

Love Always Upsets the Status Quo

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church February 2nd, 2025 – Luke 4:21-30, 1 Cor 13:1-13)

Have you been following what has happened to Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde after her sermon which challenged Trump to practice mercy and compassion? Trump labelled her sermon as ‘nasty’ and demanded an apology, others called it inappropriate and an act of political activism. One politician introduced a resolution condemning her sermon. I find this an extraordinary reaction to a women preaching the very thing Jesus calls us to live every day – compassion and mercy. Ironically, she preached that sermon from the same pulpit as Martin Luther King Jr preached his last sermon.

I read a quote this week from the book 1984 by George Orwell – they fear love because it creates a world they can’t control. Seems to me this is what has been playing out in this scenario.

Although, we are not immune from such things are we? How often are we proud of someone, until they start to say things we disagree with?

Jesus knew what this felt like. Here he was being lauded a hero in his hometown, initially at least. Jesus’ reputation has preceded him somewhat as he returns to his hometown and to his home church/synagogue. He has impressed the congregation with his insight and eloquence as he has expounded the scripture. They are amazed, especially given his humble background. He has them eating out of the palm of his hand.

However, it doesn’t take long for him to experience their fickleness. It is easy to be impressed by someone you agree with, a little harder when they say things you don’t agree with or things that require you to think about who you are, what you do and what you believe. They seem to cope with his reading of Isaiah and even his assertion that that scripture – proclaiming freedom to the captives, restoring sight to the blind, proclaiming the year of God’s favour was to be fulfilled in him. Why they even coped with him leaving the bit about vengeance, originally in the Isaiah passage, out of his discussion. It was what came next that disturbed the crowd. What came next sets them off, their pride in the hometown boy soon becomes outright rage, murderous rage, they are ready to lynch him, to throw him off the cliff. Why the turn?

Jesus reminds those gathered of two stories from their tradition. In the first, he reminds them of Elijah who during a famine was not sent to an Israelite but rather to a poor widow in a foreign region, the prophet is sent to one beyond the expected group. And the second story emphasises the same point. He reminds the listeners of the story of Namaan – the foreigner who has leprosy and who is sent to Elisha for healing, the foreigner who on Elisha’s instructions dips into the River Jordan seven times and is healed. Wonderful stories, God’s love extending beyond the borders of the ‘chosen’ ones, that outsiders can hear and respond to God’s call – but that is exactly what gets up the nose of those listening to Jesus. They are enraged, insulted probably, the hometown hero has become a disgrace, he is now the prophet who is not welcome in his hometown. This won’t be the last time Jesus will experience the fickleness of a crowd, of watching them turn on him – but more of that as we approach Easter.

The crowd turn on him because of what he says about God and God’s love. Our reading from Corinthians tells us a little bit about what love is. This ever so familiar reading, most often used at weddings, isn’t about romantic love per se, it is for us, the followers

of Jesus, and is about the kind of love God has for all and the kind of love we need to have for each other and for the world. Love should characterise all that we do. No matter how great our achievements, Paul reminds us, that if we engage in them without love they amount to nothing. Love is hard work, it is patient, kind, not arrogant, not rude, not insistent, not resentful, it loves truth, it endures the hard parts of life, it believes, it hopes and it does not end. Of all the gifts, and Paul lists three – faith, hope and love, love is the greatest.

Love, that gift of the Spirit that is ours to give and receive, according to Jesus in our passage this morning, extends to the ends of the earth. The stories that got up the nose of the folk in the synagogue are the very stories that we need to understand if we are to understand anything about God and his love. If we are to understand what we are called to be and do. The very idea that God's love extends beyond the confines of the chosen ones or the believers, that God's love and grace extends to our enemies, and that indeed God has no favourites, has led to Jesus only just escaping with his life, from a mob who have turned on him, precisely because he dares to say this. God's love upsets the status quo! The status quo turn on him, because he dares to remind them that no one group has first rights or a monopoly on God.

Jesus has begun his ministry with rejection and a murderous plot hanging over him. Jesus has quickly become an outcast. In declaring that God's love was for all, for Gentiles, foreigners, strangers, those outside the group to whom he is speaking, he is about to get lynched. Proclaiming such an inclusive message about God and God's love is risky business!¹

So here we are at the beginning of a new year, - followers of Jesus who proclaims a message that is risky, even dangerous. What does all this have to say to us? Just as Jesus seems to outline his 'manifesto' at the beginning of his ministry, perhaps we too need to think about what our 'manifesto' for the new year might be.

Who are the ones in our community to whom we are called to proclaim freedom? Who in our community are imprisoned by bars real or imaginary, imprisoned by fear or pain or illness and cannot live their lives to the full? Who in our community are blinded by ignorance or arrogance, blinded by prejudice or cannot see the truth? Who in our community need to hear of the Lord's goodness and favour?

As we think about our ministry plans in 2025 and beyond, including how we use our property, will our thinking be characterised by love? Will our programs and activities be based in love or just because they seem like a good idea? As we talk with each other and those beyond our community, will we be kind, patient, hopeful, humble and truthful, will we live the love Paul speaks of?

And importantly will we be a people of courage? The message of Jesus is risky and subversive, he got into quite a pickle when he suggested God's love had no bounds. We follow a God who in effect says, we are the church without borders, that love extends to all. This is risky business, you see, we might just have to stand up against the status quo, we might have to disagree with our political leaders, we might find ourselves at odds with public opinion or the opinion of our neighbours and colleagues, we might even find ourselves at odds with our brothers and sisters in the church, simply because this love which is from God is more radical and inclusive than any of our human rules, limits or desires.

¹ From Bruce Prewer – Epiphany 4C

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This loving is risky business, we will have to listen to others, and we might just be changed by those on the edges of society as they challenge and surprise us. We might end up rejected, prophets not welcomed in our own town, the ‘insiders’ might not like what we say and who we welcome, even Presidents might call for your head. This all might just get ugly. Speaking up for, welcoming into our midst those we are called to love (be it the poor and powerless, the refugee, women, gays, folk suffering with mental illness, people with dementia crying out for dignity, any who are ostracised or ignored – and the list goes on) might put us in a tricky position. It is sure to upset the powerful, but we have no option as I see it, following Jesus is risky, God’s extravagant love for us, for all, compels us to speak out for others, to stand up for others, that is love in action. God’s love extends to all.