

LIVED EXPERIENCES

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 30 July 2023

A Reflection by Helen Boerma and Meredith Knight

Pentecost 9 A

Romans 8: 26-39; Matthew 13: 1 3 verses 31-33, 44-52

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

HELEN EXPERIENCING CHANGE

Today's gospel reading offers

- Seeds, which have unlimited potential to become flourishing trees, which offer sanctuary.
- A trace of yeast which disappears into the dough, and expands a loaf of bread,
- A small treasure buried in a large field, or a small pearl of great price, for which a person would want to give up everything.
- A net which a person casts wide to draw in fish.

It is yet another reading about parables, this week with further metaphors.

Recently, our minister Jo and later our guest speaker Rev Hee Won Chang, have given us insights into Jesus' parables. Hopefully through each of our eyes, there are yet further things to glimpse in God's imagination. One Sunday in June, I was touched by a conversation with some of our older church friends.

I had attended church via zoom, and afterwards joined the shared community chat on zoom. The conversation turned to memories shared by Bruce Irvine and Shirley Maddox, who had contributed to, and been affected by, formation of the Uniting Church in 1977. For example, they spoke with pleasure about the movement of women into leadership roles, and the shift over time towards affirming our LGBTQI+ brothers and sisters, and how these developments had enriched their lives. Insights from this conversation shed light on what Jesus called the Kindom of Heaven.

In Jesus' time, when he spoke in parables, his people were subject to the Empire of Caesar. Some people held positions of privilege, while others were relegated to living as outsiders, in fear or oppression. To some extent we are all tangled up in systems and social structures. Aspects of those systems may serve the well-being of individuals and groups. However, for many reasons, systems and structures can go wrong. Then aspects of those systems can devalue, disadvantage, dismiss, dispose of, or damage the lives of individuals and groups, human and other, and our environment.

When those systems and structures disconnect us from ourselves and one another, Jesus' offered that there is another Realm present right now in our midst. We understand that many people who heard him at that time were drawn to a vision which led them to leave all that they had previously held as secure.

So too, we are encouraged to be co-creators of a world that does not yet exist.

In the zoom conversation, I was inspired by how the elder members of our community contributed to changes in the dominant culture of the time. Bruce Irvine for example, described himself as having been a conservative Christian bloke, and with a wry smile, he identified as now a slightly less conservative Christian bloke. He spoke about the movement of women into leadership roles.

Bruce said that he is still excited, 46 years later, by how that has transformed our church! Although he added that he does wonder if some women in the UCA don't yet experience this inclusion. Bruce said that the people who drafted the Basis of Union (late 60s early 70s) worked hard to ensure the possibility that lay people could exercise ministry in as many forms as possible. And that ALL forms of ministry would be equally open to women and men.

One result of this mindset was that the regulations required that the membership of every Council of the church must be at least one third women. Bruce admitted that he, like many other men, believed it was obvious that this would never work. We could never find enough women who had the gifts and the spare time to make themselves available. However, he and others accepted the advice to do their best to comply.

Lo and behold, Bruce said, they discovered heaps of intelligent, theologically aware, eloquent women in every congregation, who were elected to the various councils in such numbers that after a few years the regulation had to be amended to: "*membership of every Council of the church must be at least one third women and one third men*".

In the late 1980's, Bruce became a Moderator in the Uniting Church. In the same recent zoom conversation, Shirley Maddox spoke with pleasure about various changes she had witnessed. Like Bruce, Shirley served as a Moderator of the church.

During this time in the 1990s, Shirley and others experienced a huge resistance to a shift towards affirming our LGBTQI+ sisters and brothers. Shirley found it enormously difficult as some whole congregations reacted by leaving the Uniting Church. Following a pattern of consensus decision-making, Shirley chaired many meetings in times of great debate. Shirley explained that in this model, everyone gets a turn to speak, and no one would be called to speak twice until everyone had spoken once. Shirley recalled that in those meetings, people treated one another with great care and respect.

Shirley has memories of travelling widely across the country listening to the circumstances and concerns of many communities. She also was grateful for the way more and more diverse people had found a home among us here at Pitt Street, enriching our lives in surprising ways. I think Jesus wanted to lead his audience to glimpse a vision of life flourishing like this.

What do the experiences of our elders, and the parables in today's Gospel reading suggest to us about the Kindom of Heaven? Is it conceived primarily as a program of social action? Or it is primarily about what happens within a person? It seems to me that the Kindom is both in here, out there and more. For example,

- In the parable about the hidden treasure, the kindom is likened to the treasure. It is the thing that is found.

