

Love is the Measure

(Genesis 45:2-11 & Luke 6:27-38 – Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on February 20th, 2022)

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I once had a book called 'Love is the Measure'. It was a biography of the Catholic woman Dorothy Day.

Dorothy Day was born in the late 1800's into an Anglican family, but she rejected her faith as she felt they weren't doing enough for the poor. She was a suffragette and jailed for such. She is credited with starting the Catholic Worker Movement, something she denied and credited that to a man. Living through World War 1 and the Great Depression she later became a Catholic and wrote and worked to ensure that the poor had adequate food, clothing and shelter. She wrote an article called – Love is the measure – and let me paraphrase some of it for you.

We confess to being fools and wish that we were more so. In the face of atomic bomb testing, impending strikes, bread and housing shortages – there is nothing we can do for people except to love them. As we feed, clothe and shelter our brothers and sisters we realise the most important thing to do is to love.

We would like to change the world, make it simpler for people to feed, clothe and shelter themselves as God intended. We can do our bit to change the world by fighting for better conditions for the poor (both worthy or unworthy). We can work for an oasis, a little bit of joy and peace in the world, we can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident the ever-widening circle will reach around the world.

“We repeat, there is nothing that we can do but love, and dear God – please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbour, to love our enemy as well as our friend.”¹

Clearly Dorothy had read our reading from today!

Jesus bookends the reading today with a challenge to love our enemies. In between he gives two sets of instructions, almost a manual of how to do this.

Love those who don't even like you or you them

Do good to all

Bless those who curse you

And pray.

Give the other cheek should you be hit

Don't hold back from people who are in need, if they ask or take your coat, give them your other garments too

Give if you are asked

Don't ask for things back when others have borrowed them.

Perhaps it is all summed up in what has become known as the golden rule – do unto others what you would have them do to you. This ethic from the Ancient East has a form in almost every religion.

¹ Catholic Worker, editorial June 1946

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This loving your enemies is as easy as that!

Of course, it is not easy. Jesus' teaching is challenging if not almost impossible to put into practice.

This list I think is descriptive rather than prescriptive, it is about attitude, an attitude best revealed in the life of Jesus – give, forgive and live. Live lives of generosity, lives of mercy. Why? Because that is the nature of the God we follow and love.

Joseph in our first reading, also shows us how to live this out. If anyone had reason to hold back and seek revenge it was Joseph. A favourite son, who might have flaunted it in his brother's faces he finds himself near death in a pit and then sold into slavery. Years later he has succeeded, has the ear of the empire and much power and finds his family on their knees before him begging for help (as their country was in the midst of famine) and they don't even recognise him. He responds with grace, offers forgiveness and gives what he is in position to give – his love for enemies frees them all.

Now I don't know anyone who hasn't collect enemies along the way, people who we don't like, who have hurt us or vice versa. That is what makes this teaching hard, we have to deal with it and them.

Can I make clear though, that this teaching, is not a call to being a doormat, to let people get away with horrendous, violent and abusive acts, of course justice must be done. We don't have to like the person we are called to forgive we don't have to like what they have done or excuse it or forget it, we just have to forgive it. Remembering might actually be important to the healing process for all concerned. Forgiveness, if we think about Mandela and Tutu is what actually frees the offender and the one offended against.

Often, we have interpreted the adage – turn the other cheek to act like a doormat, but it is far from that. Slapping the face of a servant back then was a way of disciplining them – to offer the other cheek is almost an act of defiance, to taunt the perpetrator to doing more.

Giving your shirt after someone has taken your coat makes one very vulnerable, exposed almost.

All of these instructions call us to be vulnerable, to put others first, to take a deep breath and go beyond ourselves to forgive or to give to those we think unworthy, to offer God's grace, mercy and peace to all. Jesus is our example.

I have for the last couple of weeks been watching Parliament Question Time, don't ask why, perhaps I was hoping that just maybe they might work together and pass some decent legislation. Instead, I have been appalled at their behaviour, their name calling, one side beating the other to the lower place. I wonder what good might happen if they forgave, if they spoke to each other in ways they would like to be spoken to, if they blessed or thanked each other for good ideas rather than cursed them? What would the

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world look like if we shared our coats, our shirts, our food, our money, our vaccines when others asked?

What a difference it would be if we allowed love to be our measure, not a measure that is levelled off, pushed down but rather a measure that is overflowing a lot.

This seemingly impossible task is not impossible – Jesus, Joseph, Dorothy, Mandela, Tutu and countless others have proved that.

Jesus calls us to be counter-cultural, so what holds us back?

Perhaps Michael Leunig might help us here, and I will leave you with his words.

"There are only two feelings - love and fear.

There are only two languages - love and fear.

There are only two activities - love and fear.

There are only two motives, procedures, frameworks and results - love and fear.

Love and fear."

Amen.