

URC Youth Assembly Keynote 2 Stewart Cutler

Open Arms for Broken Hearts

It's funny where inspiration comes from. Today's keynote is brought to you courtesy of a conversation and a song. The conversation was with a friend as we sat drinking coffee and eating cakes and wondering about God.

The song came late on Monday night thanks to shuffle. I had been laughing earlier about how in the middle of my essay writing iTunes kept throwing on songs like Stuck in a Moment and An End Has A Start. It was like it knew I was struggling to get the essay finished. My Mac was mocking me.

But then came Elbow. I like Elbow. I know they aren't everyone's musical cup of whatever but I like them. So there.

More important than my musical taste, the song that came on, Open Arms, seemed appropriate for today. You'll be glad to know that I have no intention of singing it but the words will appear and we might end with it if I shut up in time.

It's a song about a returning prodigal son, sort of. I know that's not the story we are talking about today in small groups or in worship but hopefully you'll see where I'm going with this...

So, the song begins:

*You're a law unto yourself
And we don't suffer dreamers
But neither should you walk the earth alone*

*So with finger rolls and folding chairs
And a volley of streamers
We can be there for tweaks and repairs
Should you come back home*

*We got open arms for broken hearts
Like yours my boy, come home again*

There comes a point where the Gospel is presented in all its simplicity and complexity. For me it is in John's Gospel when Jesus says:

Love one another as I have loved you.

It's that simple... and that complicated.

Jesus asks his disciples to do just one thing. Obey his commands. But perhaps, like us, the disciples didn't quite get it?

Perhaps the conversation went a little like this...

And they asked Jesus,
'What shall we do when you are gone?'

And he asked them,
'What have I asked of you?'

And they asked Jesus,
'You have asked many things of us.'

And he asked then,
'Well tell me what you remember.'

'Well we remember the loaves and fish and the 5,000 fed,

A vine and the branches and the bearing of fruit

We remember the daughter 'asleep' then woken and eating and at the same time the bleeding woman, renewed in community.

Then there was the beaten up man taking the Samaritan's help, the tables being turned and the poor being set free

And the woman in adultery sinning no more

There was the calling of the fishers onto a journey unknown

Sending of twelve with only faith as their staff

You talked of being salt and the light in a world too cosy

Throwing tables about in the Temple

There was walking on water and the call to step out

The breaking of bread and the sharing of promise

We remember the parable of sowing and a harvest of plenty

There was the time they tried to throw you off a cliff in Nazareth and questions about miracles

The faith of a woman who ate from the crumbs

And so much more.'

And Jesus said to the disciples,
'You have remembered well.'

And the disciples said to Jesus,
'But what is your command when you are gone?'

And he said to them,
'Go and live out these stories again and again. Make yourself at home in my love. That's it. That's my root command.'

We can, and do, argue about what Jesus means when he speaks. We can, and do, discuss the deeper meaning of parables and sayings. We can, and should, debate how the Bible informs how we should live. But what seems to me to be beyond debate is that Jesus is really very clear about what he expects from his followers. Love one another. If you love each other then you love me.

That seems so simple doesn't it? Love each other.

But we are human. Loving doesn't come easy to us. We can all love people who love us back. We can all love those who are like us. What is hard for us is to love those who aren't like us. It is hard for us to love people who won't love us back. It's hard for us to love people when there is nothing in it for us.

It's hard for us to go beyond our boundaries.

*Tables are for pounding here
And when we've got you surrounded
The man you are will know the boy you were*

*And you're not the man who fell to earth
You're the man of La Mancha
And we've love enough to light the street
'Cause everybody's here*

*We got open arms for broken hearts
Like yours my boy, come home again*

Isn't that the way of life? The man or woman you are will always know the boy or girl you were.

It's a fact that sometimes the hardest person to love and forgive is our self. The people we have been are always with us. It's hard to love other people when we're not even that sure we can love ourselves or that God could possibly love us.

And yet that's what we read in the Bible. Again and again we read of the followers of Christ being challenged to love those outsiders, to love those who aren't like us, to love those who are different; lepers, prostitutes, the sick, the possessed, the blind and the lame. And it's not just a challenge to love people who are outcast in our societies. The followers of Jesus were challenged to love Samaritans and Gentiles. The exiles in Babylon were challenged to think that God could be the God of their captors too.

