

*"...you are no are no longer strangers and foreigners...you are members of God's family...together you are his house..." (Ephesians 2.19)*

*Knock-knock*

*Who's there?*

*Your neighbour.*

*Which neighbour? The one on the left or on the right?*

*The one on the left, I suppose.*

*Which left? The immediate left or the one two doors down?*

*The one two doors down. Yes, that one.*

*\*Beep\* Sorry I missed your call! Please leave your name and number and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Have a great day!*

Well, admittedly that's not a very good knock-knock joke, but don't we all know how it feels to be on either side of that door? There are people we know who we'd rather avoid, and we're pretty sure we know some people who would rather avoid us. And *those people* aren't always far removed. The story goes that little girl once asked her Mother, "Where do humans come from?" Her mum answered, "God made Adam and Eve and they had children and that's who we all descend from." A few days later the girl asked her Father the same question. Her dad answered, "Many years ago there were monkeys from which people evolved." The confused girl returned to her mother and said, "Mum, how is it possible that you told me that people were created by God, and Dad said people evolved from monkeys?" Her mum answered, "Well, dear, it's very simple: I told you about my side of the family, and your father told you about his." I'm sure we don't feel that way about anyone in our families, but you get the picture. As the saying goes, *familiarity often breeds contempt*. Yet there's something about the awkwardness, the *untidiness of difference* in human connection and community that also draws out the best in us. The best stories aren't the ones about how people who already liked each other kept on liking each other, but the stories about people who were estranged, even at odds with one another, and yet somehow found a way to come together, to reconcile and harmonize. The best stories are the ones about people who moved away from animosity and indifference, and toward kindness and attention.

In his book "The Four Loves" C.S. Lewis points out the problems with having just one word for *love* in the English language. He describes the kinds of loves we discover in life: affection, friendship, eros (romantic/sexual) and finally, charity. He talks about affection, friendship and eros as the "natural loves", and expands on how they can be both beautiful and dangerous. The "natural loves" can go in either direction. For example, in discussing friendship Lewis writes:

*"Friendship can be a school of virtue; but also a school of vice...it makes good men better and bad men worse. What concerns us...is not the badness of Friendships but to become aware of the possible danger in good ones...I know that I should be an Outsider to a circle of golfers, mathematicians, or motorists, so I claim the equal right of regarding them as Outsiders to mine...The danger of this partial indifference or deafness to an outside opinion, justified and necessary though it is, may lead to wholesale indifference or deafness...the group will disdain as well as ignore those outside it. It will, in effect, have turned itself into something like a class...a self-appointed aristocracy."*

Of course, Lewis shares plenty about the virtues and not only the vices of friendship; friendship itself is not good or bad. But he does get us thinking about the danger of *exclusion*, and maybe even how we think about what it means to be the Church. Is the Church built on friendship, on common interest and shared tastes, the kind of community we join in order to meet "our kind of people", and in danger, as Lewis puts it, of *indifference* or *deafness*? Or is the Church built on something other than friendship, intended to be something *unusual* altogether?

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Paul's words here in Ephesians suggests that a community that calls itself Christ's is something more than a friendship community. This isn't to say that the "natural loves" aren't involved in the life of the Church, quite the opposite. It's just to say that the Church is not founded on affection, eros or friendship primarily, but on what C.S. Lewis would call *Charity*. *Charity* is the kind of love which flows from God's nature and character, and what we see through Jesus life and teaching. Lewis says,

*"This primal love is Gift-love. In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give...God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that he may love and perfect them."*

Charity, this "Gift-love", is the love that makes room. It's the love that makes God, God, and what every Christian community must grow further into if it truly belongs to Jesus. God's Gift-love is what makes us, in Paul's words, no longer "strangers and foreigners" to God and one to another, but *family* members. It's the love Jesus speaks of to his disciples the night before his death, "Just as I have loved you, so you should love each other." (John 13.34), and gift-love is the love we hear in Jesus' voice when he says, "to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7). They say you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family, and nothing could be truer of God's family. So a church that truly belongs to Jesus isn't just a bunch of people who have selected one another in order to design their ideal version of a friend group. A church that belongs to Jesus has been brought together from diverse backgrounds and histories to make up *a new kind of family* that can only exist because of the charitable, Gift-love of God passed around from life to life. At the risk of sounding simplistic, a church that belongs to Jesus is a church family which is obviously characterized by the kind of love we see from Jesus. That's the kind of family that many of us are unfamiliar with, because that word "family" isn't always one we easily associate with generous, self-giving love. But that's what we've been brought together in God's family to discover together. God makes us a family, calls us children, calls us siblings, and offers us the chance to *learn to love how God loves in this new kind of household*.

This is why our value of *Recognizing & Releasing* is vital. Through this value we celebrate our diversity of backgrounds, histories and giftings. We don't expect to all be cut from the same cloth, and we encourage one another to be who we are within the roomy, charitable family of Jesus. And this is why our value of the *Great Commission* is also vital. We don't assume, within this charitable family, that the circle is ever closed, that the doors are ever locked. We expect that Jesus will be forever wandering off in search of yet another sheep, inviting more strangers into the circle. And Jesus tells us to follow him as a people of charity (we could even say a

people of generosity, or of invitation). To follow as people who are always making sure the circle is open; always reminding one another that the house *is still being build*, that there are more bricks to be laid. Because we know that if the Church becomes a clique, the Church forgets the cross.

So back to my poor attempt at a knock-knock joke. When we knock on the door of Jesus' family the joke becomes much shorter:

*Knock-Knock.*  
*(the door opens).*  
And that's it.

I like what one writer says, that our stories can either be punctuated by full stops or commas. We can either think of ourselves as a finished product or as a people *under construction*. We're either a house with a locked door, or an open one. That's up to us.

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#### **Discussion Questions:**

- In what ways is the Church unique in our time and society? What makes the Church stand out?
- How does this "standing out" work itself out in our everyday lives? What part do we each have to play?
- Why is inclusion and difference important in the life of a local church?
- What have you learned about your unique gifts and abilities that help to make up our church family? How are you learning to express them?
- What does it mean to be an "open door" kind of community, family or person in an increasingly fractured and lonely society?