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Sermon
Remain in My Love
John 15:7-17

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Very soon, those of us who watch TV will get to see the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. I hope the priest who marries them will be preparing them for the enjoyment of a long and happy marriage, but from the day they say "I do", they will take responsibility for maintaining and nurturing their wedded happiness. They will need to choose every day to remain in each others' love.

"Now remain in my love," Jesus says. How does that work for us?

Firstly, we must be connected to him. To be *connected to Christ* we first choose to turn from our sins and selfishness then receive him into our lives. Jesus talks about being born again. It's like having a second chance at life; starting again. When he is living in you and you are living in him it is like being a branch connected to the vine, with the flow of moisture and nutrients coming from the root of the vine. The essence of His life flows into us. The essence of love flows through us.

John 14:23 Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

Then we remain in him by the things that keep the relationship alive: Talking and listening to him in prayer, worshipping and obeying him, meeting together with other Christians at church so that we are forming together the body of Christ or if you like, the vine.

For example, as many of you know, I have been recovering from a compression fracture in my spine for about 7 weeks. It should be completely better in about 3 weeks. But being away from church and away from fellowship certainly made me appreciate it in a new way. I came back on Easter Sunday, thinking "Even if all I do is lie down on some chairs in the foyer, at least I will be there!" It's so good to be back!

Reading and responding to the Bible is, of course, another vital way of remaining in him – especially since he says here, "if you remain in me and my words remain in you".... It is a two-way thing, like any good relationship. I think of Luke 6, where he says, "How can you call me "Lord, Lord," and don't do the things that I say?" His words give us spiritual life, direction and teaching – and we have to obey them! As we live in harmony with his Word, we will naturally ask for the things he wants to give and he will delight to give them.

In v10, Jesus tells us: "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 and one which he had to do too.

But talking of obedience sounds quite strict. We often misunderstand 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 several Greek words, which describe different kinds of love. The one most like the Hollywood kind is "Eros" in Greek – erotic, passionate love. When we talk about love between friends or say, "I love reading books," "Phileo" is the Greek word to use. Family love is "Storge" but the kind of love God specializes in is "Agape." It means to place someone first in our affections, to esteem, highly regard and honour. This is the kind which makes consistently good 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.

That quality of love will warn us if we are going off-track, and not stay silent just to keep the peace. Jesus' words in Revelation 3:19 show that: *Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.*

It is not a love that calls good, evil and evil, good to avoid conflict. It needs strength, much as disciplining a teenager requires strength, not "Well, if it feels good, darling." 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 seriously important 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. This passage in John is part of the longest of Jesus' recorded conversations. It is, in fact, about a quarter of the book of John. John was the disciple who was closest to Jesus, so we need to take note!

As we think about this greatest expression of love for each other in v13, "laying down your life for your friends" comes up. This can be expressed in numbers of different ways. Choosing to help someone when you'd rather be watching the rugby. One spouse making sacrifices so the other can achieve some goals. Not insisting the other person conforms to your way of doing things; maybe not expecting that the life of Jesus expressed in them will look exactly the way it does in your life. Submitting to Jesus your idea of what you want to do with your life and choosing what he shows you is best.

Seldom easy, but it bears fruit! For example, the joy of obedience. Then Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants but friends." What is the difference between servants and friends?

Firstly, it is closeness. The person serving at the table is not as close to Jesus as the one sitting beside him. We have access to him that a servant does not have.

Secondly, He said he had told the disciples everything that his father had taught him. Deep sharing is one benefit of friendship.

Thirdly, because we are friends, not servants, we can expect to receive what we need from him because he loves us, not just if we have earned it.

Fourthly, a servant obeys *when the master is there* and with an eye to personal gain. It's only a job and a 40 hour week is enough, thanks very much.

But a friend jumps to obey because of love, loyalty and trust, even goes above and beyond the call of duty. We obey Jesus, even if we don't understand why he says something, because we know he has our best interests at heart. We trust and honour him. He is the one who knows best.

Friendship means more than just obeying God because we don't want to end up in hell. Obedience out of fear of punishment is less than what he wants. He wants the obedience to spring from respect, gratitude and the impetus of his Spirit flowing in us and bringing his thoughts to our minds. Quite often I have thought something like, "Oh I will go to the library now" and then an important encounter happens because I went at that time. I believe God's guidance can happen like that. The flow of God's Spirit within us. The sap of the vine flowing through the branch as we live in him and he in us. The responsiveness of friendship.

Jesus says, "Friends, you did not choose me but I chose you." This means that we have significance and value. There is nothing more important can be said about a person than "the creator of the world chose him or her." We can be like the rest of the world and believe that our worth comes from our looks, our salary, our possessions, our fine friends, but how amazing to have on your CV: "This person was hand-picked by God."

Do you really believe that? There are things that will just naturally flow from believing that. A woman who was sent by ACC to help me with housework while I can't bend down. She told me about a house she cleaned recently and how shocked she was at how the people lived in that filth. It made me think, "Perhaps they have no idea that they are valuable people. Worth something better than that."

If Jesus has chosen you as a friend, he values you and has a purpose for your life. The purpose is to go and bear fruit – good quality fruit. (v16) Many people struggle with what am I here for, what is the point of life?

I have a copy of a set of DVDs called "Identity and Destiny" by Sandra Sellmer-Kersten. Would anybody here be interested in watching these with me? I thought it might be good to do a winter series – maybe on Sunday evenings or something. It could help us orientate ourselves to God's purpose for our lives, to live from the name God gives us, not accepting the labels other people have given us. Better than thinking we have to have the latest gadget, the best job and smartest house for our lives to be worthwhile.

Another aspect of this is brought out by a comment of C S Lewis : "*Christ, who said, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christians, every church, "You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another."* Sometimes people wonder if they should keep attending or leave a particular church. The truth is that we are not here just for ourselves.

We are chosen by God to be here. I am not saying you are locked in, never to leave, but Ian and I have found it very beneficial to wait for God to clearly speak before making such a change. The same God who said, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted" also said, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." So we understand that we are here not just for ourselves but for others too. The unique interactions with the people here are used by God to bless and mature us and also the other person.

And part of our purpose is to bring pleasure to the Lord. We were created for an enjoyable relationship with God.

Paul writes to people in Ephesus who had started to find their purpose in relating to God:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.¹

Light will bring these qualities in us. He also gives us his Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit dwelling within us is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.² These fruits are natural products of closeness to Jesus. We don't have to strive in the flesh to achieve the fruit of the Spirit.

"Remain in my love." Those words also mean it is possible not to remain - to choose to opt out. I encourage you to persevere, to finish well. When we get to the end of it all we are promised a crown of life. In Revelation 3 we are promised: "*To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.*"

After the current passage, Jesus goes on to say that we are to expect persecution. We must not expect being a Christian is a ticket to peace, or protection from all conflict. We must not expect to fit in with the world's values and expectations.

¹ Ephesians 5:8-10

² Galatians 5:22&23

What matters is to remain in His love, let His words remain in you – so you will bear much fruit and bring glory to Father God.