

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

John 15:1-8 [MW18-15]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Hakaru, Sunday 29 April 2018

Have you seen any of “The Godfather” series of movies?

- you know what they're about?
the Corleones, a Mafia family
- they run protection and extortion rackets
they make money from gambling and “nightclubs”
they deal in drugs, prostitution and murder
- yet alongside all this they are Catholics
getting their babies baptised, having First Communion
receiving honours from the Vatican
- how does that work?

You've heard of Adolf Eichmann?

- a major organiser of the Holocaust, responsible for the death of millions of Jews
it is said that after a day of his gruesome business at Auschwitz
he would go home and tenderly play with and be affectionate with his small son
- how does that work?

You may not be aware of Jack Abramoff - he had a stellar career as an American lobbyist

- businessman, movie producer and writer
he fell from grace spectacularly when his bribing of public officials
and embezzlement, which ran to millions of dollars, was exposed
- yet he went regularly to the synagogue
how does that work?

Perhaps it can be explained by what happened to Aldrich Ames

- Ames pleaded guilty to giving up the CIA's most precious secrets
to the KGB for money
- when asked how he could do such a terrible thing
despite his sacred oath of loyalty to his country
knowing his actions would jeopardize the futures of his wife and son
knowing his deeds cost the lives of at least eleven people
- Ames calmly responded: “I tend to put some of these things in separate boxes
and compartmentalise feelings and thoughts”

How does that work?

- all these people seem to have two different boxes in their lives
and rationalise evil conduct because these two compartments are not connected
- they separate their lives into “church” and “world”
and one has nothing to do with the other
- their lives are split into separate compartments
church life, work life, professional life, entertainment life
- and these little boxes do not touch one another

The Corleones, Eichmanns, Abramoffs and Ameses

- are, to use Jesus' metaphor, branches cut off from the vine
and even though they might look prosperous, they will wither and die
- because they are not connected to Jesus

In fact such people act as if they are not connected to the world
- and the community and the people they hurt

Jesus urges:

Be whole. Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you.

- in short: stay connected and be mindful of the connection

The great Christian truth is: we are connected to something much larger than ourselves

- we are connected to the hundreds of people who are just this year getting access to clean water in Africa
- we are connected to the thousands being injured and killed in the Middle East
- we are connected to children we dare not hurt by hands or words
- we are connected to the earth we dare not pollute by our selfishness
- we are connected to animals that we dare not make suffer needlessly
- we are connected to nature, to all of creation
- as St Francis reminded us
- we are an interconnected human community
- our actions have consequences

As Christians we are the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Vine and Branches

- and so should not have separate little boxes in our lives separating beliefs from actions, church going from church living our lives from the lives of others
- we are a communal people, responsible for one another whose actions affect others
- which means what you and I do and say here should be the same as what we do and say when we leave this place
- as one preacher has said:
"The unity of Vine and Branches does not allow us to make compartments of our lives"

You may not have heard of Harry Kraemer

- he was the CEO of Baxter International, a medical supply company and a few years ago his actions cost the company \$189 million
- now you might be thinking ... typical, just like all too many CEOs we hear about Kraemer must have cooked the books or drained the company accounts to finance his own over the top lifestyle

But it wasn't like that at all

- it was actually down to Kraemer's honesty, his high sense of ethics and his refusal to compartmentalise his life from his work

Executives at Baxter international had learned that one of the products they manufactured, a filter for a kidney dialysis machine, may have been defective. Some patients using the filter had died of unexplained causes. Rather than covering things up, Kraemer recalled all of the filters and instituted a rigorous investigation. This recall and investigation cost the company \$189 million. Kraemer also recommended his performance bonus for the year be cut, because this situation had occurred under his leadership. And to top it all off, he informed Baxter's competitors in the medical manufacturing business of the possible flaws in Baxter's filters, so they could benefit from the research his investigation turned up.

The Corleones, Eichmanns, Abramoffs, Amesese and Kraemers

- may be a bit 'out of our league'
however they certainly highlight that being connected to the source of life is a matter of life and death
- their experiences, opportunities, choices
are similar to those we all face, day by day
- a sobering thought

So here is something perhaps a little closer to home and more down to earth

- a reflection from Philip Gulley, church pastor in a small town in the United States
who reflects on the simple things of life in a profound way
- this is from his book *Front Porch Tales*

My hobby is woodworking and has been for a number of years. My foray into wood began when we needed a kitchen table and my wife suggested I build one. We were low on money, and I was between college and graduate school and had the time. I'd never built anything before, but a kitchen table seemed as good a place to start as any.

My grandfather had a workshop set up in the family barn. I'd go there in the morning, turn on the heater and set to work. It took me the month of February to build the table. I could have done it quicker, but being tucked away in the barn while winter blasted away outside was so pleasant it made me want to dwell on that page as long as I could. In March, I took the table outside beneath the trees, next to the crocuses that were pushing up, and sanded it down. Grandpa came by and taught me how to use slivers of glass to plane the joints smooth. That's an old woodworker's trick I never would have picked up on my own.

I spent a week massaging five coats of tung oil into the wood. It takes a long time to get the finish right on a piece of furniture, but you can't hurry it, or the flaws will show, and all your hard work will be for nothing. Woodworking is a good way to learn that doing something worthwhile takes time. It is possible to make a table in a hurry. It is not possible, however, to make a table worth passing on to your grandchildren in a hurry.

My wife and I wrapped the table in blankets, loaded it up in the truck, and carried it home. She gave me a brass plate, engraved with my name and the year, to mount on its underbelly. That's so when my children's children play underneath it they'll be able to see when Grandpa built it.

A friend came for dinner not long ago. He asked me where I had bought my table, and I told him I had made it. He wanted me to make him one, but I told him no. A man has to be careful not to let his hobby become his business. He was talking about how his kitchen table is forever falling apart and lamenting the shoddy nature of today's craftsmanship. People slapping things together in five minutes expecting them to last a lifetime.

We got to talking about how that isn't only true about furniture, it's true about life. Folks get discouraged because God doesn't make them saints overnight. They don't understand all the years of God-work that go into making one's life a thing of beauty — a lot of shaping, a lot of smoothing, a lot of finishing. And if we rush the process, the flaws will surely show.

Once a week I rub a coat of lemon oil into my table. It reminds me that my table is never really finished. Kind of like me.

“... all the years of God-work that go into making one's life a thing of beauty ...”

- sounds a lot like “remain in the vine” to me

Jesus said:

"I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit ..."

That same preacher I mentioned earlier also said:

You can even take those words to mean branch as in branch office. There's main headquarters and there are its branches which are supposed to reflect the product and philosophy of the main corporation. We are branches of Jesus. The Vine. We are supposed to reflect his values and his mission.

Its's all about being connected

- recognising and maintaining that connection
so that we are nurtured, fed and able to grow
- and for that to show in who we are and what we do

Let's pray ... we'll have a time of quiet, then I will conclude with a prayer

[moment of silence, then]

*Jesus,
you are the vine and we are the branches.
Help us to stay connected to you
so that in what we say and what we do
you love shines through
and draws others to be connected too.
Amen.*