

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 17 MAY 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

John 15: 9-17

"I've loved you so long"

Easter humour

Background Briefing, 19th April, 2009

ABC Radio National

What made the Romans Laugh?

The oldest collection of jokes in the world, *Philogelos: The Laughter Lover*,
Professor in classics at Cambridge University, Mary Beard

Professor Beard's favourite joke is a version of the Englishman, Irishman, and Scotsman variety, with a barber, a bald man, and an absent-minded professor taking a journey together. They have to camp overnight, so decide to take turns watching the luggage. When it's the barber's turn, he gets bored, so amuses himself by shaving the head of the professor. When the professor is woken up for his shift, he feels his head, and says "How stupid is that barber? He's woken up the bald man instead of me."

Introduction

A week after the swine virus caught our attention, a cute story came to life on the Internet.

"As the two friends wandered through the snow on their way home, Piglet grinned to himself, thinking how lucky he was to have a best friend like Pooh bear. Pooh thought to himself: "If the pig sneezes, he's dead!"

Humorous and terribly human. Friends and family can both love and hate each other, companionship lives with competition. This is part of life. Yet, the challenge here is that we have intimate friends living at a great distance from each other. They inhabit inner spaces of discourse, living within dimensions of fantasy that places them "outside of this world" (Santner, *On the PsychoTheology of Everyday Life*, 40). They walk alongside each other, but how often do they negotiate beyond this fantasy world?

1. In our reading from John 15: 9-17, John's Jesus describes his relationship with his followers as one of being "best friends". Gail O'Day in the *New Interpreter's Bible on John* writes that John uses the two Greek verbs for "love" (agapao and phileo) interchangeably ... so when Jesus speaks of friends ["philos"] here, he is really saying "those who are loved" (cf. the description of Lazarus at 11:3, 11). [page 758; cited in: Brian P. Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes, *Text Week*, Year B6. WWW].

Jesus directs his followers "to abide", "to remain", that is, to maintain a mutual, interdependent relationship with each other, a communion of love. This love and friendship is like the intimate, organic relationship between the vine and the branches. It is to exist in honest recognition of and regardless of the obstacles, hatred, or competition.

Yet, it seems that they may be engaging in the Piglet-Pooh Bear parallel-living without deep reciprocal engagement. William Loader suggests that John is addressing the issue of parallel-living for his own community:

“... a major crisis was developing within John’s community which needed Jesus’ instruction and his prayer - or, at least, the members needed to hear what Jesus would have prayed. The unity was not ‘airy-fairy’, but relational and practical. After the breakdown has occurred in these relations, we read in 1 John that such mutual love needed to express itself in real ways, in sharing material resources, in deed as well as word (1 John 3:17-18).”

2. Friends and members of a community can be distanced from each other as much by non-sharing, parallel living, as by any discourse that is produced and inhabited.

A few weeks ago, I shared the notion of the third-space-discourse produced by Rose and her friends about Mr Wintergarten. Rose and the children created a story full of images, arising from their fear of the unknown, about the neighbour, a discourse that grew like an invisible, impassable wall between their worlds.

In Ian McEwan’s book, *On Chesil Beach*, Edward becomes distanced from his mother by a discourse about her being brain-damaged. His mother had been in an accident in which her skull was fractured, dislocating her personality, intelligence and memory (McEwan, 70). At the age of fourteen, his father had chosen to tell Edward that his mother was brain-damaged. This disturbed him, but explained things.

“He had never thought of her as having a condition, and at the same time had always accepted that she was different. The contradiction was now resolved by this simple naming, by the power of words to make the unseen visible. *Brain-damaged*. The term dissolved intimacy, it coolly measured his mother by public standard ...” (72)

3. In the French film, *I’ve Loved You so Long*, Juliette Fountaine, powerfully played by Kristin Scott Thomas, is a former physician who returns to Nancy after a mysterious fifteen-year absence to live with her younger sister Léa and her husband and children. The reasons provided for her absence are only “awkward euphemisms about long trips, being ‘away’ and the most shattering admission from her long-estranged younger sister, Léa, that their parents told her ‘you no longer existed.’” (Nov 07, 2008, Linda Barnard, *Toronto Star*).

And Léa responds with great emotion to her husband’s cold and calculating demands that she talk to her sister and pressure her to find a place of her own:

“It takes time! It isn’t easy. My parents killed my sister in my mind!”

Again, we witness how discourse can produce performative violence, and tear and divide the world.

“Brittle and unsure of herself, Juliette awkwardly stands to one side, sipping coffee while the family sits at the breakfast table, her status as outsider palpable. Léa is almost desperate to reconnect with her sister, inviting her to outings, dinner parties, the local pool, a weekend in the country. Slowly, tentatively she entices a wary, bitter Juliette to step back into the world, a world Juliette says she realised got along without her very well when she was gone.” (*Ibid*, Linda Barnard)

I won’t destroy this exceptional movie by telling you any more except that the writer-director

Philippe Claudel has produced a moving metaphor about living beyond parallel-living, about negotiating friendship and love. Léa's commitment to a respectful, honest, and brave relationship evidences a Christ-like person. To use psychoanalytic terms, her persistent yet respectful love and friendship intervenes into the dimension of fantasy that structures her sister's inner world and brokenness. She is shutdown and emotionally near death. Yet Léa must also learn how she can reframe inner fantasy constructions so that she can become a real friend and companion. Both women are on a journey of ex-change and conversion.

4. Paul writes, "You must speak the truth to one another since we are all parts of one another" (Ephesians: 4:25). Along with this, we need to speak or discern the truth about ourselves and the discourse we inhabit, the truth that structures our identity and meaning.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and teacher of the Enneagram, a spirituality process, writes, "your ability to accept me frees me" (*Enneagram 2*, 4). And again, "... community in the deepest and truest sense, [is] where people are empty enough of themselves to make room for the other, where I hold a place in my heart for the one who is not like me."

Jesus, in our reading today, is inviting us to contemplate what it means that we *are* deeply connected, as a vine is to its branches, and that each branch shares a common source of life and love with other branches.

In addition, associated with this is the cultivation process. To abide, to associate with each other as friends, to experience fruitful relationships, requires us to be like Léa. To really love the other when they push us away, ignore us, and avoid us. Yet, to do this we need to be comfortable with ourselves, to love our self, to face what we don't like about ourselves. This is what cultivation is about. And therapy in all its forms is about cultivation, always for the sake of love that produces communion.

Richard Rohr writes that

"Catherine of Siena, in her *Dialogues* ... pictures the spiritual life as a large tree.

First of all, the *trunk of the tree* is love.

Next, ... the *core of the tree* - the middle that has to be alive for the rest of the tree to be alive - is *patience*. ... For Catherine, no virtue happens unless you have patience with yourself.

The roots of *the tree* - now this isn't Freud or Jung writing, this is Catherine of Siena - the roots that sustain the whole tree she identifies as *self-knowledge*. *You will* not grow in love, she claims, without self-knowledge.

What are the *branches of the tree* of the spiritual life? What reaches out to connect us to the larger world? *Discernment*. Only when you have discernment, she claims, do you know how to listen, how to weigh the inner and outer voices, how to hear deeply what is happening in relationships.

In other words, according to Catherine, love does not happen without self-knowledge, without patience and without discernment." (*Ibid*, 5)

Conclusion

To conclude we will listen to a song from an Adelaide band, The Huckleberry Swedes, *We Farm our*

Love, as an artistic expression of contemporary spirituality, fashioned by young people. The words and images reflect their desires to be reflective, growing and relating people.