

6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Revd. Cara Heafey, Associate Minister, Summertown URC



Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: JOHN 15:9-17

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

REFLECT:

Yesterday evening I listened to an interview with a man from Alabama named Ray Hinton. His is a powerful story. An innocent man, he was wrongfully and spuriously convicted of murder and sentenced to death. The detectives on the case, the jury, the judge, none were interested in the fact that he had a solid alibi for the time of the crime, or that there was no evidence linking him to the victim or the event. His only "crime," it seems, was being a black man in the south.

Ray spent 30 years in prison, 28 of these on death row. For the first 2 years he was angry with God and in protest refused to speak a word to anyone. His 2 years of silent fury were broken

by compassion: his cell-mate was weeping and Ray asked, "what's wrong?" The man replied that he had just got word that his mother had died. Ray forgot himself and tried to comfort his grieving companion. As he did so it dawned on him how grateful he was for his own mother, whose love he described as "unconditional."

Ray also experienced unconditional love from an incredible friend, Lester, who had been his buddy since childhood. Lester drove a 6-hour round trip every week without fail to visit Ray, making the journey after finishing his night shift. Somehow, love broke Ray open. It became a kind of calling to do all he could to ensure that the prisoners he saw being taken past his cell to the death chamber were shown love, unconditional love, something some of them had lived their whole lives up until that point without ever knowing. He led the other prisoners in creating a ruckus of noise, banging on anything to hand, to ensure that the individual would still hear his friends' love for him on the other side of those terrible doors.

Finally Ray's own cause was taken up by a tenacious lawyer, his case reopened, his conviction overturned and he was released. He might have been a bitter man. 30 years of his life, and much else besides, had been stolen from him. But hearing him speak I was left with an impression of a man filled with irrepressible gratitude and joy.

Since his release Ray has dedicated himself to campaigning for the abolition of the death penalty. There is nothing a human can do, Ray believes, that would put them beyond the reach of love. Through those who loved him back to life Ray discovered and now exudes the unconditional love of God.

I know this is a rather long story, but it seems to illustrate beautifully these words of Jesus from John's Gospel.

I remember at one time feeling puzzled and frustrated by Jesus' love commandment. How can love be commanded? I could understand being commanded to be gentle or patient; these things can potentially be accomplished through self-discipline and sheer act of will. But love? Love is a spontaneous, unbidden thing. Love is a response.

And therein lies the solution. Jesus tells his followers repeatedly, "abide in my love". If we think we have to earn God's love by being loving ourselves, we have it all back to front. God's love for us is unconditional. When we learn this, when we lean into it, when we live in it, love begets love. Just like last week's picture of the vine and the branches, it's God's love that resources and enables us to love. It was God's love, mediated by Lester and his mother, that enabled Ray to love. May we too abide in and be bearers of love.

PRAY:

There's a beautiful line in a prayer from the Iona community that comes to mind (it's from 'Evening Liturgy B' in *A Wee Worship Book*). The intercessions begin, "Let us say a prayer for those who need to be remembered tonight:" and then a number of 'headings' are listed, among them:

Those who need to forget / the God they do not believe in / and meet the God who believes in them...

Let this be a prompt for our prayers today.