

Sermon Archive 246

Sunday 19 May, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Acts 11: 1-18

John 13: 31-35

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



How can you identify a genuine disciple of Jesus? How can you pick out from the crowd someone who's on a sincere journey of faith? What does it have to do with the sharing of food? And who's that knocking on the door?

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Who's that knocking on the door? It's someone who sat with Jesus, who was among that first little group to hear the new commandment. "I give you a new commandment", Jesus had said, "that you love one another". Simple language - complicated challenge: loving one another. But, under the tender teaching of the best teacher, "beginnings in love" had been made. Within the group were one-time tax collectors and on-going tax-payers. Within the group there were labourers and intellectuals. Within the group there were those who had the grace to feel embarrassed when being outed as wanting to be greatest in the group. After three years of working together, eating together, travelling together, listening together, natural friendships would have begun to form. Thomas's doubts are back - better take care of him. Peter's impetuosity is on the rise - better cut him some slack. John's looking insecure - better make room for him to lay his head on our shoulder - these things happening while the teacher is saying "God is love", you are loved. Be loved.

And now, preparing them to live life after he has gone, Jesus is saying to them "love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples - if you have love for one another."

Who's that knocking on the door? It is Peter, given love, commanded to love, coming to our house to love.

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Who's that knocking on the door? It's someone for whom things used to be so

very clear - like black writing on white parchment. This is black; that is white - no confusion here. Faith had brought him clarity. There was one God - immortal, invisible. "This is my name for ever, my title for all generations". There were ten commandments (neither nine nor eleven). The temple made of stones had definite, God-prescribed dimensions. Good teachers would begin their teachings with "you have heard the law". And in that sprawling law, there was so much detail to guide the obedient life: laws for food and fabric, for offerings and praying, for what to do with mildew, menstrual fluid and nocturnal emissions. Everything was covered. The only thing missing was a people committed to living it out - a people of the law. Who's that knocking on the door? It's someone trained in a distinctive way of living - who knows it's probably not possible, but sees his cultural identity through the lens of at least giving that life a try. His understanding of himself as a child of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob comes from being different - being distinctive - being formed by law - being called into the story of a particular, separate people.

Yes, so when he's hearing this new commandment (hang on, eleven, rather than ten?), he's sitting among other Jews. People who know what to eat, how to dress, when to pray. He's being told to love people he understands, people who are like him, people who belong already to what God is doing. Maybe when I answer the door, and he sees me, he'll realise he's got the wrong house. Who's that knocking on the door? A good man, who's not expecting me.

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Who's that knocking on the door? Someone who knew that there were ten commandments, but now has heard an eleventh. Someone who knew that the One God was immortal and invisible, but who now wants to say he has seen God in a dying man. Someone who worshipped in a temple of God designed stones, only now to know that the temple is made of human flesh. Someone who heard the familiar phrase "you have heard the law" now regularly followed by "but I say to you". Is the one knocking on the door a poor man whose faith is disintegrating? Someone lifted high on a rock, only to fall off it - where did the certainty go? Why are things changing? My God, my God, why are you confusing me?

Who's that knocking on the door? It's someone who's fallen into a trance and had a strange, strange vision. (What did the prophet Joel say? Your young ones shall have visions, and your old ones shall have dreams - but only when the Spirit comes. Has the Spirit come?) In this vision, a great table cloth is lowered down from heaven, with some obscene, offensive picnic on it. All the prohibited foods,

the unclean foods, the infecting foods that good Jews would never eat. The smorgasbord is a stomach-turning expression of all that Israel is not, all that God is not, all that we should not be. It's one thing for non-Jews (THEM) to eat that kind of thing, but we would never eat it. It would be an orgy of apostasy, a feast of filth. Three times Peter tries explaining it to God. And three times God replies "what I have made clean, you must not call profane.

If Peter stands in that doorway, looking like his faith is falling apart, it's because, in a way, it *is*. Insisting that old divisions, old practices of separation, even old revulsions over other people, no longer apply, there are huge changes going on for Peter. Those divisions had given shape to his faith. But now God was taking them away. Perhaps God's love is broader than he knew. Perhaps the commandment to love one another is meant for more than just twelve people, or just one nation. Who's that knocking on the door? It's someone who in the act of knocking is acknowledging that my house (my house) is held within a love. He is bringing his food, his love, his taking me seriously as one of God's people, to my house. He is someone to whom I say "yes". He is someone to whom I say "come in". He is someone who, inside my God-condemned house, will witness the Holy Spirit baptising people - as if God is already here, working, blessing, making authentic disciples. That's who's knocking on the door.

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Who's that knocking on the door? It is someone who, now that he has been obedient to God by loving previously excluded people, is about to face an inquisition. Not everybody has had the vision he's had. Not everybody has been blessed with the conviction that God is marching on across those barriers. And those non-vision people are still inclined to find God more easily in exclusion than inclusion. Judging is still more spiritually familiar and assuring than discovering. Closing doors is still more religious than opening doors. (This is my name for ever, my title for all generations.) So they ask him, (I think I detect anger in the text), "why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

Peter, as a person of God's new faith, is someone who needs, with patience (and some courage), to articulate his vision within the great anger of the world. What patience and courage exercised by Arch-bishop von Galen of Münster, explaining to a NAZI-blinded nation that people with intellectual developmental challenges were children of God and should not be allowed just to mysteriously disappear. What patience and courage exercised by Martin Luther King in explaining that African Americans too deserved civil rights. What patience and

courage exercised by Teresa of Calcutta in explaining that the poorest of the poor were people too. What patience and courage exercised by Mary Griffith in explaining to the conservative religious right of America that her late gay son, Bobby, deserved not to be hated. Peter was never going to be the last person trying to explain that the table is an open, expanding one. Where the vision is given, and the Spirit is working, the barriers tumble down.

In terms of the real historical time line, Peter was probably the first one to articulate that God's love dissolves exclusion. **Paul** was probably the first one to live it, by travelling widely and setting up churches in so many different cultural contexts. They were the early trail-blazers. Interestingly, both Peter and Paul were put to death. Such is the resistance to the vision. Who's that knocking on the door? Someone who knows the anger of the world, but knocks on the door anyway.

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Lastly; who's that knocking on the door? Simply, it is a disciple of Jesus. It is someone whose capacity to love makes people see God. No one has ever seen God, it is said, but if we love one another, God lives in us. That's who's knocking on the door. "Love one another – by this people will know that you are my disciples."

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Just an epilogue - on maybe the next evolution of love:

This week, our neighbours at the Al Noor Mosque were visited by Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, and a practising Catholic. Interviewed by television media, members of the congregation said he took off his shoes, and went into their mosque. (Who's that knocking on the door?) When he was with them, he listened. The people of that house felt like they had been listened to. They felt like it was a real instance of "we are one" - as Muslim and Christian met.

A couple of weeks before that, another Christian delegation visited - well, not really visited. They did not knock on the door. They stayed over the road, in the park, with loud hailers, claiming Christchurch for Jesus. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" The evolution has a way to go.

But someone is knocking on the door – calling us to love. Who is it? Shall we go and see? A moment of quiet.

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