

May 5

Learning to Know and Love

Acts 10.44-48, Psalm 98, 1 John 5.1-12, John 15.9-17

Today's readings are filled with the love of God and its outpouring through, from and with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel, Jesus describes the love of the Father for the Son, the love of Jesus for his disciples who are now called his friends, and his instruction to them to go out and put that love into practice. This is a lesson that we are still learning. The love of Christ is for everyone, and we are not to withhold it but to joyfully proclaim it.

Last week we learned that *those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.* (1 John 4.20)

Love one another. The person to be loved is the other. It is easy to think of reasons not to love others. We are, of course, less willing and able to look in the other direction, to what it is about us that inhibits us from loving our neighbours. Love enriches how we live in community. It imbues and permeates the faith that we profess, and it is how we live out that faith.

In many ways the whole Bible is a long, multi-episode story about God's love for God's people, and God's encouragement to them to leave behind fear, hatred and self-centredness by truly seeing the other through the eyes of God. That is hard, hard work. Whenever we think we have got it, God opens our eyes to the next person or group of people that we need to see, the next step we need to take. Loving enables more loving. Each step enables the next step.

Here is a quote from Wendy Brown. As I read it, I would like you to think of instances where you see or hear of these things happening. Or, if you disagree, instances of that.

Love for others is a practice, an ideal, an imaginary, a struggle, not an achieved state. It is always incomplete, or better, always aspirational. There is plenty of that aspiration afoot these days. This doesn't make the future of [neighbourly] love rosy. It is challenged from a dozen directions – unequal social structures that disadvantage some, lessening commitment to truth, lack of accountability, attempts to influence or suppress the voices of others, and assaults on the very value of love for others. So, the winds are hardly at love's back.

This may seem a somewhat pessimistic view. Can you tell me where you see these challenges to loving others happening, or perhaps where you see the opposite, where love is prevailing in our wider society.

[Examples ...]

I am going to take just one thing as an example, enabling or suppressing the voices of others.

I will tell you now that Wendy Brown is not a theologian, she is a political theorist and I quoted her because when I read what she said, the word love immediately substituted in my mind for her actual words. Where I said *love*, she actually said *democracy*. Of course, democracy does not necessarily equal love of others, but it can be a part of it.

If we narrow the concept of love to democracy and then to one simple measure, the right to vote, we can see the history of our eyes gradually being opened to see the neighbour we should care about, and whose voice we should hear, regardless of whether we agree with them or not.

In Britain a few hundred years ago, those who had a say in governance were initially a very small proportion of the population, about 2%. They were not seen as *the people*, but as *the right people*.

Over time, there was a gradual shift to greater voting inclusion.

Having the right connections, the right social class, the right economic background, the right education or evidence of responsibility, the right occupation, the right age group, the right gender, and so on were what mattered. All these distinctions gradually fell away, until there was almost universal suffrage for adults over 21. This process continues in our country and in our lifetime. It is not, and perhaps could never be, a universal right to vote.

In Australia who got the vote in the 1960s? (Aboriginal people in 1962 could vote, from 1984 they must vote) In the 1970's? (18-year-olds)

Do these people have the right to vote? Permanent residents who are not citizens, citizens who live permanently overseas, people in nursing homes, prisoners, 16-year-olds? Is there anyone you would like to see with the vote who does not have it now?

[Answers ..]

At any one time, the status quo is what has so far been seen as right. When exclusion is the norm, this is often only recognised when it has moved to the past, from *this is just how things are* to *how could things have been like that?* This applies to more than just voting.

Let's return to the broader issue of recognising our neighbour, knowing our neighbour, respecting our neighbour, loving our neighbour.

Living as disciples of Jesus is a pathway of continuously discovering who is our neighbour. Opening our own eyes or the eyes of others is not easy, but new norms can be established and these in turn can be further questioned. There will also always be a need for new insights in the small things of our daily life as well as the big issues.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said, *The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice*. Dr King's words about the arc of the moral universe are themselves a quote from 19th century clergyman Theodore Parker. Theodore Parker also said *Democracy means not*

"I am as good as you are" but "You are as good as I am." I guess it depends on which side of each privileged status you stand. His faith-grounded action also included working against slavery and working for women's right to vote. In our daily lives, we have the opportunity to make a difference. We don't need to wait for big issues of social justice. We can make a difference to others in small ways. Here are some examples.

If you regularly go for an early morning walk and you see a few people, some alone, some with others, some with a dog, whose name are you most likely to learn first?

Maya Angelou, American poet, said, *I'm convinced of this: Good done anywhere is good done everywhere. For a change, start by speaking to people rather than walking by them like they're stones that don't matter. As long as you're breathing, it's never too late to do some good.*

We saw this everyday love in the animated video Andy showed a fortnight ago about the indifferent man and how his life was transformed.

John Donne, English poet and 17th century Dean of St Paul's cathedral, said, *No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.* We are a part of the life of everyone, and they are a part of our life.

We all have struggles of various kinds. This is an important part of our common ground, our common humanity, our struggle to find our own pathway in life.

If you speak with someone you disagree with, do you speak with curiosity, truly seeking to understand why they hold the views they do? Do you have compassion for their struggles?

Martin Luther King Jr also said. *A riot is the language of the unheard.* When we hear of someone saying something or doing something we deplore, and we say, *Why on earth are they doing that?* perhaps we should actually ask them, instead of sharing rhetorical questions with those we already understand and agree with.

Another sermon quote by John Donne: *And who understands? Not me, because if I did, I would forgive it all.* Can we make a real effort for Christ's sake, to know and understand our neighbour? Perhaps then we, too, would forgive all.

When I was reading about John Donne online, there were a few comments on that page in response to what had been written about him and I was struck by this one by 'Beth'.

I truly believe there are few things we can change in life; however, the most life-changing innate power we possess is the ability to change our thoughts... and thereby change our lives.

That's what Jesus asks us to do, encourages us to do, commands us to do. We are to show and share love, the great love of God poured out on us. We are to show this love to our neighbour.

Short poem from F. Scott Fitzgerald:

It was only a sunny smile,
and little it cost
in the giving,
but it scattered the night
and made the day
worth living.

I will finish with 2 thoughts from Bishop Mark's sermon in the latest Anglican News. This sermon was written in response to the tragic stabbing events at Bondi Junction.

Bishop Mark quotes US journalist David Brooks, who says: *Human beings need recognition as much as they need food and water ... No crueller punishment can be devised than to not see someone, to render them unimportant or invisible ... On the other hand, there are few things as fulfilling as that sense of being seen and understood.*

And Bishop Mark concludes his sermon with these words, *The question God's word presses upon me is what do I do in a moment of choice? What do I do when confronted by the needs of others? What do I do when the clock is ticking and I have to decide whether to stay and see or turn and go? Perhaps it's in those moments we learn whether we really are willing to lay down our life for others as Jesus laid down His life for ours.*

May we learn to love our neighbour gladly, freely and generously, as our God loves us.
Amen