In short, God's love has no boundaries. No matter how we might want to limit God's love we are challenged in the same way that the disciples were. Every time we come up against people we find hard to love we need to remind ourselves of Jesus commandment, love one another.

But we are human. Surely that can't be right? Surely Jesus means we just need to love each other?

And yet when we read again that list of stories and sayings we see exactly what Jesus means.

We remember the loaves and fish and the 5,000 fed, people who had turned up to hear Jesus. They had walked for miles and brought no food. Idiots.

The vine and the branches and the bearing of fruit. But surely that means people like us? Those others, how can they bear fruit?

We remember the daughter 'asleep' then woken and eating and at the same time the bleeding woman, renewed in community. Yes but that was different.

Then there was the beaten up man taking the Samaritan's help, but there are people who just don't deserve our help.

The tables being turned and the poor being set free. They should get a job, stop sitting about all day. That would set them free.

And the woman in adultery sinning no more, well as far as we know. A leopard doesn't change its spots!

There was the calling of the fishers onto a journey unknown. But it's not like they gave up much is it. Fishing was hardly a decent job with big prospects.

And so we go on. We find so many excuses not to love people. That's because love costs more. Love means giving of ourselves. Love means caring. Love means being open to being changed by people we least expect.

*Everyone's here
Everyone's here
The moon is out looking for trouble
And everyone's here*

The song is about a man returning to his hometown, the place he had been a boy. Years have passed since he was last here and he's different. He's come back home with a reputation to a place where everyone knew him. Some liked him, some didn't.

Everyone's here. Such a human experience. Never quite knowing how people will react, how things will work out. We all know these events. A wedding, a birthday, a Youth Assembly, or whatever the occasion, there's

always a bit of tension. Who will turn up? I hope they don't come... Who does she think she is? I wonder what the story is with him is?

Nowhere to hide. No anonymity here. People know you. People know me.

Do you ever wonder about the disciples? I mean they were hardly the brightest or the best, were they? Fishermen, tax collectors, political activists...

I wonder how Matthew and Simon got on. Matthew was a tax collector. He worked for the Romans. People hated the tax collectors. They were dishonest and they collaborated with the occupying force. Simon was a Zealot. The Zealots were an extremist political movement who wanted revolution. Can you imagine these two ever being friends?

I can imagine Jesus telling them to sit next to each other at dinner. I can imagine the tension.

What about James and John or Peter and Andrew? Two sets of brothers, and we all know that brothers get on with each other all the time... I wonder if Andrew was annoyed that Peter got all the attention?

Everyone's here
Everyone's here
The moon wants a scrap or a cuddle
And everyone's here

What's it going to be? Are you going to see the good in each other or let the difference, jealousy, fear and anger consume you?

It's a question we can ask ourselves every day. What's it going to be? A scrap or a cuddle? Loathing or loving?

Jesus left us one instruction. Just one.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

We have a choice. We can remain or not. We can obey or not. We can follow or not. We can love or not.

To choose not to moves us away from the life God wants for us. It doesn't make God love us any less but it makes us less loving. From the very beginning this whole project has been a partnership between God and us. God gave us this world and let us name it and build it and grow it and look after it, just as He has given us this church to name and build and grow and look after.

We know which is the better way...

I wonder if the refrain of the song should be the refrain of our church?

*We got open arms for broken hearts
Like yours my child, come home again*

Love one another as I have loved you. Follow me and I will make you fish for people. We'll have open arms for broken hearts, like yours my child, come home again.

Let's pray:

Vine grower
Grape crusher
Love maker
Hear us
a new community
here because of love
and no other

God mould in us
a new community
beyond what culture shapes in us
further than what denomination calls us to
more than just 'of the moment'
May we turn from the fears these bring
confessing the pain that has gone with them
and recreate a new community
chosen by you
lived by us

God, mould in us
a new community
that has no common goal other than love
that proclaims no single message other than love
one reason for being
one language
called love

And may we turn from the fears these bring
confessing the pain that has gone with them
and recreate a new community
chosen by you
live by us

God, mould in us
a new community
that does not select but accepts

that does not define but affirms
without limit

And may we turn from the fears these bring
confessing the pain that has gone with them
and recreate a new community
chosen by you
lived by us
now
forever
named by love
that endures.
Amen.