

## SUMMER WINE

JULY 13, 2008

This week at Friendship United we are holding the Annual Vacation Bible School. Friendship United has held this annual event for over twenty years and it has proven to be a good outreach program for the community children aged 4 – 11. Some children join the Sunday School as a result while others attend only the summer program as they are on vacation with their grandparents who live in the area.

Whatever the reason, it is good to have an opportunity to present the gospel to kids in a setting of fun and relaxation.

This year our theme is God's Big Backyard. This curriculum stresses over our five day Vacation Bible School the importance of Christians of all ages young or old to be of service to others. Each day we follow one sub-theme: Serve Family, Serve Friends, Serve Neighbours, Serve Community and Serve Jesus. These themes may sound as if serving Jesus is but one of these obligations. In fact, if truly we wish to serve Jesus, we need to do serve Jesus by serving family, friends, neighbours and the community.

To illustrate serving family, we have the story of Miriam who took care of her brother Moses. You remember the story of how Moses' mother feared for his life and put him in a basket and floated him among the bull rushes on the river Nile. Miriam watched over him each day until one day Pharaoh's daughter heard the baby's cry, located Moses and adopted him as her own son.

Now, thanks to Miriam's watchfulness and the mother's courage, Moses was safe. He went on of course to be instrumental in the Israelite escape from slavery in Egypt.

Serving friends utilizes the story of the four youth who brought their crippled friend to Jesus for healing. You recall the details: Jesus was in a house speaking to the family and to those who crowded in to the room. Four young men appeared carrying a mattress on which lay their sick friend. Clearly unable to get into the house to see Jesus, they climbed up the outside stairs to the typical house flat roof patio. There, they tore open the roof and with ropes lowered their friend to the very feet of Jesus. People got a little cranky about this interruption, not to mention the damage to the roof. However, Jesus was very touched by the faith and determination of the four young men who refused to be stopped until they could bring their needy friend for healing. Jesus heals the man because of the faith of those who loved and cared for him, his friends. Service to friends is important; these are the very people who make our life rich and meaningful.

For service to neighbours, the story used for illustration is the parable of the Good Samaritan. People around Jesus were arguing one day as to who was your neighbour? Jesus tells this powerful story: a man was traveling on the road. Suddenly, he was beaten and robbed and left for dead. A Samaritan, looked down upon by mainline people of faith of that day, was the only person who stopped to see what was needed to assist the man. All others walked quickly by and did not want to get involved. Never bothering to check out the man's religion or status in life, the Samaritan takes the man for assistance and pays for him to have the time to recover.

Jesus wanted his followers to stretch their existing limited definition of neighbour. To Jesus, the neighbour was any human being in need.

For service to the community, we have the familiar story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a small man in stature and not known to be a man who shared the wealth he had achieved by often dubious means. One day Jesus was scheduled to walk by on the road and so, being very short, Zacchaeus climbed a tree to get a better view. He also hoped in this way to be inconspicuous. Would you not know, Jesus spied him in the tree and stopped to talk to him.

He said these now famous words to him: “Zacchaeus, you come down, for I am going to your house today.” Me, Zacchaeus stutters, why me? No one wants anything to do with me and furthermore, you are a man of faith. Why would you come to my house? I am not of any importance. Furthermore, I do not know if I can face you up close. Never mind Zacchaeus, you just come down and escort me to your home. Confronted by Jesus, and overwhelmed by Jesus’ caring graciousness and directness, Zacchaeus has a change of heart. He proclaims that now he will share his good fortune and wealth with the poor in the community. Zacchaeus has never been generous before – meeting Jesus has changed him forever. This man Jesus honoured me and said I had worth in the eyes of God. How can I not respond with a grateful heart and share what I have with the community. Service to community does evoke positive response from others.

On the last day of Vacation Bible School, we speak of serving Jesus directly ourselves. Here we have the story of Peter and John who so wished to respond to Jesus’ goodness. They wanted to do right and they did believe in Jesus but like so many of us, they kept doing some things the old way and were not very proud of their efforts. But, Jesus kept his faith in them. In response to Jesus’ faith in them, they wanted to do whatever Jesus asked of them. They took great pleasure in serving their families, their neighbours, their friends and their community. However, the greatest joy came in serving Jesus himself and learning from the words and actions of Jesus. The fundamental lesson they learned was that serving others was a key way to serve Jesus.

So, these are the stories which we hope will trigger our young people to think of God and his love for us as we have seen it in Jesus. Discovering God’s overwhelming love for us is one of the great adventures in life whatever our age.

These stories by Jesus or about Jesus are of great importance to us. Jesus was a great story teller and he was able to make the complicated understood in a way Christians could remember.

Our Gospel passage today from St. Matthew speaks to our need to understand the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven often referred as well as the Kingdom of God and why striving to understand and enter into it is important.

