

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 9 May 2021

Prepare our hearts, O God, to hear your Word and obey your will. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

1 John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

You did not choose me, but I chose you!

We continue to explore the theme - love (*agape*) this week through Jesus' words – “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Last week, it was with the word ‘abide’ (*meno*) through the relationship with the vine and the vine grower. It was organic and inseparable. Today, we'll explore *agape* love through friendship with Jesus. We'll see that this friendship is Jesus' initiated, action-based and the way of conquering the world.

Jesus' initiated friendship

In the present time, the notion of friendship seems to be changed a lot when it comes to Facebook friends or Twitters. In this competitive and mobile society, making and sustaining friends with the traditional patterns may be difficult. Even so, empathy, support, and mutual struggle in friendship may still be the ethos of friendship. In John 15, we learn that to be a friend of Jesus means to be loved and chosen. Especially in John 15:13 – ‘to lay down one's life for one's friends’ is what this friendship entails.¹ It is rooted in this incredible event of sacrifice, in which the Lord takes the role of servant, the Judge becomes the victim.

In addition, this friendship is not based on mutual attraction, as Jesus explicitly says – “you did not choose me, but I chose you.” When students wish to learn music, sports or special skills from sought out teachers, they want to be like them. In this case, the choice is theirs. But Jesus reverses the order. He chooses his followers. The decision is his.

As such, in this friendship, disciples are not able to dictate when and where they will act like friends. Also, they cannot demand this or that benefit from the friendship to satisfy their own needs. Further, the election does not warrant a sense of elitism on the part of those elected. In this friendship with Jesus, people are chosen not for privilege but for bearing lasting fruit in God's reign.

¹ See also John 10:11, 15

We wonder what Jesus was thinking when he chose this very ordinary group of disciples. And yet, the growth of the first-century church shows that Jesus chose well - or that he empowered well. It was not because they were great, but because the one who empowers them was great.

What we learn here is that God chooses whom God chooses. God empowers whom God empowers. We acknowledge that most godly work is done by ordinary people distinguished by the God-given love - *agape*. The person who seems to have the least to offer might be the person that God chooses to transform the world. And this friendship always involves actions.

Action-based friendship

The friendship with Jesus, similar to the understanding of *agape* love, is quite different from that of our culture. In today's culture, love is understood as the satisfaction of one's own needs rather than as satisfying the needs of the other. When a person says, 'I love you,' that may mean only 'I want you' and may even resort to manipulation to possess you. How different that is from the person who stands ready to sacrifice on behalf of the other person - even to quietly walk away if that best meets the other person's needs. To understand the friendship of which Jesus speaks, it is helpful if we have debased the word love in our common usage as friendship with Jesus is based on *agape*.

Agape love that Jesus commands is more a 'doing' than a 'feeling' word. It doesn't require that we approve of the actions of the person whom we love or even that we enjoy their company. It does require that we act on behalf of that person to demonstrate our love in some practical fashion. An *agape* person will do what is possible to feed the hungry, and to give drink to the thirsty, and to welcome the stranger, and to clothe the naked, and to visit the sick and the person in prison.² The *agape* person doesn't seek her/his benefit by helping these hungry, thirsty, strange, naked, imprisoned people. The nature of the *agape* love is giving, not getting. Since the friendship with Jesus is based on this *agape* love, the friends are also supposed to do the same thing and allowed to know what is going on.

When Jesus called them friends, he has made known to them everything that he had heard from the Father."³ For instance, the disciples are told about the coming crisis and Jesus' impending departure. They are not kept in the dark about what is happening and what is going to happen. In addition, the gospel of John as a whole is a story of revelation of the Word made flesh, of

² Matthew 25:31-46

³ John 15:15

the restoration of sight to a man born blind and so forth. It promises the coming of the Spirit of truth, who will teach them everything and remind them of all that Jesus has said to them.⁴

What makes people friends of Jesus then is their being captured by the story, following the sometimes comforting, sometimes disturbing plot that leads to the cross and the empty tomb and finding the light in the story which will guide their way in the world. It also enables them to keep God's commandments. That is, to love God, believers love one another, and to love one another, believers must love God. Separating the love that believers have for God from the love they have for one another is impossible because both forms of love stem from God and are experienced in God's gifts of Jesus Christ.

Conquering the world by the friendship with Jesus

The commandments are not a burden because they come from God, and “whatever is born of God conquers the world.”⁵ Faith itself conquers the world.⁶ Believers conquer the world.⁷ For us - Westerners who understand the phrase ‘conquer the world’ as a kind of military campaign, these statements are absurd. How the commandments, or faith, or believers become a kind of military power that destroy the opposition? But we can easily find the answer from a story of *Arabian Nights*. The question was, “Who chose and decided the other’s fate – Scheherazade or the Sultan Shahryar?”

When we follow the rest of the story, we may soon find an answer. That night, with the help of her sister, Scheherazade began to tell a story during the long night. The king lay awake and listened with awe as Scheherazade told her first story. The night passed by, and Scheherazade stopped in the middle. The king asked her to finish. But Scheherazade said there was no time, as dawn was breaking. So, the king spared her life for one day to finish the story the next night. The following night, Scheherazade finished the story and then began a second, more exciting tale, which she again stopped halfway through at dawn. Again, the king spared her life for one more day so she could finish the second story. And so the king kept Scheherazade alive day by day, as he eagerly anticipated the finishing of the previous night’s story. At the end of 1,001 nights and 1,000 stories, Scheherazade told the king that she had no more tales to tell him. During these 1,001 nights, the king had fallen in love with Scheherazade. He spared her life

⁴ John 14:26

⁵ 1 John 5:4a

⁶ 1 John 5:4b

⁷ 1 John 5:5

and made her his queen. Now, who chose and decided the other's fate – Scheherazade or the Sultan? Indeed, we may say that the love of Scheherazade has conquered Sultan Shahryar.

Yet, there is synergy here - intertwined elements that feed each other. Likewise, the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves us and invites us to abide in his love. As we keep his commandments, we abide in his love.⁸ And we experience a complete kind of joy. This joy fills our hearts, driving out poisonous feelings that would make it difficult to love our neighbour. Knowing that this neighbour is also a child of our Father helps us to love. Abiding in the Father's love lets us remain in this God-initiative friendship and keep His Commandments. Indeed, we didn't choose Christ Jesus, but he did. In the end, this friendship will transform us to be genuine friends of Jesus Christ. Then, it enables us to love those imperfect souls – to love them warts and all. To be sure, there is no greater love than this friendship with Jesus, and this *agape* love will conquer the world in the end. Amen.

⁸ John 15:10