaven. The conversation, when it occurs, will be cordial, and I suspect we will leave that conversation with both of us having strong opinions about what is right and wrong and with no one's mind being changed. After all, although Uncle Joseph would probably not believe it, I've actually come to know a little bit about the Bible myself. That will be OK. What it is to be family is to have the discussion. For now, Uncle Joseph taught me, concentrate on how we go about being family. Family, after all, is family. That is enough. Good lesson. I would think it were a sweet lesson, a nice lesson, a polite lesson that doesn't get at the core values of the Gospel, however, were it not for the fact that at the core of the Gospel is where Jesus places what Uncle Joseph knows. There are no other precepts of faith that are more important than what Uncle Joseph helped me learn this past summer.

The gospel that was read just a few minutes ago is about exactly the lesson that Uncle Joseph was teaching me. Family is family and that is that. The passage at issue is from the Gospel of John and it is a teaching by Jesus. But it is not just any teaching by Jesus. It is his most important teaching. It is Jesus' final opportunity to teach his disciples on the night before he died. Jesus knew the stakes were high. John and the other disciples in that most intimate and private conversations with their teacher knew that the stakes were very high. All of them knew that, as far as the teaching was concerned, as far as the core values of the Gospel were concerned, this is what mattered. It is Super Bowl time, score tied, fourth quarter, fourth and goal, with time for only one more play. Nothing could be more important when it comes to what Jesus had to say than what he had to say on this one occasion. And what does he say? He says a quaint little thing, a thing that sounds strange enough for Uncle Joseph to have said it. He uses a word that we hardly ever use in actual conversation, so strange is it. The word is "abide." And what Jesus says is: "Abide in me as I abide in you. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." At the very top of the list of Christian virtues is to abide. Now abide is a word that, to my knowledge, I have never used in conversation. Ever. It is an archaic word. It is a strange word. It is a quaint word. I can well imagine it coming out of Uncle Joseph's mouth. And it is a very good religious word. It is a biblical word. And those also are reasons that it might very well be heard coming out of Uncle Joseph's mouth. It means to endure, to persevere. It means to stand against opposition. It means to stand fast. It means to remain as in to live or to dwell. And all of these are things that we Christians, to be sure, are called to do. But if we think this is about our Christian calling, we are missing the point. These are not qualities that describe us. They are qualities that describe God. Our abiding is not the point. Our abiding is secondary to God's abiding. We are called to abiding not because it is the Christian thing but because it is the godly thing to do. The point is not that we abide. The point is that God abides. The

quality of abiding, first and foremost, describes what God is like. And the abiding quality of God is not abstract. It has concrete application. Over and over God endures, remains, stands fast, abides. It is not that God abides in the abstract heavens but in the concrete realities of real relationships with human beings. The Old Testament lesson for tonight reminds us of exactly this quality of God in God's relationship with David. "I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David" (Isa. 55:3b). What marks the relationship between God and David, and there is no one in the Old Testament more beloved to God than David, is the quality of abiding, not David's abiding, but God's abiding. David is hardly a moral example. He manipulates Saul's son Jonathan and Saul's daughter Mikell. He conspires to have Uriah the Hittite killed so that he can take Bathsheba. He is no picture of faithfulness at all. But through it all, God abides, endures, stands fast with David, not because it is David's nature to be good or righteous but because it is God's nature to abide, to be faithful in relationship, to be unconditional in love. Abiding in relationship, it turns out, gets at the very nature of who God is. So the point of this gospel passage from John is not primarily that we abide, it is that God abides, and that God's abiding calls forth our abiding. But abiding is not an abstract concept. It is concrete. It is a concrete relational concept. It was the concrete defining characteristic of God and David. So it must be with us. It is made concrete in the relationship between Jesus and us as well. Jesus said, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." To abide has a particular concrete, tangible context. If we are to abide in Jesus' love, we are to keep his commandments. What it means to be a faithful Christian is to keep Jesus' commandments. What we are called to stand up for, to endure for, to stand against opposition for, to be true to come what may is to keep Jesus' commandments. That is what Jesus said. If we would abide in Jesus we must keep Jesus' commandments. My dear friends, I have searched the Scripture and find one and only one thing that Jesus referred to as a commandment given by him. One and only one thing. It comes in the very next verse after the passage for tonight ends. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." We abide in Jesus in only one way, by keeping his commandment. We keep his one and only commandment by loving one another. We abide in Jesus, my dearest brothers and sisters, by and only by abiding in one another. Jesus' one and only commandment to us is to love each other. I wonder why it is we don't put that on granite monuments and enshrine it in the courthouse lobbies. Then we really would be subversive. When we fail to abide in one another, we fail to abide in Jesus. It is impossible to love God, whom we have not seen, and not love our neighbors, whom we have. It is impossible to abide in Jesus, whom we have not seen, and not abide in one another, whom we have. Abiding in one another is not an option of the Gospel. It is the categorical imperative of the Gospel. It is not easy to abide in one another. I think God is well aware of that. It was not easy for God to abide in David. It was a challenge worthy of God. Still, God did. It was not easy for Jesus to abide in the almost comical attempts of the disciples to follow him. It was not easy for Jesus to abide misunderstanding and betrayal. Still, Jesus did. It is not easy to abide one another. It is particularly not easy to abide one another now. Abide is not a sweet, quaint word. It is a difficult, challenging word. It is what we are called to. We must abide one another now, particularly now, when it is not easy to

do so, because, quite simply, we cannot abide in Jesus otherwise. I have to tell you that I think my Uncle Joseph is a very wise man. He is too steeped in a lifetime of studying the Scriptures, even if quotes from them chapter and verse in a way I would never do, not to be a wise man. And my Uncle Joseph understands the Gospel priority of abiding, abiding in family. What we believe is that in the waters of Baptism, God has made us God's own family. Blood is a strong bond, but in Christ, water is even stronger. And if earthly families can realize, even despite the strongest differences of opinion, that family matters more than opinion, how much more is that the case in the family of God. We are a family, whether that feels any more comfortable to us right now than the so far unspoken subject that Uncle Joseph and I have yet to deal with. Family, after all, is family. Uncle Joseph would never rest otherwise. Neither will God. The truth is that we liberals and conservatives are each other's brothers and sisters. The truth of the Gospel is that we liberals and conservatives are family and nothing we can do can undo that. The truth of the Gospel is that we need each other, we liberals and conservatives. We need each other to be the object of each other's love. We need each other to be the object of each other's abiding. We need each other, we liberals and conservatives, because the truth of the Gospel is there is no Jesus for us otherwise. And so we abide. Amen.

The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls, Bishop of Lexington