

Pitt Street Uniting Church
Carers Sunday- 12 October 2025

A Reflection by Dr Elizabeth Watson
Gospel - Gospel of Luke 17:11-19 - Care and Gratitude

Carers Sunday

October is an unusual month in our liturgical calendar. It falls in the latter half of the Season of Pentecost - that long series of weeks and months of Sunday services of worship from Pentecost itself, and Trinity Sunday, through to the Reign of Christ and the beginning of Advent. With Advent we commence the beginning of a new liturgical season and indeed a new liturgical year.

But in October we have also chosen to focus almost the entire month on topics of contemporary concern. October is Mental Health Month with the first Sunday especially set aside for that focus. The second Sunday is Carer's Sunday and marks the beginning of Carers' Week.

Today our focus is on care, and on carers. Many of you will be familiar with the official definition of a carer as anyone who cares **unpaid**, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction, cannot cope without their support. That is the focus of Carers' Sunday and Carers' Week.

Care and all aspects of this multifaceted and deeply grounded concept has, seemingly suddenly, come into prominence. Have you noticed? Our splendid Governor General Sam Moyston, on the occasion of the Official Opening of the Parliament following the most recent election, actually chose to devote her entire address to the assembled MPs and Senators to the concept and practice of care. What a wonderful occasion that was and how extraordinary to have our head of state focusing on care in all its manifestations. One might perhaps call that wider focus, Care with a capital 'C'.

However, when I began researching caring work, there was almost no recognition of this central concept and practice at any level of government or even in the wider community. And certainly, no real awareness or carers and caring work taking place in the so-called domestic sphere, in the home. I wouldn't usually begin a reflection with a focus on myself and my academic research efforts and what lay behind that work. But it does explain why you see

me, up here, reflecting this morning on care and carers. And so, I am indulging myself, so to speak, but also presuming on your tolerance and patience.

But to the history of that research work and its focus.... Back in the 1980s my academic colleague, Jane, and I became more and more aware of numbers of our students needing an extension on an essay submission date, or more dramatically, needing to drop a subject that semester. It became clear that many of these requests could be explained by an increasing load on the home front, on responsibilities to care not simply for children but also for parents or grandparents, or both. If married, then in-laws often became part of the equation. Some of our students needed to keep up a certain number of hours of paid work. Their families depended on that income.

So, when the Federal Government agency, The Office for the Status of Women, advertised that they were making available funding to undertake research on women and women's lives, Jane and I decided to apply for research on carers. We entitled it 'Women in the Middle'. I wrote the submission and Jane did the costing. We were one of 5 applications that were successful. We were elated and very excited. I am not going to fill you in on the details of our research methods except to say that we proposed to interview carers themselves, in some detail. The epistemological underpinnings of such research are a source of great interest to a few other people in this congregation but...

To speak plainly we recorded the stories of carers. And then analysed those detailed personal accounts.

A decade later we were able to gain funding, also from Canberra, to do research on working carers and later still, and independently I undertook similar research examining the experience of men caring for wives with MS. Many of you will be aware that more women suffer from MS than men. There has not been much research done on male carers for a whole range of reasons, but the most critical one is that by and large the greater bulk of unpaid caring work is undertaken by women. Were there parallels? Did male carers find themselves in similar circumstances? What if any were the differences?

As we were undertaking our research here in NSW, not surprisingly we discovered others also interested in doing research on care and carers, in other parts of Australia and across the world. Especially in UK. And of course, publishing the results of their own research. Lots to be learnt from reading widely.

And it is always important to note the limitations of one's research and I do so here. As researchers we need to acknowledge the implications of those limitations whether they be ethical, or financial or the sheer pressures of time and the need to produce a reliable income. But in the case of research examining the lives of carers, we are undertaking research of only one half of the caring relationship. And my research has recorded only one side, so to speak, of this relationship and not the other. The other half, the perspectives of those receiving care, is not the primary focus. Sometimes that perspective is difficult to obtain – in dementia care for example. But it is a very significant limitation, nevertheless.

