

The church is God's community, heaven coming into being on earth. As such, it is a foretaste of heaven. The promises of heaven are ours in the present. God's promises of fullness of life meet us in the present. Our life is to be lived as redeemed people of the promise, the promise given to Abraham and Sarah of God's favour, and the promise given through Jesus of heaven coming to earth. The struggle for Christians is that other influences are appealing.

We in the church say a lot about love. God's love for the whole creation. Our love of God. Our love of all God's creation. Some would say it is the basis of Christianity. Others would declare it a summary of the faith. In any case, the concept of being in a love relationship with God as the initiator and the creation as the responder to that love and living in that love is central to our faith. Paul seeks to put the issue beyond all doubt as to who we are and how we are to live in relationship with God and God's creation. The point is we can only be Christian and live as Christians with God's total help. All else will fail.

Moving on to Matthew. Matthew places some very practical teaching about relationships before us. If someone has hurt you, you go and resolve it. The alternative is to carry hurts and hatreds around with us avoiding certain persons or at best, being no more than civil to them.

It is no accident, that most worship includes a time of 'fixing things up' with God. This 'fixing things up' or 'putting things right', which we call the prayer of confession, is most important if we are to worship God and to hear God 'speak' to us. This is a model for our relationship with others.

It is difficult to go to someone who has wronged us, raise our concern and seek reconciliation. Invariably we do not go to another and speak to them alone. It all comes out at a public meeting, or in front of family. How much better to take the teaching of Jesus 'and go to the other when the two of you are alone'.

When we go to another whom we believe has wronged us in some way, we need to be open and honest with ourselves and the other, listening to what they say. *We* may have got it wrong. An obvious slight may have been not what was intended. The difficult conversation is what is called a 'learning conversation'; we go with an openness and humility to hear what the other is saying, even if we think we are in the right. It places the conversation in a different place, a safe place.

When someone comes to us, we need to listen carefully, listen for the truth in what they are saying. They may be right, in which case we need to be quick to grasp, say sorry and move on. And of course, it might be that the other has miss-heard, or miss-understood, and in a one on one situation, there is space to clarify.

Walter Brueggemann said:

Failed speech is linked to the disappearance of trust. Not listening is related to death in a relationship. To fail to listen means to declare the other party null and void. To fail to listen is to declare that the other party has nothing to say or contribute. A society that suffers failed speech . . . cannot believe promises, cannot trust God, cannot be human.<sup>i</sup>

What a gift it is, when a person who has an issue, goes to the source, first.

Rectification and reconciliation does not come naturally. Our common sense, our human wisdom of divide and conquer, of wedge, and enemies and alliances, of friends and enemies, of those whom we love and those whom we hate, does not understand this kind of teaching of ‘doing to others as you would have them do to you’, of ‘love your enemies, do good to them’. To human wisdom, this wisdom of Jesus makes *no* sense, because this ‘heaven on earth’ wisdom has an upfront cost, which may involve a cross, in which case it will also involve a resurrection.

And it is true that the bonds of enemies are stronger than the bonds of friends. It is easier to make an enemy than to make a friend. It is easier to lose a friend than an enemy. It is easier for a friend to become an enemy than a friend. By contrast, I think the saying is true that the holiest place on earth is where an ancient hatred has become a present love.

Loving one another, loving the neighbour, as Paul wrote to the church in Rome, or as Matthew’s gospel wrote to the early church in the late first century, or as Jesus himself most likely said to the first followers, is to love the other from the depth of our being, having compassion on the other, just as in the preceding verses of this chapter, compassion is demonstrated in the shepherd leaving the 99 on the mountain to go and find the one that has gone astray, to love the other is to want to, and to work for the best relationship possible. The other may reject us, but we never, ever give up pursuing the other seeking reconciliation.

In the literature on no-violence this is described as “relentless persistence” that involves attempts to overcome bad with good, lies with truth, hatred with love. “Relentless persistence” draws its strength from truth; it is as much spiritual as practical.<sup>ii</sup>

This loving one another is revolutionary wisdom which no human being could have made up, because it is wisdom that comes from God, and sets Jesus out as different to the rest, and says we can’t fabricate this, we need help for we need heaven to come on earth and only Jesus and the one who sent him is able to do this in us when two or three gather in his name.

If we cast our eye back beyond the parable of the lost sheep to the early part of chapter eighteen, to the discussion about true greatness, further understanding of this wisdom is gained. Becoming like a child is the way to enter the kingdom or reign of heaven. And the particular character trait is the humility of the child, that in welcoming the child, we welcome Jesus. This is indeed heavenly wisdom on earth, of which most of us pray at least weekly, if not more frequently.

This wisdom of Jesus is building a community of substance. This is honesty in confronting issues, open love rather than being 'nice'.

Paul Miller wrote on this passage from Matthew:

There is to be no fostering of resentment, or harbouring of grudges. Nor do complaint, trial or discipline take place when one has committed an offence against another until serious efforts have been made at personal reconciliation, acknowledgement of the offence on the part of one and forgiveness on the part of the other.<sup>iii</sup>

This teaching in Matthew fleshes out the teaching from Leviticus 19:17 "You shall not hate your kin in your heart; you shall show the other their fault and not bear sin for their sake."

It is in the serious business of the church, whether governance, or worship or confrontation (vs. 15), negotiation (v. 16), adjudication (v.17) reconciliation, when two or three are together being church, than Jesus is present, and his presence will be the wisdom of God building community.

There are many challenging verses in this selection of verses from Matthew. We must deal with the difficult verse 17:

If a member refuses to listen even to the church,  
let such a one be to you a Gentile and a tax collector.

This has always made me feel uneasy, because it seems out of character with Jesus. Perhaps it is that God's love has limits, on first appearance, it seems to clash with the view that God's love is unlimited.

However, as we think about this treating of people as Gentiles and tax collectors, I wondered how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. Would Jesus who said "love your enemies, do good to them", who transformed the retributive 'eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth' into "let someone hit you on the other cheek also", and 'take your cloak as well as your coat', would this Jesus really have rejected people? Would Jesus who said 'do to others as you would have them do to you', then treat people like dirt? And then the clincher was when I reflected that Jesus called Matthew, a Tax Collector to follow him, and Jesus was criticised because he ate with tax collectors and sinners.

Maybe here is a clue. Jesus showed mercy and compassion upon these people. Jesus showered Gentiles and tax collectors with hospitality, acceptance and forgiveness.

Could it be then, that when Jesus says to the church that they should treat a member who refuses to listen, to treat them like tax collectors and gentiles, this is code for treat them with mercy and compassion, because mercy and compassion are the outworkings of love, the same love that goes to another and seeks reconciliation, rather than destroying a reputation through third party triangulation, the same love that forgives another *ad infinitum*. That the issue in loving the other, even the person who refuses to listen, is ultimately not about trying to *change* the person or put them right, it is about *loving the other as Christ has loved us*. This is real, costly, deep love. And Christ has loved us even to a cross, and as we love others with a costly love we will love even to a cross, and as surely as Christ was raised following the cross, we too will experience a resurrection.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Genesis 1982, p102

<sup>ii</sup> Engage: Exploring non-violent living, Slattery, Butigan, Pelicarić, & Preston-Pile, Pace e Bene, Press, Oakland, California, USA, 277

<sup>iii</sup> Patrick D. Miller Pentecost 2: Proclamation 3 Series A Ed Elisabeth Achtemeier, p 45