

Sermon - *Being disciples – Faith, Hope and Love*

Linda Driver
Athelstone Uniting Church #59
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Video: before listening to this sermon, we highly recommend watching this video (5:40):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBaHPND2QJg>

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13, 1 John 4:7-16 [NIV]

Ode to Joy

You just saw a number of orchestras and choirs come together to perform Beethoven's Ode to Joy from his Ninth Symphony as a celebration of Sabadell, a town in Spain, a little north of Barcelona.

I wonder what you noticed as you watched... what surprised you? What did you like? I invite you turn to someone near you and share either one thing you liked or one thing that surprised you. If you're not comfortable sharing, simply stay where you are and reflect on this question yourself..

So... I wonder if you picked up the same kind of things that I did...

The flashmob style of performance is such a special surprise for those present

It was evident in the faces of the audience

There was great joy in sharing this music – joy that was shared by both the musicians singers and audience

People wanted to come and see – to share in the experience – we could see people moving forward toward the performance – and we could see people climbing light poles to get a better look (a little like Zaccheus perhaps?)

The orchestra itself grew from a soloist to a duet to a small ensemble right through to over 100 musicians and singers

The music was glorious! Melody to harmony

And even though it wasn't sung in English most of us would have had some idea of that they were singing about

The music appealed to young and old, across all cultures who there

All joined in in some way.

This was a celebration of joy – experienced by audience and musicians alike – all were included

All united through music

This for me is a wonderful metaphor for the life of Christian discipleship -

For us there is great joy in sharing the love we all share

As Jesus said:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:35)

Our hope is that people will want to come and see - and will want to know more

And that together we will grow – with more joining in – playing their part – in this Christian life we all share.

A celebration of joy!

Pray

Let's pray:

Lord, thank you for this image of joy through music. Help us to catch a vision of your kingdom – a vision of the joyful life of being your disciples.

In Jesus' name, Amen

Being Disciples series

Let's recap where we are in this Lenten series of Being Disciples. We've been working through Rowan Williams' book by the same name: Being Disciples.

And a reminder that we have copies of the book available - contact Sharyn during Office hours to get your own copy at only \$13!

And if you want to go deeper, there are Discussion Questions available to be used after reading each chapter.

In the last 2 weeks we have examined what a Christian disciple is:

We can begin by saying that it simply is someone who follows Jesus

And someone who tries to live out Jesus' teachings

Discipleship is about how we *live* – it's a state of *being*

Of being *aware and attentive*

Of being *with / or abiding with Jesus*

Christian disciples live in a state of expectancy – we expect, anticipate, a new thought or idea or vision, or flashmob, to come.

And as Christian disciples we have the Holy Spirit to lead us, to guide us, to energise our awareness and to kindle our expectancy. So, like the first disciples, we look and listen.

Prayer

it is through prayer that we can hear from Jesus, as he whispers to us – when we wait patiently and in anticipation

It is through prayer that we bring our concerns, our confessions, and our needs to Jesus.

Jesus encourages us to ask for our needs to be met.¹

By doing this we are recognising that we are not self sufficient – we need God to meet our needs. And we need others.

Praying for our ‘daily bread’ then is asking to be reacquainted with our vulnerability, to learn how to approach not only God but each other with our hands open.²

Praying is an expression of trust in our God who knows our needs for the present and the future before we even ask.

We are forgiven

One thing we pray for is forgiveness - for ourselves and for others.

Williams uses the metaphor of bread in relation to forgiveness – he says that when we ask for forgiveness, we acknowledge that we are hungry for healing, for the bread of acceptance and restoration to relationship.

We take a risk by stepping out of our safety zone and making ourselves vulnerable – just as the one who forgives. Forgiveness is one of the most radical ways in which we are able to nourish one another’s humanity.

A willingness to forgive is clearly the mark of people touched by God. It is a matter of being prepared to acknowledge that we cannot grow or flourish without restored relationship.³

Faith hope and love

This week we are focussing on the three things that at the heart of being followers of Jesus – faith, hope and love.

In his book, Williams says that
faith challenges and frames our understandings about God,
hope requires memory of the past and
patience for the future and
love is received before it is given.

Inspired by the writings of the 16th century Spanish friar, St John of the cross, Williams speaks of the human mind as working in 3 ways: it understands, it remembers and it wants.

(repeat) it understands, it remembers and it wants.

So, in the Christian life, he says:
faith is what happens to our understanding

¹ New Interpreters Bible - One volume commentary (Abingdon)

² Williams R: Being Disciples p38

³ Williams R: Being Disciples p41

hope is what happens to our remembering
and love is what happens to our wanting.

St John of the cross believed that in this process of Christian growth – one of the most difficult things is the sense we have at times that we have lost our bearings along the way.

What we thought we understood, we discover that we never did,
what we thought we remembered, is covered with confusion
and what we thought we wanted, turns out to be empty. These can be described as the dark nights of the soul – crisis points in our life when we lose our way for a while – then find them again – each time we grow more in maturity – and are recreated in faith and hope and love with our understanding, our memory and our will becoming more what God wants them to be.

