

**May 5, 2024 John 15:9-17**

**The section of John's gospel we have read today are some of Jesus' final words, addressed not to the world at large, but to his intimate friends. His words are presented as a farewell speech, something for the difficult days ahead; intended to give them courage and faith in the days of Jesus' absence, but when the Holy Spirit comes to stand alongside them.**

**Jesus prayer is that the disciples will "abide" in his love. Nice word, "abide". Not one you will hear too often today in the wider world. Not many people spend much time thinking about how they will abide or how they can abide better. Many of us are too busy to be doing much abiding. The word highlights the difference between waiting for- something, someone... which can be an anxious, stressful waiting and waiting upon. Abiding has a sense of gracious, unhurried time spent in the presence of someone. Just content to be, to be with someone or a landscape or favourite object.**

**In today's passage there is an interesting mix of language. There is the language of commandment - "This is my command...". This is a form of language many people have experienced and expect from Christianity and the church. And some will hear that and go, "Ah here it is. Commands, Thou shalt..." But when you look at the content of the command, "This is my command, that you love one another as I have loved you" the language becomes filled with love, intimacy, participation, vulnerability, suffering.**

**A command to love. Which may seem a bit counter intuitive. Why do we need to be commandment to love those we love? It's easy to love a person who is attractive and fun to be with. But what about the person who isn't quite as attractive, compassionate, or fun to be around? Indeed, what about those whom we might consider enemies? We're living in a time when the divide between people is seemingly at an all-time high. We've always had "enemies" to love, but lately, it seems that the list of potential enemies has grown much longer**

**So we will need a definition of what it means to love - here is a simple one I came up with - to desire, act, for the best interest of another that they may flourish**

And for many of us there is one person perhaps hardest of all to love... yourself. But that is another sermon for another day.

And then Jesus calls his followers friends. Facebook upended and emptied out the meaning of word friend. Also follower. Yet here is this word, this relationship, at the very centre of what Jesus is saying about him loving us, our relationship with Jesus and who loves him and who obey his commandments.

By contrast, many Christians talk a great deal about *family*. They talk a lot about the biological family (Mum, Dad and the kids) and the spiritual family (how we are all brothers and sisters in Christ). Very conscious of line crossed when purely work colleague moves towards friend when you invite someone to dinner at your home.

Not do away with family metaphor but maybe ease back on it and allow for more friendship language.

Richard Beck notes, friendship calls you to a higher standard of behavior. You treat friends better than you do family members. But what I find lacking in many churches is *friendship*, a face-to-face, first-name-basis relationality between rich and poor. This is what is missing in many churches. Programs abound but there is too little friendship.

It was this expression of friendship in the early church set in the rigidly hierarchical class system of the Roman Empire that transcended and then helped to subverted the values. In the one fellowship, master, slave, women, men, gentiles, jews, foreigners. All belonging because all had been called friends by the one who said, I no longer call you servants but friends." There is one Christian group that has taken this name, this calling, most seriously - Quakers also known as friends.

Jesus has revealed all that he has heard from the Father and so he calls us friends. This is a rare picture in scriptures. Abraham was one of the few who was called a friend of God (James 2:23). While Jesus walked the earth he was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). How amazing is it that God can come to us and call us his friends! Our joy will be full when we are friends with Jesus!

Those called the friends of Jesus live out the command to love. They embody it, just as Jesus did. Words like truth and love, big Biblical words, are meaningless unless made flesh and blood. Truth and love do not exist as abstract concepts and timeless principles but truth springs into life as we live truthful lives and love stirs into life as we are moved to loving acts. The only question is can we, who profess to follow Jesus and called him Lord, can we become Christian?

**To abide in Jesus, to live as a friend of Jesus, to be befriended by the teacher of love is to be united in love with the one who touched lepers, washed feet, shared meals with outcasts. The biggest challenge about inviting Jesus into your heart is he insists upon bringing his friends with him. all his friends he has chosen. "You did not choose me but I chose you". I saw during the week a lot of ministers are using the illustration of choosing sides for school playground team events and an awful lot of ministers must have been lousy at sports cos many describe the trauma they experienced of being the last chosen. In school and society choosing sides is important cos one side is going to be the winners and the others are the losers. Who wants to be a loser? We humans cannot imagine life not played out by the winners/losers mentality. Winners and losers in the budget, in sport, in media... everywhere. For a while I was going to conclude by saying that we humans have this winners/losers mentality but not God... I wonder now if it maybe more correct to say God comes in on the side of those usually considered to be the losers.**