

Rev'd Justine Richmond. Sermon for Easter 6: 5th May 2024.

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17.

In the passage we heard today from John's Gospel, we are still in the farewell discourse and so it is easy to focus on the words "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (v.13) After all, Jesus is about to be arrested and crucified and so it seems as if he is relating this to his comments about love. 6

Yet, if we only focus on the sacrificial nature of love, we miss two other key aspects of this text.

Firstly, the radical nature of friendship that Jesus is speaking of. He tells his disciples that he does not consider them servants any longer (the Greek can also be translated as slave) but he tells them they are his friends, because he has made known everything to them that he has heard from the Father.¹ As Jesus prepares to leave them, he hands over the responsibility of being friends. It is important they are no longer servants because a servant or slave was obligated to support the master through difficult times. "A friend would do it freely, for reasons of mutual commitment and affection."² In the context of John's community this might be seen as "a call to shoulder the responsibility of remaining faithful to Christ their friend, even in the face of escalating troubles."³ We might ask ourselves the question about what it means to be Christ's friend, rather than Christ's servant.

But even before Jesus talks about friendship, Jesus speaks of joy, a deep, complete joy. The implication here is that love leads to joy. Doesn't it seem strange to be thinking that at this point in the gospel story? I cannot imagine that the days ahead will be very joyful for Jesus or the disciples. Yet, joy doesn't mean a superficial notion of happiness. Joy comes for those that abide in the love Jesus promises. It leads us to consider the nature of genuine joy.

This kind of joy is echoed in today's Psalm. It begins in Psalm 97 – "Light dawns for the righteous and joy for the true of heart"⁴ As we move to the joy of Psalm 98, we recognise it is framed with faithfulness and righteousness. These Psalms were written with the fall of Babylon about to happen and the reality that it would be possible to return to Judah and rebuild the city. However, the way the psalmist talks about the earth (and the ends of the earth) responding to the Lord brings a timeless quality to the verses. You could imagine it being a hymn for the early Christians, and us too. Verses 5 to 9 have this wonderful outpouring of joy for what God has done:

Shout with joy to the Lord, all the Earth: break into singing and make melody.
Make melody to the Lord upon the harp: upon the harp and with the sounds of praise.
With trumpets and with horns: cry out in triumph before the Lord, the king.
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it: the good earth and those who live upon it.
Let the rivers clap their hands and let the mountains ring out together before the Lord.

This is a call for **all the earth** to shout with joy. You can see this in the reading from Acts, as the Gentile believers are baptised. It is the gift of the Spirit which comes upon them and fills them with joy as they speak of God's goodness in all their respective languages.

The world is reflected in the words of the writer of first John too – who tells that the sign of our love of God is the obeying of God's commandments, which are 'not burdensome, for whatever is born of God

¹ John 15:15 my paraphrase.

² Thomas Troeger, in *Feasting on the Word Year B Vol 2*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. P.499.

³ *Ibid.*, p.501.

⁴ Psalm 97:11

conquers the world” (vv 3-4). The writer says it is our faith which conquers the world. A faith that emerges from reflecting God’s love to the world.

Jesus is talking to his friends about abiding in his love, but his words are not limited to them. He reminds them that they did not choose him, he chose them – and he appointed them to go and bear fruit that will last. The implication here is that this is no small mission, because all through the farewell discourse in John, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the world, and the difficulties they will have in the world. The commandments are here too – telling them if they keep his commandments they will abide in his love, and their joy may be complete.

The theme of joy and abiding in God’s love was certainly embedded in our time at clergy retreat this week. Our retreat leader Vivienne led us on an incredible journey with God. The reflections each day were about rocks and water, inviting us into a deep joy and enthusiasm for God. Vivienne modelled this with her own infectious joy and deep faith. Through some of her contemplative practices she invited us to be playful – to simply spend time with God, and to allow God to reach out to us. We were encouraged to use our bodies to connect with God, through walks, photography, collage/art and something she called colouring prayers.

One of the things she used a lot was what she termed a “wonder wander”. She invited us to ‘come and see’ as Jesus did in John 1:35-39. This involved walking with intent, with “an attitude of quiet, expectant waiting that does not demand God’s revelation, but accepts and is satisfied with the wonder of Emmanuel already present in the physical world.”⁵ She said that it is particularly helpful when one is feeling restless, as this approach to prayer takes us beyond what we read or hear. It engages the whole body, cultivates wonder, and helps us to experience God in small moments of wonder. Viv gave us examples of some of her wonder wanders each day in her presentations. She would show us two photos, and the conversation with God that accompanied them. As the week went on, I began to take photos of things that piqued my interest, intending to reflect on them later. On the last day, I had taken some pictures of some new shoots coming out of an old, cut back peppi tree. As I did so, I noticed some low sweeping branches and decided to try and stand in them as if they were a stream of water. I took one selfie, then another. (I know it was a God moment because I am not a fan of taking selfies).

This was the first one:



And the second one:



As I moved from the first, to the second, I heard a voice in my head say “Why so serious, Justine?”. This was exactly the kind of conversation Viv had described in her presentations. It reminded me to look to God and to express the joy that my faith gives me. To express it more in everything I do.

⁵ Vivienne Holt. Come and See: Walking and seeing as a way of connecting with God. Material distributed at Clergy Retreat 2024.

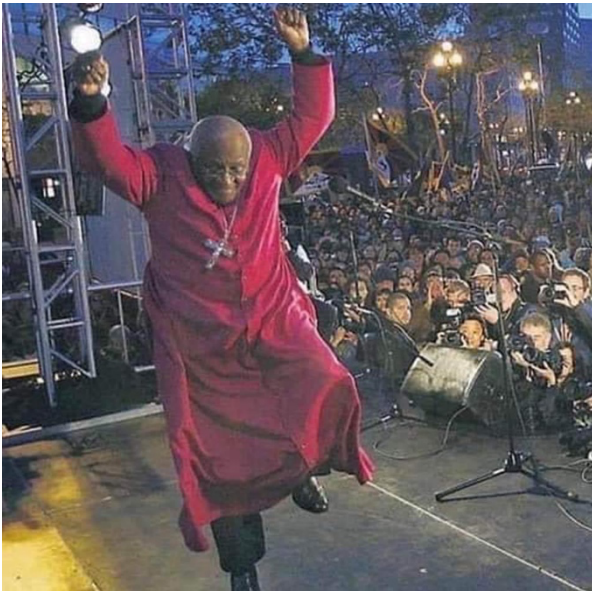
So, I took another photo as my answer – OK God, I get it!

How **do** we express the joy that abiding in God's love gives us, the joy that being a friend of Jesus gives us?

As I wrote this reflection, I came across this poem, and this wonderful picture of Desmond Tutu:

**I sometimes forget
that I was created for Joy.**

**My mind is too busy.
My heart is too heavy
for me to remember
that I have been
called to dance
the sacred dance of life.**



**I was created to smile.
To Love.
To be lifted up
and lift up others.**

**O' Sacred One
untangle my feet
from all that ensnares.
Free my soul
that we might
Dance
And that our dancing
might be contagious.**

-Hafiz⁶

What a great reminder of what we are created for – to smile, to love, to be lifted up and to lift others up. Indeed, my prayer for the church is that our dancing might be contagious.

Christ is Risen, Alleluia! He is Risen indeed, Alleluia!

⁶ Image and poem taken from a Facebook post by Rev'd Deb Bird, retrieved at <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/oYKWop5uLDJtP9An/?> 4/5/2024