

Sermon Archive 483

Sunday 5 May, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: John 15: 9-17

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In engaging with last week's gospel, we thought about the idea of "abiding in the vine". This week we have Jesus continuing with the idea of abiding - a resting among, a gentle enfolding, a being at peace within that which surrounds us. But this week, lest we become confused about what the vine is, he makes it clear. The vine is a love that begins with God.

Jesus talks about the love that God has had for him. He talks about how that love has turned him into someone who, in return (well, not in return only, but in a "pay it forward" way also) has been able to love his disciples - love creating love. And now he's raising the possibility with them, that just as God's love has flowed from God to *him*, and from him to *them*, now why shouldn't it flow from them to *others*? Again, love creates love. He's painting a picture of something overflowing, filling every corner it finds, turning unlove into love, lost into found, abandoned into rescued, forgotten into cherished.

It is in describing this love, that Jesus is able to say to his disciples, "no longer do I call you 'servants'; now I call you 'friends'." This thing flowing from God, changes who we are to one another. We're no longer the hierarchical dynamic of servants and masters (in which work and social positioning is done), but friends, in which affection and bonding are done.

I could run now to the philosophers to find sage things to say about the nature of friendship. I'll take a different tack, though: three reflections on friends, and a wee epilogue of gratitude.

First Reflection: the Quilt

In 1853, Philena Cooper Hambleton, with her husband and two daughters, left her home in Ohio, to start a new chapter of life in Iowa. It's a fair trek from Ohio to Iowa (about 1,100 km), so (especially in 1853) "leaving" really was a matter of picking up sticks and saying a final "goodbye". Philena's people were Quakers, otherwise known as members of the Society of Friends - and yes, the Society took its name from Jesus' calling the disciples his "friends". The Friends in that time had a practice of saying goodbye to one another by making and

presenting a Friendship Quilt. The quilt was made up of small pieces of fabric provided by individual friends, and marked in ink or embroidery with the names of those who were staying, all sewn together. The quilts were patchworks of fabric representing patchworks of people - people stitched together in community, each with their own colour or pattern, with straight or raggedy edges, forming this "one of a kind" thing. A contributor to the website, Art and Faith Matters, writes:

"In the useful form of a quilt, the love (and names) of friends could literally enfold the travellers on their journey and in their new home."

I like that. The love of farewelling friends finds a form to wrap and warm the person or people who must move on. On Philena's quilt there were lots of names:

Joseph & Phebe, Calvin, William & Martha, Thomas & Phebe, Peter & Margaret, Joel & Phebe (so many Phebes), Reuben & Rachel, Levi & Mary, Stephen & Mary, (two names illegible - bummer!), Cath, Mary & Jesse, Rachel, Sarah, George, Martha, Whitson, Thomas, John, Alfred & Sarah, C.H. & A.A, John, Benjamin & Lydia.

They all went, in the spirit of friendship, as names on the quilt that went with Philena.

When the time came, Philena's quilt was inherited by her daughter, Angelina, then by her son Arthur, then by Arthur's daughter Florence. Florence seemed not have anyone to leave it to, because it ended up in an estate sale in Danville, California in 1995. It was discovered in an antique shop in Petaluma, California by Lynda Salter Chenoweth, who was not only a quilter, but also a sociologist historian at University of California-Berkeley. Lynda got busy researching not only Philena, but as many of the people whose names were on the quilt as she could find records for. In a book called "Philena's Friendship Quilt: A Quaker Farewell to Ohio, Ohio University Press, 2009", she presented sketches of Philena's friends - who they were, what they did prior to and after her departure from Ohio. I've been unable to track down a copy of the book, but I understand it's an affectionate presentation of a community of friends. They're all long gone now, but the affection that they had for one another (even as they said goodbye) is good to have recorded - kept after the love has gone. What did Paul say? Faith, hope and love abide! Abide in love, and we'll be known as friends - as if somehow our names are written in a "book of life". It all abides.