- In the parable about the pearl, the kingdom is likened to the merchant who searches and finds the pearl. In one, the kingdom is the object, in the next it is the subject.
- Then, the kingdom is likened to the fishing net cast wide, which suggests that the kingdom is reaching out and seeks us, individually and collectively.

So the kingdom seems to be something we seek, and something we are, and something that is seeking us.

Bruce said that with the emergence of the Uniting Church, he had been inspired to change the church. But in the end, he said, The Church changed me.

Social scientists, such as Brene Brown, talk about how human connection is central to everything. Shame, based in belief that we are not good enough, is the fear of losing that connection. However, it seems to me that Jesus offers a life-changing treasure. It is life-changing to discover that, despite having limitations or flaws, or despite what the values of the dominant culture say about us, each of us is nevertheless worthy of love.

We are enough. We can flourish.

This discovery can be like finding a pearl of great price. Finding this treasure can motivate us to give up all that we have considered certain and secure, to extend this deep respect to others and to our world. These parables offer encouragement for our times.

The shifts experienced by our elders are far from complete in every Uniting Church community. But hopefully the seeds of change will extend beyond all our lifetimes.

Though small or hidden, God's Realm is nevertheless still here and still at work, like a tree still offering a place that supports life rather than destroys it, or bread which nourishes.

Paul Kelly sings, *"From little things, big things grow."*

Oscar Wilde said: *To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people just exist.*

With the older friends here at Pitt Street, I feel gratitude to hear them speak with openness and pleasure about changes of vision they had witnessed and contributed to, which will continue beyond all our lifetimes.

Our respected elders recognise that by opening our communities to a greater breadth of human experience, their vision of God and life had brought them to see things ever afresh, expanded and enriched.

People do search, find and celebrate.

Meredith, who is speaking next, also has a story to tell, which is a beautiful illustration of this.

In this reflection, I am focusing on the last two verses from today's theologically rich passage from Romans; "*For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depths—nor anything else in all creation—will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Saviour*"

The Apostle Paul said for I am persuaded that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Why was Paul so convinced?

Following Paul's encounter with the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus he suffered many horrendous things for the sake of the gospel. Paul was jailed and beaten many times, his life was in constant danger, he'd gone hungry and thirsty and was cold from not having enough clothes. Yet Paul was convinced that nothing could separate him from God's love.

Paul knew that regardless of his life circumstances and his own failings, that nothing could separate him from the love of God. Paul had a revelation that since the beginning God had loved him and nothing could ever change that, not even death; Paul was later martyred in Rome.

Paul was giving this message about God's love to a small community in Rome, who styled themselves – rather as we do – as '*People of the Way*'. However, he was under no illusion that the love of God makes for an easy life. Like Paul, these followers of Jesus, lived with the constant threat of persecution for their beliefs. Paul built up this and many other early Christian communities – by his witness to the love of God in his life.

In my own life, I experience God's love most potently within community. Community which is the basis of Christian life. Within community I have experienced the most profound acceptance, grace, love and connection with God. In Christian community we are called by God to strive to always be the best that we can be, acknowledging that as fallible, imperfect human beings, we can and do fall short and yet, God's love remains constant.

I am blessed to be a member of two church communities where I powerfully experience God's love: this congregation, which has been my spiritual home for nearly 40 years, and the congregation of Metropolitan Community Church. Within these communities, I have found a safe place to be authentically human, with all my strengths and failings, and to live fully as a loved child of God.

Metropolitan Community Church "MCC" is a universal ecumenical denomination whose primary outreach is to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

It was in MCC where I had my "Damascus" experience, and I would like to share this personal experience with you to illustrate today's text and how it informed my theological understanding.

It was 1976 and I was a deeply troubled 15-year-old. I had been raised in a Christian home and my family attended our local Methodist church where I went to Sunday school. In 1973, when I was 12, my parents separated after a tumultuous marriage and from then on, my life gradually fell apart.

The next three years included bullying and ostracism at school, truancy, under-age drinking, self-harm, sexual abuse and other unsafe behaviour. In Year 9, I was sent by a child psychiatrist to “Pallister”, a small school in Greenwich on Sydney’s north shore, for dysfunctional adolescents; most of whom were juvenile offenders (not me). This all occurred as result a low self-esteem and self-loathing.

I also felt very alone and very isolated. Into this mix came a dawning awareness that I was a lesbian, which further compounded my feelings of isolation and dejection. I talked to my Methodist minister, and he told me that it was a “stage” I was going through and would grow out of. 47 years is a very long stage! The minister told me that homosexuality was a sin and trotted out those all too familiar biblical texts which are often well-meaning. But, in my opinion, misguided fundamentalist Christians use them to justify their position.