But I thought that I would frame our consideration of carers and caring work by recounting a few of the stories I've listened to over the year. Much of what is revealed will be immediately recognisable to others. Each of you could add your own stories and insights. Caring is both a universal experience and a very particular and personal experience. This is a mere glimpse.

I wanted to begin this brief exploration with the recognition that care is a doing word. The notion that one might attempt to care in some removed, abstract sense, makes no sense. Care and caring are a practice.

From that flows so much of what constitutes 'caring' in all its dimensions or aspects. It may be surprising to some of you that in the interviews I have conducted with carers over the years there was little explicit talk about love, indeed there was sometimes a recognition that love was not a part of the relationship or was no longer present - that at least was how it was expressed to me. I've selected 3 of the many stories that have remained with me.

The first of a woman who was an only child. Her arrival in the world was unexpected and, on the part of the mother, not exactly welcomed, as this woman was constantly reminded growing up. The mother, in her widowhood, had come to live with her daughter and her daughter's female partner. The mother was beginning to dement. She became even more difficult and negative. Nothing was good enough. She strongly disapproved of her daughter's partner and the nature of their relationship. This was difficult stuff. The daughter related how driving home from the hospital -

she was a nurse - she would often pull over to the side of the road just before her home, and sit in the car and cry, sometimes howl. Then she would gather herself together and continue home. When in the interview she summarised her caring and why she had taken on this responsibility, she said...

“You know, Liz, my mother is not a nice person. I don’t love her. But she is old and lonely and frightened, and she has as much right to proper care and a sense of security at this point in her life as anyone else. So of course I am caring for her.”

The second, another woman also caring for a mother who was frail and lonely and also slowing dementing, said, looking directly at me...

“I know it sounds awful, but I don’t really love my Mum anymore. This is all just too hard.”

Then only a minute or so later is describing how, if her mother, who was incontinent, left a mess in the bathroom or the hallway, she’d wait until she was back in the living room before cleaning up as she wouldn’t want her mother to think that she was a nuisance. And still later, that when the family was going on holidays, she’d make sure that her mother knew well in advance so that she could choose between going to the nearby nursing home, which offered high quality respite and where she was well known, or to stay with a younger cousin to whom she had always been close.

The third comes from my study of men caring for wives/partners with Multiple Sclerosis.

I was making my way back to my car accompanied by the man I had just finished interviewing. We had, a short time before, been speaking of why he was doing what he was doing. Like so many other men in this study, he was anxious not to be seen as thinking too highly of himself – but he did need me to understand that this was very hard, physically and emotionally – but more than that, he wanted to make the point that staying in the marriage, staying to care, was not what most men do. He, on the other hand, had chosen to stay and care, he had not, to use the Australian colloquial expression, used by many of these men, that he had not ‘shot through on his wife’.

Then he added,

‘You know, I **know** in every bone of my body that if the circumstances were reversed, it would not even occur to my wife not to stay and care for me, so how could I not do the same for her.’

These carers were doing something that was very difficult and where they often found themselves exasperated, frustrated, and very weary - in other words, not feeling especially positive about what they were doing or even feeling positive about the person for whom they were caring - but they were determined to see it through as long as they were able.

There is much we could say about what these stories reveal. Let me simply underline a few of the insights.

First, and to make the point again, caring is hard. The stresses, the difficulties, are manifold.

Secondly, carers do not always ‘feel’ loving but, in these 3 cases, without exception, they are enacting love. Too often we are caught up in an understanding of love that is essentially about feelings, about being in love, being buoyed up by loving feelings. Our feelings are important – in large measure, we are our feelings – but so are our actions and what we are prepared to do, to devote time and effort to. They define us.

I would underline that there is courage here. This is the sort of every day; every night courage we should valorise more often than we do.

And, of course, grace – should we not see this, too, both as gift and practice.

These stories see carers acting also out of a sense of responsibility, of doing the right thing even when it is hard, of doing what they do out of a profound sense of duty - words used especially by the men in the MS study. We shy away from the word ‘duty’ in our day and age, scared of its harsh strictures often unreasonably and sometimes sanctimoniously imposed by others in days gone by. Perhaps we need to engage in some re-thinking here – as perhaps we must with all those things we shy away from.

