

Readings: John 15 and Acts 10

Our family went to Punakaiki on the West Coast in the holidays. Isn't it just the most incredible place!! The ocean and the rocks and the waves and the foam and the towering cliffs and the rainforest and the rain. Wow. It was great to take our teenage boys. They loved it.

I went there last when I was a teenager myself. I grew up through my teen years with my mother and my younger sister Natalie. Mum made ends meet on the DPB. Somehow. We never felt poor but not a cent was wasted either. After she left my father my mother bought herself a car. A sky blue Skoda. Probably not the wisest decision she ever made in her whole life. This was back in the days when Skodas were among the most basic cars on the road, and not the most reliable. It had the engine in the back and the boot in the bonnet. All the seats hinged up and inside the seat there was space for storage. It developed an unfixable fault in the fuel system so that occasionally, just when you were accelerating to cross an intersection, it would just stop with a grumpy cough, as though indignant with the whole business of taking people where they wanted to go.

We bought a bumper sticker for the sky blue Skoda which said "This car runs on love" My sister and I always said that that car only went at all because of my mother's unfailing belief in it.

Somehow, miraculously, the three of us did an entire circuit of the South Island in that car. Not once but twice. My mother did not enjoy the whole palava of our extended family Christmas, so she ran away, abducted her girls, packed us up with a tent, drove us onto the ferry and off we went. Twice. I remember Punakaiki in the pouring rain on Christmas Eve when I was 15. And I remember an utterly wonderful Christmas Day dinner in the Hokitika Hotel, a fabulous buffet spread. What a welcome relief from crouching over a spluttering thermos trying to boil a billycan.

When you are a child you just love the people around you.

We hope that our children get to completely take for granted that they are loved, even squashed together in a tent in the rain. Our children are formed first and foremost by our belief in them. Like my mother's Skoda, kids run on love.

And as we grow we learn to love people back, and we learn to keep on loving even when people let us down or hurt us. Love is not contingent upon people meeting our expectations of them. Love grows as we choose to be curious about another person, who they are, what makes them spark and glow.

Week after week people stand right here and promise to love each other for the rest of their lives. It is an awesome thing to witness.

It is even more awesome for me to stand here beside a person when his or her wife or husband has died, and every person in the room marvels in awe at the love that sustained them and forged a long good marriage.

Our Bible readings today are about love. Jesus tells his friends before he died: as I have loved you, love one another. As I have come from the Father, so I have lived out the Father's love for you: love one another. As I have shown you the Father's heart: love one another. I know, I know, you've heard a lot of sermons about love and you've sung a lot of songs about love. God is love. Yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so. Love divine, all loves excelling.

It's my job to push you in your thinking and your living ... so, OK, what does it mean, love one another? The problem is, in the church, we tone it down, make it easier. So we think it says 'be nice to one another'. Or maybe even, heaven forbid, 'Be polite to one another'. And some people are just easy to love – we have lots of easy-to-love people in this church. And it's easy to love people who kind of look like me and who value things that I value and

who dress nice and smile nice. And you've heard dozens of sermons about loving your neighbour. The wonderful story told in Acts chapter 10 is one of those stories, about how people who are very different from each other overcome their fears and their prejudices and find a common love. It is really astonishing. I love the way God is at work on both sides, Jew and Roman, stirring them up, prompting them to take a risk and step into relationship.

I love how the Roman officer asks to immediately and directly on his nudge to send for Peter. Cornelius had obviously heard about Peter. Perhaps he had heard about the healing of the crippled man on the Temple steps – we had that story a couple of weeks ago. The whole town of Joppa was in uproar because Peter had healed a woman called Tabitha, in fact she had actually died and God brought her back to life. Surely Cornelius had heard about that. Surely Cornelius was curious about this man Peter and wanted to meet him. So when he had a vision from God, a message from an angel, prompting him to send for Peter, he just did it.

As for Peter, God had some serious work to do laying the groundwork for Peter to be open to such a radical rethinking of who he was as a good Jewish man. God literally and figuratively took him on a journey, into places and relationships he could never had imagined.

The book of Acts is a book about journeys. It begins in Jerusalem and ends up in Rome. Peter is such a key figure in the early days because he lead the apostles in going out. In the previous chapter, 9:32, Luke writes that Peter travelled everywhere.

I used to worry about Peter's wife. We know that Peter was married and I used to feel sad for his wife, assuming that she got left behind in Gallilee while Peter set off here and there. But then I discovered a little line in 1 Corinthians where Paul is arguing that apostles have the right to travel with their wives, like Peter does. 1 Corinthians 9:5. So it's a classic case of the invisible woman; although she is not mentioned she travelled with him. I love that.

Anyway, back to Acts 10. What I really love about Acts 10 is how they meet on equal terms. Jew and Roman, fisherman and commanding officer, healer and benefactor, with children and servants and the grandparents and all. Divisions and distinctions, hierarchies and race ... that evening as they ate together none of that mattered. Peter spoke and their hearts burned and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. God is in the relationship business. God opens the way for people to love one another, just as Jesus loved his friends.

So, folks, how are we going to love one another as Jesus loves us?

What if we challenged ourselves to not just sit with people we already know and like, but crossed the room to talk to someone you don't know yet? What if we prayed for that person during the week, or even gave them a call? Loving others is not just the job of the pastoral team. Connecting with others is not just the job of the Fellowship Team or the Cookie Girls. What if we suddenly and completely stopped being afraid of rejection? What if we just wanted to love and bless another person?

And how about as parents, how would our parenting be different if we loved our kids as Jesus loves us? Imagine if our kids totally and absolutely knew that they are the apple of our eye, the delight of our heart, just as they are.

All right, I know, it's not easy. This is a big ask, and I don't live it any better than anyone else. But I love those moments when God's Spirit is with us and between us and we really see another person, ... not the external things but the heart. I love those moments when I get out of the way and let Jesus take the lead. If the church had a bumper sticker it would say "This church runs on love". We exist because God believes in us.