



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Remain in My Love

John 15:9-17

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On Saturday, Ian took the wedding of my nephew and his new bride here at St Stephen's. It was lovely to see them so happy. Ian and I have done our best to prepare them for the enjoyment of a long and happy marriage, but today, they take responsibility for maintaining and nurturing their wedded happiness. They need to choose every day to remain in each others' love.

"Now remain in my love," Jesus says. He is talking on the eve of his death. How are they going to remain in his love, if he is about to die? In v10, Jesus tells us how: "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love." It's a deliberate choice.

It sounds quite strict: "Obey my commands." That is a pretty plain order. We often misunderstand his command about love by thinking of it as a fond feeling, or excited emotion. When the hero and heroine walk into the sunset at the end of a movie, it's not the deliberate, selfless love that Jesus talks about. (In fact, it will be easier for us to operate in Godly love if we don't train ourselves with constant diet of magazines, TV and movies.)

In the New Testament, when we see the English word "love", it could be a translation of one of four Greek words which describe different kinds of love. The one most like the Hollywood kind, is "Eros" in Greek - passionate love. When we talk about love between friends or say "I love reading books," "Phileo" is the Greek word used. Family love is "Storge" and the kind of love God makes a specialty of is "Agape." This is the kind which makes consistent, selfless choices for another's well-being. When God knew that it was the only way we could come back into relationship with Him, He loved us so much that He gave his only son to be beaten, spat upon and murdered. His loving heart knew in advance that it was the only way for us to be freed from our sins - and he still chose it.

This is not a love that wimps can do. It needs strength. In fact it is a verb, a "doing" word, not a description of a feeling. In this kind of love, feelings often follow action, rather than the other way around.

The command to love one another is a seriously important commandment and very high on Jesus' agenda - He chose to teach it on the night before he died, so it must be of the first importance.

Think of some of these auto-immune diseases where the body is attacking itself. If the body starts to attack itself, it causes its own destruction. That leads to death. And whenever you see death and destruction, you see the work of the devil.¹ Our job is to fight on God's side against the devil's agenda. We cannot fight on God's side as a cohesive body if we are at odds with one another. Being at odds with each other is like a

¹ John 10:9-11

man in a well-drilled, effective army suddenly taking his weapon and turning it on his comrades-in-arms. Jesus is the commander of this army. He says joy comes from doing things his way.

So our joy and effectiveness as a church will not come from superficial goodwill - just smiling at one another in passing. That's better than nothing but the kind of love Jesus commands means consistently choosing for the other's well-being.

In order to help you think about the "how" of doing what Jesus says here, Ian and I have done some work identifying some Scriptures which help to pin down the how-to's. It's a list of the scriptures that have the words "each other" or "one another" in them. Greet each other, help each other, submit to one another, etc, etc. The page is on the welcome table with the sermon notes. As you read and meditate on these scriptures, ask God to help you incorporate them into your life. They are like a WOF to check how we are going in our relationships.

However, because the church is made up of human beings, we will not always make the good choices. James reminds us that

*We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man." And again "no-one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."*²

The truth is that we each have a mouth that is full of a very powerful weapon – the tongue. It can be used well to bless people, to encourage them, or to pass on idle gossip; to make thoughtless comments or poke fun at people. I would say that here at St Stephen's there is normally a really good atmosphere of good will and good intentions towards one another. But inevitably, there are thoughtless comments that hurt people.

So in order to obey Jesus' command to love one another, everyone has responsibilities. We need to be careful and kind in what we say and as listeners, we need to be quick to forgive. I have no doubt that sometimes what I have said or done has hurt someone. Most of you have been gracious about it and forgiven me.

I think I remember that when we first came, I said clearly, "There will inevitably be times when I do or say something that will hurt. Please be assured I do not intend to hurt you." Now I want to add, if I do, please tell me, so I can apologise and try to make it right.

C.S. Lewis once said *"Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."*

I had to face up to that when one church I was in had a seminar on "Peacemaking." I went along, learned some principles, then *wham-oh* soon after, I was embroiled in a problem where someone was offended by something I did & said. I was receiving nasty emails and it was quite hurtful! But I realized that here was a marvelous opportunity to test and see if operating the principles in God's Word would get me out of this jam and would restore love to the relationship. And it worked! I was thrilled at how the trouble just melted into peace as I followed what Jesus said to do. You can read about it in Luke 6:41 and Matthew 18:15-19.

Trouble in relationships can make or break our lives. Let's look at the foundational commands of God about relationships.

Matthew 22:37-39 Jesus replied: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment.* ³⁹ *And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* "

When Ian and I were in London, our vicar, Mike, had a simple way of interpreting what Jesus said are the two greatest commandments: he used to say, "That means, 'Snuggle up and play nicely.'" Snuggle up to our Daddy God, and play nicely with our brothers and sisters.

In any family there will be differences of opinion, different ways of seeing things, times when we hurt each other. The important thing is, when something goes wrong, that we make every effort to bring the relationship back into harmony, however much we think we are in the right.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24 *"...If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."*

² James 3v2&8

So if someone has withdrawn from you, Jesus says it is your responsibility to search him out and find out why. This is an expression of true, Godly love. Caring enough to go and find out why someone feels hurt. There are always two sides to a story and each person needs to be heard and understood.

I heard of a couple who had gone to a marriage counsellor. The husband had his say. Then the wife said that his complaint that he lead a dog's life was probably true.

"He comes in the house with muddy feet," she said, "tracks across my clean floors, barks at nothing, growls at his food and makes himself comfortable on my best furniture."

I'm not getting at men with that joke - there are always two sides to a story!

The devil does not want us here at St Stephen's to be in harmony, loving one another and encouraging one another. He knows that such love is a recipe for answered prayer³, and for bringing people out of darkness into the Kingdom of God.

So to put a spoke into the devil's schemes, we need to be quick to go and resolve differences. Do you remember the vision of the church Ian had when we first arrived? It was like a yacht. This clearing up of offences is part of trimming the sails on our boat, so we can catch the wind of the Spirit and the boat can really get along at a good clip.

Back to John 15: *"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, than he lay down his life for his friends."* Jesus is talking about what HE will do for them – lay down his life as a demonstration of his love. And he says "Love each other to that same degree." Quite a daunting tasks for me – perhaps you, too. But all it needs is that we start small and build up. For example, overlooking a minor offense is a beginning part of that love. But if it is worse than a minor offense, instead of raging or gossiping or withdrawing from fellowship, we need to go and talk to the person who has offended us. Be reconciled.

That means more than confronting the person with what they have done. It means being prepared to admit our own part in the affair, the log in our own eye, as well as pointing out how that person's words or actions have been objectionable.

It's not always easy and I hope that if you need help, you will not hesitate to ask for it. For those of you who are new to St Stephens, we have not only the vicar but also the wardens who act as elders. Mike Bayly and Torben Sorenson are very approachable, can keep a confidence and are able to help. Sometimes we get stuck in a situation and need help to see another perspective, as well as some prayer to break the hold of it on our lives.

Let us make it our goal to please Jesus. He says: "You are my friends if you do what I command. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other."

Now don't think I am getting at anyone in particular! This has emerged from the lectionary reading... and we are convinced that we have the best congregation available! You are appreciative, kind, generous, considerate, hardworking and forgiving. Together, let's put effort into trimming the sails. If you need to, do take the opportunity during the Peace, to say to someone, "What day can we get together? I need to talk to you."

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³ John15v16