

**Sermon (Kauwhau) given at Service of Worship led by Margaret Garland,
at Knox Church Ōtepoti Dunedin New Zealand.
Sunday 19 January 2025 - Epiphany 2, 'Covenantal Love'**

Readings: Psalm 36:5-10, Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11

We pray: Abundant God, may your word for us this day shine brightly in our hearts and minds, may we seek not to contain it within our limits but rather release us to your vision for us. May your Spirit guide us and your Word embrace us we pray. Amen

Covenantal Love: words never seem enough as we try to express our understanding of God's abundant love for us and for the world, let alone how we live that that love in our faith, in our lives. How do express a love that transcends all expectations, stretches so far that its limits cannot be ever be found or proven, holds a promise that sustains the impossible and nurtures the least and the smallest to fulfilment?

So I brainstormed some of the ways we might want to reflect God's love in our lives and in our faith – what it looks like, how we are to respond, how it shapes our lives, our decisions and our relationships with God and each other and this is what I came up with: bountiful love, abundant grace, unconditional faithfulness, unrestrained hope, deep and joyous belonging, home of our heart.

Both of our readings today speak of the covenant of love that God makes with us – one in the book of Isaiah and the other the Gospel of John. Both our readings use the analogy of marriage to explain the breadth and depth of that love, which does need some interpreting for us today.

Isaiah is speaking to the people who are in despair in exile, separated from their land – from Jerusalem – and speaks of the great rejoicing when the creator, the builder is reunited with the people of God. God's power and great love is likened to the bridegroom's love for his bride and this, like a wedding, is a cause for great celebration and rejoicing – something that I suspect many of us need a reminder of. How important is it that, in a world of turmoil and great pain, we rest in the joy of Christ Jesus in our lives. It's not that we are turning our back on the pain of the world but that by acknowledging and celebrating God's covenantal love throughout time and to all people, we are anchoring ourselves in a joy that will sustain us and lead us through our life of faith.

John's gospel is the only one of the gospels that tells us the story of the wedding in Cana, placing it as the first act of public expression Jesus' ministry as he begins his journey to the cross. It is a story of the generous abundance of hospitality given to the

guests, about the abundance of God's love poured out for us way beyond our imaginings. While we wonder if Jesus is being a bit rude to his mother and raise eyebrows these days at the amount of alcohol up for consumption, I think we are being asked to concentrate on the reason for the party and the joyous moment that is being celebrated. The abundance of God's love shown to us in the person Jesus born among us, love personified – and that in coming face to face with this act of covenant, we are to celebrate and be exuberant, over the top even at the presence of what we know as Cana Grace. I came across a delightful quote that says: *God does not want our religion to be too holy in to be happy in.* (That is a quote from Robert Brearly) John too is reminding us that it does no harm to be giddy with delight from time to time.

So let us continue with unpacking our understanding of Covenantal Love. And see where it fits with our relationships with each other.

Our call to worship challenges us to understand that God's covenantal love is pre-emptive and unshakeable – no matter what we do and who we are, where we have been or where we try to go, we are loved. The love exists for all the world and it will not be broken. It shows us that we too can love in this way – not conditionally or sceptically or selectively but with generous abundance of heart.

So this is where the marriage analogy needs some work for our time. I would suggest that 'marriage' is intrinsically about the deep abiding love that exists between two people and their commitment to each other before God and family. That it is more than a fancy ceremony or a legal union or a party. That God's love welcomes all, scripture analogizes this love with marriage and so who are we to deny that. We could sum it up by saying that marriage is about character not container.

I want to share a story with you – no names or places – a story of deep, unshakeable love that brings me to tears. A couple who both didn't quite fit as individuals into our world, who found each other as young adults, whose relationship survived the incredibly difficult decision for one to transgender, who together braved the world and took their family along with them, who had the most amazing wedding full of joy and hope, where apprehension became delight and laughter, where love outshone uncertainty and difference became home and hearth. These two created some of the most awe inspiring examples of love and courage and sheer beauty for those that know them, gave a new meaning to tenacity in the face of prejudice, they proudly said that they each made the other better and were the exemplar of generous love for not just each other but for those in need. Just a few weeks ago we heard a story of enthusiastic and extravagant gifting to struggling families. On Friday, after a 6 year battle with cancer, one of this couple died – too soon, too hard, so unfair, and the pain hurts, really really hurts, yet their love will endure, their influence continue to inspire, their memories continue to nurture.

I think their story is a much more helpful metaphor to use for our understanding what God's covenantal love is all about, a love that will never let us go and will inspire us to seek the best in the most difficult and make the world a better place.

Covenantal love is about character not container. About who we are in relationship, about trust and grace and abundance of unconditional love. Not about containing and excluding.

We currently have church communities that seek to define God's love by container. Some are in and some are out. The view from inside the container is by definition restricted somewhat. The ceiling is low and the windows are small. From the outside looking in, it's a dark and dubious space. From the inside looking out, fear from afar determines decisions.

But there is another way of living out the covenantal love of God – we understand it as our home – as our place of belonging where we constantly know the joy of being loved and the strength of being held in love in Christ. It's our home, it's our rest and our solace – there we are family, we embrace rather than exclude, we know people as diverse and interesting, we work out things with love and respect, we ask questions and explore the options and sit with uncertainty.

Yesterday I went to the movie *The Conclave* (very good by the way) – where one cardinal suggested that the greatest enemy of the church was certainty – that they, the church, needed to live with doubt and ambiguity – it's the pathway to wisdom.

And when it is our home, our committed relationship, when we know we belong, we not only have to raise the roof with celebration from time to time, but we also find that the familiar sometimes annoying love of family can overcome our propensity to judge from afar, to see things only through our eyes.

Think about it: if we would but understand Aotearoa as family, as belonging, then what place the terrible hurt and misunderstandings that have erupted around Te Tiriti – we would be talking around some kai, doing our mahi side by side, celebrating the relationship, whanau through and through.

I would like to finish with reminding us of the words of our psalm today:

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

The psalmist's sheer delight speaks over centuries – words that take us out of smallness and invite us into the reality of abundant Covenantal love.

Our response comes from a hymn written by Rev Doug Gay (some of you will remember his visit here some years ago) where he urges us to remember the gift of God's abundant love in which we have a deep and joyous belonging.

*Is this the way you spoke the word,
that called the darkness to be light:
is this the way you wrote the code
which shaped the fragile chain of life?*

*Are these the notes that you composed,
are these the colours you designed,
are these the stars that sang for joy,
are these the patterns of your mind?*

*Are these the lives that you inspired,
are these the faces that you love;
is this the earth you will redeem,
is this the world you came to save?*

*Then I will love the world you made.
and I will love the gift you gave,
and I will drink its beauty in,
and I will make my home in it,
and praise with joy the Maker.*

Knox Presbyterian Church, Ōtepoti Dunedin

Our vision is to see the reign of God, made known in Jesus, have a transformative effect on people's lives and on the world in which we live.



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