Second Reflection: the Quake

Recently, I heard people speaking about what it was like for them to move from other places to settle in Ōtautahi Christchurch. Our city has quite long had a reputation for being hard to infiltrate - the locals, it seemed, had famous skills in keeping new people at a distance. And indeed, this **was** the experience of some who were part of the conversation this week. It was hard, they said, to feel at "home". It was easy to miss the place that used to be home. Established friendship circles among the locals kind of felt like they were impenetrable. Conversations didn't just naturally happen in the streets, shops, or schools.

But then there was a series of earthquakes, and things changed. In adversity, people began to speak, to express concern, do a number of rare things that let the strangers in. We wonder, then, whether being vulnerable, or understanding the vulnerability of others is "fuel for friendship". Maybe there's something hiding in this possibility that's connected to what Jesus says about "laying down of life" being connected with how love turns people into friends.

Third Reflection: the friends of Pakuranga College

In 1979 Matthew and Ron found themselves in the same geography class; and in 1980 they found themselves joined in other classes by Darien and Lester. The four became good friends until departing for different university faculties in 1981. We lost touch - until some coincidence on facebook brought two of them together, then three, then four. These days, when I travel to Tāmaki Makaurau, the four tend to meet up for dinner at a restaurant in Eastern Beach. On the first meeting (after decades apart), I remember thinking "yes, I can see why these people were my friends - I've enjoyed their company tonight". I quite like that they are people who got to know me when I was still young and stupid (as opposed now to "old and stupid"). There's something about having people who remember how you used to be (as you were assembling your personality). There's something also quite deprecating about seeing how easily, at the age of 60, we now fall into being old men who talk about their health! There's also something interesting about balancing my pride at having more hair on my head than most of them do, with the obvious fact that I'm the fattest one. These are not things you notice when you form new friendships - with new people of whom you have no earlier memories. There is something interesting also about having to face the fact that young human beings get older - that they won't last forever - that the current quilt can end up in an antique shop, a curiosity for a stranger.

Closing question (maybe about abiding): after we four had been friends, but before we were friends again, were we friends? Is friendship part of that love that abides, held by God once written in a "book of life". Or does friendship require active, on-going participation? When he spoke of love and friendship, I wonder what Jesus meant.

An Epilogue of Gratitude:

Kia ora, Jesus. I hesitate to say "Jesus, my friend", because that feels presumptuous - to presume that you would wish to be called my friend. But I guess it'd be fine, since you've already said that you're mine. And you throw that out with the strange claim that I didn't choose you, but you chose me. That never made much sense, Jesus - since I always felt like my becoming part of the vine was something that I chose to do. And indeed I did choose - - - but maybe it wouldn't have been choose-able were it not for this love that overflowed already in my direction - an understanding that heaven was approachable. Maybe love does change people, and open their eyes to what they **can** choose. I don't know . . . But when I come to think of it, I've never been able to choose someone and make them love me. It doesn't work that way. And whenever love **has** come, it's always come as grace, wonder, never something **earned**. Friends have been a gift.

I want to thank you for my friends. I know that I'm a social animal - that I need others. O yes, I know I make much of my comfort with myself, the way that a quiet house is just OK. I also know (and this'll make you smile), that when I go shopping, I talk to people - delight in interaction. And I know the modern scourge of loneliness in my world - and how some governments have appointed "ministers for loneliness", because they know that loneliness is growing health and welfare issue. It's like even the secular bodies that are never going to affirm "abiding in love" as a political strategy, still see friendship as a therapeutic practice.

So beguile me, O Christ, with this claim of yours that we are friends, and that friendship should be contagious. Be in my heart and mind, that I might honour the friendships I have, and share them in your God-like way. Let me abide in the love that I've found in you, and around you, and coming from you. Let me abide . . .

I think that's all, my friend. For a few moments of quiet, I'll just abide.

Amen.

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