We should note that the Kingdom of Heaven was not just the Kingdom we all hope to arrive at when we die. Rather, this Kingdom refers to the reign of the Creator God which has been in existence throughout the universe since the dawn of time. This Kingdom’s citizenship is open to all. Our role is to believe in God and place ourselves in his hands.

The Kingdom is a realization on our part of our place in God's world and the wonder of God's mercy, love and forgiveness. Our viewpoint changes when we understand and accept the special relationship with God and reach out and call it our own.

Jesus speaks often of the value and worth of the Kingdom. He tells a parable of a great treasure hidden in a field. A man discovers this treasure and quickly covers it up again so no one would rob him of it. Then he goes home, liquidates everything he has, so he can buy the field and obtain for himself its great buried treasure. This treasure was worth all of this change in his life, the selling of his properties and his prized goods. Go after that which is worth it the story tells us – take risks, be adventuresome and give everything you have to achieve your goal of the treasure. It is worth it Jesus states.

Jesus' second parable of the Kingdom of God is about another man, a merchant who is in search of fine pearls. One day he discovers a pearl beyond his imagining and he decides he must have this great treasure. So he too goes and sells everything to get this one great prize.

Seeking the kingdom of God is worth such an effort says Jesus. Seek that which is important with all your heart, soul and mind.

The third story compares the Kingdom of God to a large net which is thrown in the sea to catch fish of all kinds. When the net is full, the fishermen sort the fish into those they will keep and those they will discard. So it will be at the end of time says Jesus. The good will be separated from the bad. The bad will be cast out into eternal punishment. Jesus was consistent in describing being cast out from God's presence as the ultimate hell. To Jesus, the ultimate punishment, true hell, is to be separated forever from God.

In our Romans reading, St. Paul urges his readers and listeners to present their bodies as a pure and living sacrifice to God. In other words, do not worry about sacrificing animals to God or the good deeds we might do to try to impress God. Instead, offer yourself and all you are to God and make this gift of yourself and your journey in life your ultimate commitment to God.

He urges his church members not to **conform** to everything that is around you but to be **transformed** by the renewal of your mind.

Paul is speaking of our attitude not only to life but to our own ability to control ourselves. We need not be victims, tossed to and fro by whatever is happening around us. We decide how we will be and act even if we can not control the economy, crime, anger, war, etc. that exists all around us. Give yourself to God and he will help you live and face what is before you.

Faced with new congregations of recently converted men and women, Paul speaks of behaviour with one another. Do not prize yourself above others but recognize that each person is on a journey with God and are at different stages in their faith walk.

Recognize that each person has gifts to offer. The mosaic of the church is part of its strength and what we will find within the church which should be enriching to our own life and critical to our own faith development.

Then Paul writes one of his famous lines: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” Paul speaks regularly about our need to be as genuine as we can be. Do not try to be what you are not – your gift to the world is who you uniquely are, warts and all. Love one another sincerely and hold on to what is good. In a world of so much evil and turmoil, hold on to what you know to be true and be yourself within the circumstances you find yourself. Then he says to his readers: “Outdo one another in showing honour.” That is a tough one! Paul is saying to put your energy not in making sure you are number one, but put your efforts into honourable work and behaviour. Paul goes on: “Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord.”

I believe that Paul was indicating to new converts that being a Christian did not mean passive acceptance as victims of whatever came their way. Rather, he urges them to be proactive and alive, channeling their efforts into worthwhile activities which helped their fellow man and also pleased God. He goes on to say further: “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.”

In short, Paul urged everyone to see their life and all they are as a living sacrifice to God. Do not sit there and think you have nothing of value to offer God or the world. You are the unique gift, you are the force for good, you are the fount of love, forgiveness and joy. No one can take any of that away from you. You are the master of your behaviour.

The Kingdom of God is within you and around you. You are the pearl of great price for who Christ died and rose again. You were crafted by God at creation and God seeks a close relationship with you, an opportunity to walk with you through the good and the bad that life throws at you. And it is for you, as for the thief on the cross with Jesus, for whom Jesus prepares a place.

Summer time is a time to slow down and think through our priorities and to take stock. Some writers have called this the time of Summer Wine. Sitting back, enjoying the beauty of nature, visiting with family and friends, allowing ourselves to be recreated. Recreation comes from the concept of re-creation, a time to rebuild and commit ourselves anew to what is important.

Jesus was only too well aware that people were stressed out just by the burdens of their life. Do not be a victim to this doom and gloom he would say. Take charge of yourself and realize again what a unique creation you are. Celebrate who you are and thank God for his part in your life. Allow God to come into your heart and very soul and accept his loving forgiveness and peace.

Jesus gave people a sense of value and a sense of being valued. That is what we should hold onto as well for ourselves and for the people we come into contact throughout our busy days.

I am the way, the truth and the life said Jesus. Come unto me all you who labour and I will give you rest. It is for you I died and it is for you I came to convince you of the overwhelming love God has for you. Go and tell others, share what you know and have experienced. Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of time.  
Thanks be to God.

Rev. Gary Magarrell