Let's look at Faith and Understanding.

Williams claims that we are in an era when we don't prize intelligence as much as we once may have – when we don't provide as much scope for the mind to be stretched and challenged and enriched in completely unpredictable ways

And with so many new discoveries in the scientific world, in archeology, in careful examination of historical texts, we have lost confidence in what is the truth – what we can know for certain based on fact and reason.

Rather than be concerned, Williams says that it is when we face brick walls of understanding – when we find ourselves in a state of confusion of loss – that is when faith comes in.

It comes in the form of a dependable relationship.

You learn to be confident in a 'presence', an 'other' who does not change or go away. You realise that when the signposts and landmarks you thought you knew have been taken away there is left a presence that does not let you go – this is faith. Faith in a very deeply biblical sense.

There is a sense that I am being held even when I don't know what to hold on to! This faith is initiated and sustained by God's faithfulness, not mine! And God we know, is dependable.

And... we are called to be dependable people ourselves – people in a dependable relationship – who are there for those who feel abandoned and those who don't know who and where they are. By our faithfulness to the lost, the suffering and the marginal we begin to show what it is to have faith in the one who doesn't let go.⁴

Let's look at Hope and Memory.

Williams says that this loss of confidence in knowledge also leads to a loss of identity. A social amnesia. Do we remember who we are?

⁴ Rowan Williams Being Disciples Pages 24-26

To put it in our context, what does it mean to be an Australian, in our multi cultural, plural society?

What does it mean to be part of our denomination, the Uniting Church?

Crises of identity are common in society now and in individuals.

Am I the same person I was?

In a culture where we hold many different careers, may be in a number of different long term relationships, may live in a different states and may have fractured careers and broken relationships – is there one story to tell about who I am and who we are?

And that's where hope comes in..

Hope is not just a confidence that there is a future for us; it's also a confidence that there's a continuity such that the future is related to the same truth and living reality as the past and the present. Hope, like faith, is hope in relation; relation to a reality that knows and sees and holds who we are and who we have been.

You have an identity because you are held in a single gaze of love. You don't have to work out and finalise who you are, and have been; you don't have to settle the absolute truth of your history or story. In the eyes of the presence that never goes away, all that you have been and are is still present and real; it is held together in that unifying gaze – by the divine witness, who loves you as you are.

God sees who we are – as everyone else does – and when we're on our own by ourselves. Who we are is in the hands of God. It tells us that we can hope in 'what is unseen' in the one who doesn't need to be told about how we work because God knows our hearts.

So hope is confidence in the future and

it is confidence that the past, present and future are held in one relationship – the witness in heaven – who does not abandon us

This means that we need to be patient – patient with each other as we work through our confusions and uncertainties and patience in the sense that it takes time for each of us to grow and mature in Christ. And it takes time then for the whole body, the community, to grow overall. ⁵

And then we come to Love and Want

We live in a culture with so many choices, so many options – and we're free to decide what we want.

It can mean that our lives are filled with choices that are shallow and at the surface. We can lose touch with the deep desire of who we really are and the deep sense of call where we are drawn towards something beyond ourselves which gives meaning – we can miss that deep call of God.

In our freedom of choice we can lose touch with the idea that the most important freedom is the freedom to be ourselves and the freedom to grow. – to discover slowly and patiently the deepest rhythms of our life, and to find the context in which we will grow as God means us to.

⁵ Rowan Williams Becoming Disciples pages 26-30

Williams speaks of Love as freedom to receive. It permits us to be enriched and to be 'given to'. To be made alive and to be breathed into.

Love is an openness to joy!

When Paul writes about love in 1 Corinthians 13, he makes it clear that doing good is not enough – love has to be delight in another, the refusal to be glad at another's failure and the willingness to receive truth as a life giving, joy giving thing.

Love is generated by being loved;
it is not that we loved God, but that God loved us,
as we heard in 1 John 4.

Love is the dependable presence that doesn't go away; the presence that remembers and holds in a single gaze what has been true and is true of us; the eternal, unshakeable witness to what we are. We are seen, known and held, and we are welcomed. We are the objects of eternal delight.

So the church then is a place where time and space are given, where people are allowed the space to experience eternal love; where people are made free to receive in a world that can be demanding things of them all the time. May our church be an environment in which we can learn to open ourselves to joy – and a space that provides for moments of stillness, and quiet and peace. A place where our souls can be nurtured.

Faith, hope and love: these three, says Paul, are the heart of our discipleship, of our learning and growing in Christ. The greatest is love, because once we have understood the nature of that to which we are present in its eternal, unchangeable radiance and glory, everything else falls into place.⁶

Love holds everything together.

Let me close by reading to you Psalm 100:

Psalm 100 New International Version (NIV)

¹ **Shout for joy** to the LORD, all the earth.

² Worship the LORD with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.

³ Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

⁵ **For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.**

Amen!

⁶ Rowan Williams Being Disciples page 30-35

Let's celebrate the love and joy that comes from the Lord by singing the hymn *Joyful Joyful* to that same tune we heard the orchestra play – the Ode to Joy!