As a result, I believed that I was a hopeless sinner, and that God didn’t love me anymore. I felt that I didn’t deserve God’s love. Nowhere existed in my life where I felt safe, and I became deeply depressed. I blamed myself for everything that was happening to me.

And then, thank God, I found MCC and, in so doing, my “safe” place. Entering MCC on that November night in 1976, aged 15, changed my life. The love and compassion that I found in MCC was beyond my imagining. I had never experienced anything like it. People understood because they had been there too, they listened to me, and they genuinely cared, and my troubled soul found succour.

That first night, when the time came for Holy Communion, I went up the front and knelt at the communion rail and as the pastor prayed with me, in that instant, I knew with absolute assurance, God’s unconditional, all-encompassing love for me. The peace of Christ flooded my wounded soul.

I distinctly remember that we sang that wonderful hymn of Charles Wesley, *And Can It Be* which is one of my favourites. That hymn spoke to me powerfully of redemptive love and releasing the chains of an imprisoned spirit.

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; my chains fell off,
my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.*

That night, the “clanking” chains, some of my own making, some made by others, fell away and I arose from the communion rail renewed and restored. Two months later, on 18 January 1977, my father was killed in the Granville Train Disaster whilst travelling to work. I will always be grateful for the outpouring of love and support that I received from my MCC family.

I was to learn in MCC, that the life of a Christian is not one that is to be spent snug and secure within the confines of church buildings, surrounded by those with whom we share a common fellowship. God’s love, exemplified through the life and ministry of Jesus, calls us out of our comfort zones into the highways and by-ways of life with Christ, sharing God’s love.

Especially with those who are most in need, those most desperate to hear of a God who loves them beyond imagining, with those who are most marginalised, most excluded, most irritating, most angry, most reprehensible, most unworthy, least acceptable by the world’s standards.

In his autobiography, Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson, tells us that: *“A church is more than a mutual admiration society. It exists for more than itself. If we are followers of Christ, we need to go where Christ is – which, as the Gospel tells us, is always with the poor, the dispossessed, and the marginalised. Robinson states: Will our “inreach” to one another be the security blanket we hold on to for comfort, or will our loving community give us the confidence and courage to engage in “outreach” to those who most need to hear that they too are loved by God?”*

If we truly embody the love of Christ, it will spill over into our lives and enrich all those around us. God’s love is not just for the church, it encompasses all of humanity, without exception, and beyond humanity to the earth and all Her creatures. Everything comes into God’s ambit of love, and we are God’s messengers of love.

This was Paul’s vision for the church, eloquently expressed in his letter to the Corinthians, which states that whatever we do, we are to do it through love; selfless love, love which is directed to the well-being of the other, love which does not seek anything in return. This type of love, agape love, sees the need of the one whom God loves and endeavours to meet that need without regard for circumstances – or personal risk or cost, for the sake of the other, for the sake of God’s beloved.

In the less enlightened 1970s and early 80s, Metropolitan Community Church embodied the kind of Christ-like service that Jesus calls us to. Many of our members had been deeply wounded by mainstream Christians so it was tempting to wrap the security blanket of our loving community around us. However, we were aware, that we too were called to costly discipleship, so we had various ministries that reached out beyond the church community.

We had absolutely no idea what costly discipleship meant, however, until the H.I.V./AIDS epidemic hit Sydney in 1983 destroying countless lives as it did all over the world. Due to societal attitudes towards the gay community at that time, MCC was one of the few places that those affected by this pernicious virus could turn to for support. The need was often overwhelming, but God was faithful to us and when our resources and spirits were low, we were always provided with what was needed.

I was a lay deacon at the time and the pastoral team which consisted of 6 men and me, the youngest at age 22, drew encouragement and strength from the promises of God to us in the scriptures such as from Isaiah *“Even youths will faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint”*.

Through ministering to those who were living and dying with HIV/AIDS, my MCC friends and I caught a glimpse of what Christ-like service really means, and through it all, we were held in the infinite ocean of God’s love.

In conclusion, to return to the words of Paul and adding my own descriptors: *“nothing can separate us from the love of God: not HIV/AIDS or COVID, not homophobia or transphobia, not physical disability or mental or physical illness, not addiction, nor religious piety, poor theology, persecution, broken relationships. shattered dreams, nor our own failings, self-doubt or lack of faith”*.

The point is - nothing can separate us from the love of God. God’s transforming love reaches into the darkest corners of human existence and all creation bringing liberty, hope and renewal.

Thanks be to God – Amen