

God calls us for a greater gift of love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 12 February 2023

A Reflection by Rev Alimoni Taumoepeau

Epiphany 6A

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Matthew 5: 21-37

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

“So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” Matthew 5:23-24, NRSV

We are living in a world where God is seen as irrelevant and non-existent, and if there is any space to raise the issue, then God is identified as old fashioned, right-wing, judgmental and distanced.

God in Jesus has revealed what God is like and has called us for a greater gift of love. Jesus in this part of the Sermon on the Mount seems to raise the bar for behaviour and conduct that seems impossible to live out as human beings.

And the good news is: we can all be salt of the earth and light of the world, by living life as Jesus did, and the world then will know who God is and what God is like.

Our Christianity should not drive us by fear that we have to do the right thing; otherwise God would not accept or love us. We live and act out of what God is like. We act righteously because God acts righteously. We love because God is love and we accept others because God accepts us.

This revelation of God is truly in our texts for this morning; you and I are called for a greater gift of love. Our lifestyle will reveal our faith in God. Let's learn what this may look like:

CONCERNING BEING FULLY, GENUINELY, GLORIOUS, HUMAN

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Matthew 5:21-22, NRSV

Jesus was quoting from one of the Ten Commandments: *You shall not murder!* When we read this we often hear it as someone telling us what to do. We rarely take notice; it was God referring to God-self as one who does not tolerate murder.

And Jesus wants to get into the heart of it all. *"I say to you if you are angry at a brother or sister, you are liable to judgement."*

Interestingly, in Scriptures, it teaches that there is righteous anger: The kind of anger that I see members of Pitt Street is exercising through the advocacy work of ARRCC.

Angry at injustices against the vulnerable, the poor and the refugees. By their anger, they stand up to be the voice for the voiceless. This is what God is like, standing for justice for refugees, for the poor and marginalised, and for climate justice in this country and in the world.

Jesus was not talking here about righteous anger. Instead, he talks about bad habit or conduct that we allow to form inside us against another. Those from a sense of insecurity and wanting to be in control that churns inside you when someone cuts you in a conversation or in front of a queue, or in a slow traffic before or after work.

That creates an intimidation that often bubbles up and suddenly outburst into saying words like "You fools! Who do think you are? Don't you know who you are dealing with? Then it escalates to "I'll show you where you belong!" Furthermore, "turning the hands that hold together to a fist that blows apart."

Mark Twain shared how this inward habit or conduct harms us human beings:

"Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured." (Mark Twain)

And the wisdom of Solomon agrees with the harm and problems such indwelling can create or put our lives into:

"An angry person starts fights; a hot-tempered person commits all kinds of sin."
Proverbs 29:22, NLT

It was to this unlawful end that Jesus wishes to show us what God is like: never to let anger control the best out of you. Rather, to be truly human, let us practice being reconciled and make friends to each other as quickly as you and I could. Especially when we notice these internal relational issues begins to confront us.

These are easy to say, but so difficult to do. It may cost us everything: our time, our sense of pride, our whole life to offer a greater gift of love. The kind of love shows what God is like: love your neighbour as yourself.

At a meeting on zoom, a friend of mine keep cuts into what I say or try to say. I felt intimidated and unrespected. I did not realise that I was switch off by muting, not only as I needed to, but I was angry. Until one of the members of the meeting notice and ask on chat if I am alright, as I was not contributing.

I wrote back: *"I'm OK!"* But the truth was, I was not OK.

After the meeting I find it difficult to work. So, I called my friend and invite myself for a coffee. I postponed my next meeting, and we went for a flat white and latte. I soon found out that my friend had an irritating situation started from home; he had a near accident on his way to work with a bike who cuts him on the road, and he did not realise he was giving it to me.

He apologised for being disrespectful and asked for forgiveness. I apologise too, for being so quiet and unresponsive in the meeting because I was angry. We reconcile and our friendship became stronger as a result as we share a greater gift of love.

CONCERNING THOSE WE VALUE THE MOST

"When you make a promise, say only "Yes" or "No." Anything else comes from the devil."
Matthew 5:37, CEV

As a divorcee myself and remarried I was reluctant to talk about this teaching of Jesus. But the more I think and pray about it: I realise Jesus was teaching a very important principle about committing ourselves to honour with high regard to relationship that we value the most. I was drawn to the fact that the divorce teaching was between two very challenging practices: adultery, and being truthful in making promises.

As I reflected on the words of Jesus, I was asking the question whether what breaks a lot of relationships is one or both people were unfaithful to each other in allowing our focus to wander freely, where our sense of trust and honesty to one another is put into a secret basket, until in recognition it's out of our control.

When saying, men should not look at women as sex objects, we know as a country, as well as churches that too many women, children and men too are being exploited in such degrading and abusive way. God was against that, and so should we. As truly human as we should, we regard one another with honour and respect as Jesus would.

Addressing adultery, the kind of lifestyle that inflicts exploiting the other by taking advantage of them. Something that Jesus turns upside down by sharing that the gift of love is about giving away ourselves so that others find, in and among us, their dignity and their value. Illustrating this I wish to show what God is like:

"It happened that as he made his way toward Jerusalem, he crossed over the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men, all lepers, met him. They kept their distance but raised their voices, calling out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Taking a good look at them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." They went, and while still on their way, became clean." Luke 17:11-14, Msg.

When I read this story, I cried. This is what God is like. Jesus gave these individuals their humanity. He grants them gifts of great love, not only for the church to testify by the priest celebrating their dignity, but the whole community to give them the value due to them.

That is our call, that is our mission, that whenever we gather as a community of faith, when we meet people where they are at, they walk away finding and experiencing what God is like in this space - among each of the members of Pitt Street Uniting Church.

Our story is our life with God, both in our action and our words. The way we treat each other will only show the kind of God we believe in.

The one in whom our trust is put, so is the gift of love we dare to give. Let's commit ourselves to be salt of the earth, and light of the world.

In the name of God the Mother and Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.