There is also mutuality – the relationship coming to the fore, the profound nature of what binds us one to another. The complexity of that.

And there is empathy. Another practice. Empathy requires us to apply ourselves and do so in a very thoroughgoing way. Empathy doesn't just happen of its own accord. It requires effort and focus on our part. It demands greater openness and questioning of ourselves. It means not letting ourselves off the hook.

It is difficult to forget that earlier this year we heard from that self-obsessed, egregiously wealthy individual Elon Musk, indulging his moment in the limelight of the World of Trump, to lay the blame for the supposed decline in the USA on the apparent increase in a preoccupation with empathy. Enough of that...

And beyond that, and most importantly, caring means enacting those empathic insights in the way we relate to others – to everyone, including those we do not like. If we practised empathy more often, we might get better at it. We might also come to understand afresh how essential it is if our world is to survive.

As about so much else, the truth about caring is rarely pure and never simple.

So, what does it mean to honour carers and caring?

In part it is to acknowledge all the above and much more. Caring is an extraordinary act of concern for the well-being of another human being, even if it's a matter of caring for someone to whom we are close, whom we love. Regardless of the nature of the bond, this is sacrificing oneself for another.

But honouring care and carers should never mean we end resorting to hagiography. We do no one any favours when we idolise carers.

In the first place, such treatment of the issue overlooks the reality that not all care is sweetness and light. Some care is exploitative, even abusive, and some of those who are cared for are manipulative and spend their energies in emotional blackmail – as may happen and does happen in relationships across the board.

Secondly it can mean that we neglect the circumstances and needs of those who require care, those being cared for.

Thirdly, it distances caring concerns, pushes them off the policy agenda and into the bland world of good works. We need to care about caring, all of us, to care deeply and actively about care, caring work, carers and about those for whom they care.

Let us take a moment to remind ourselves that this is in our own best interests. At any moment, any one of us might find ourselves, or someone we love, as a carer or needing care. We need to ensure that we have in place truly fine supports and provisions for carers and care recipients – properly funded, not short-term funding but with a guaranteed ongoing source of finance, services that are readily available and accessible regardless of where you live or your income.

And we need to see work environments across the board transformed so as to recognise that workers – all of them - have responsibilities to others built into their lives and that many workers have significant caring responsibilities. We need to resurrect the notion of ‘family friendly’ workplaces and give that goal renewed clout. As part of that, we need yet again to address the concept of ‘the ideal worker’ as someone available to his or her workplace 20 hours a day. It is absurd and damaging not just to carers but to the whole community. I’d like to believe that it in Cecline!

So, I repeat - we need to care about care and carers, to care deeply, to care actively.

Our readings remind us of the importance that Jesus placed on relationships with others, on the interconnections between us all, and our obligations to love and care for one another. Always. Regardless of whether we believe the person to be worthy of such attention. Regardless of whether we personally like them.

Our Gospel reading comes from Luke. Let’s remind ourselves that The Gospel according to Luke is the only gospel to record one of the finest and most readily recognised of Jesus’ parables – we know it as the story of The Good Samaritan. It certainly is a parable about caring and doing so when such care has required the disregard of taboos and assumptions about what might be required of a person, especially an observant Jew. And of course, Samaritans were reviled by the Jews.

And Samaritans feature here in today's Gospel reading. Luke's story here is of Jesus healing 10 people, but only one, a Samaritan, returns to say thanks. Care can come from unexpected places, including from those we think need our care. And the Psalms – what a wealth of praise and thanksgiving they so often convey. And what a powerful contemporary Reading.

In honoring carers and their care of another who needs their care, we are drawing attention to that profound, central wisdom of all the great religious traditions. It is the recognition that we are 'bound together in this bundle of life', a vast web of interconnection and interdependency.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu has written that...

“The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation.”

We are called to care. To care deeply. To care actively. For all people, all life, the environment, all creation. We are called to be co-carers, co-creators with God.

So, in the words of the Brian Wren hymn,

Therefore, let us make thanksgiving
And with justice, willing and aware,
Give to earth, and all things living,
Liturgies of care.

Amen