

## *Generous Undertakings*

*(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist, June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024 - Mark 5:21-43 & 2 Cor 8:7-15)*

On Wednesday I met a young Vietnamese man who had come to the open pantry. I assumed he had come to get some food. We started chatting and he told me he had only been in Australia for two weeks and was studying a Master's degree. I, thinking he was here for the food, explained the system to him. No, he had heard about the program and had come to volunteer – soon he was washing dishes, serving tea and coffee and once the meat van arrived he helped handing out the food. We had chatted about Christianity, and he had told me he was a Buddhist. He explained that he thought there were many similarities between the two. His reason for being there was his understanding of his faith, that we are called to do good deeds for others.

He could have been quoting Paul, who was advising those at Corinth to excel in generous undertakings, to do so was to live out your love and follow in the footsteps of Jesus who models generosity in his very being. Out of one's abundance you should provide relief for those in need.

The volunteers at Open Pantry and I have in the last few weeks got to know some others who are living out Paul's teaching. It is generosity in action. They give up their time to stop excess food from being dumped and ensure it can be given to those in need, and as you look at the people in the queue, there are plenty of people in real need at the moment. They are not just giving out food, they are building community, they are offering dignity. One of the women in the queue this week said to me she felt embarrassed that she needed to line up to get food, hopefully I was able to reassure her that everyone was welcome, there was no judgement.

In our reading from Mark's gospel today we see Jesus undertaking generosity in a number of ways.

In these stories he seems to be constantly interrupted. Reaching the shore, he gets out of the boat to find a great crowd gathering, no doubt he was about to go about his normal tasks – teaching the crowd, healing the sick.

Then he is interrupted, interrupted by a leader of the synagogue who is quite desperate, his daughter is very ill and he knows, that despite him being a Jewish leader, that Jesus can help. Jairus is an important man, wealthy but he gets down on his knees and begs Jesus for his help. So, Jesus stops what he is doing and goes with Jairus to help.

However, the crowd followed. And then he is interrupted again. A very ill and desperate woman who had been bleeding for twelve years reaches out and touches his cloak in the belief that such an act would be enough to heal her. I sense that she didn't really want to interrupt, and she had enough faith that just getting that close to Jesus would be enough to provide healing for her. Unlike Jairus and his family we know nothing about the woman, other than she is poor, has been very ill and is ritually unclean. This is

more than an interruption for Jesus, he seeks the woman out. The disciples laugh at the thought that anyone could tell who touched his cloak, such is the size of the crowd. I wonder what the woman felt, it seems to me that she did not want to make a fuss, how was she going to respond? Mustering all her courage, she admits it was her. Jesus needs to see who she is, find out about her, really bless her. The woman who has no name is called 'daughter' by Jesus, when she is treated with such dignity, she finds herself telling him her whole story. This interruption for Jesus was very significant, not just a healing of body but an emotional and spiritual healing too, this woman is doubly blessed, is called daughter and now included in the family of God after living on the margins of society for more than twelve years. A generous undertaking indeed.

Then there is news of the other daughter, ironically she is twelve years old and the terrible news is received that whilst Jesus has been tending to the other woman the girl has died. The message is don't bother now, it is too late. Jesus is not deterred, tell them that he is going to her now and everything will be okay. Laughter again, the little girl has died there is nothing else to do but weep. Laughed at again, Jesus makes his way up to the girl's room taking only the girl's parents and Peter, James and John. He reaches out his hand and touches the girl and she too is healed, she walks and is given food. She too is restored to wholeness.

Two unclean women are restored to wholeness. There is much to notice in this story, but I find it interesting that both of these women were ritually unclean and yet Jesus embraces them both, he is not bothered by the religious 'rules' of the day, they don't get in the way of him doing good. These women are at opposite ends of their lives, a young girl about to embrace womanhood, an older woman who had been ill for the same amount of time as the girl had been alive. One is from a wealthy family, the other on the margins of society. One has others to plead her case, the other is hiding in the shadows. Neither are excluded from the generosity of Jesus. One reaches out to touch Jesus and receives healing, the other is healed by Jesus reaching out and touching her.

Jesus takes all these interruptions and turns them into opportunities to undertake generosity. Are we able to do the same when we are interrupted? Are we able to be generous not just with our money but with our time, with our energy, with our compassion, with our forgiveness? Can we set aside our personal agendas for the good of others? Do we see interruptions as opportunities for ministry?

For the last few weeks, I, along with Ini and Rev Nigel from across the road have spent a couple of hours each week serving tea and coffee to about a hundred people lined up waiting to receive material assistance. As we do that, we find ourselves in conversations with those lined up. I have to fight my tendency to think that this is taking me away from my 'real work', one of the volunteers reminded me this week that this is my real work. As I observe what happens in that couple of hours, I am blown away by the way in which completed strangers are generous to one another, how they interrupt their daily activities to serve others – this friends, is the way of Jesus. This is what Paul implores the people in Corinth and us to do – generous undertakings, giving people dignity, building community, responding to material, emotional and spiritual need.

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Many in our world and community are desperate, feel powerless, even hopeless, much bleeding goes on. They cry out for wholeness and compassion. They interrupt our more comfortable lifestyles; how will we respond to such an interruption?

Henri Nouwen once said – “You know ..... my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.”

May our interruptions be opportunities for generous undertakings, may they be opportunities for us to give others the dignity they deserve. Amen.