

## Epiphany 4

Ocean Grove/ Barwon Heads

3/2/2019

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Yesterday I conducted a wedding for 2 police officers at St. George's, Queenscliff. One of the readings they chose was today's second reading.

In the passage Paul wrote about love, he used contrast to emphasise his points – for example, love is patient, love is not easily angered.

Let me share 2 contrasting stories with you to emphasise the points I want to make today. I used this first story in my address at the wedding. It may not be considered politically correct in 2019, but it still makes me laugh.

A very healthy old man was celebrating his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. His great grandchildren wanted to know how he had reached such an age and was still so spritely.

He said, "Your great grandmother and I have been married 75 years. We decided at the beginning that when we had an argument, the one who lost would go out for a long walk and think things over. So I have had 75 years of walking in the fresh air."

I have used that story at a few weddings to identify what love is not – it is not about confrontation, or winners and losers, or exacting penalties.

By contrast, in his book "One Inch From the fence", Wes Seeliger wrote: "I have spent long hours in the intensive care waiting room watching with anguished people...listening to urgent questions: will my husband make it? Will my child walk again?"

The intensive care waiting room is different from any other place in the world. And the people who wait are different. They can't do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race and class melt away. A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his wife as much as the university professor loves his, and everyone understands this. Each person feels for everyone else.

In the intensive care waiting room, the world changes. Vanity and pretence vanish. The universe is focussed on the doctor's next report. If only it will show improvement. Everyone knows that loving someone else is what life is all about.

*Could we learn to love like that if we realised that every day of life is a day in the waiting room?"*

To put it another way – could we come closer to living out Paul's definition of love if we really believed that Jesus could come back tonight, today, this morning; and that we need to live each day as if it is our last?

This passage from 1 Corinthians is one of the most familiar in the Bible, and is often read at weddings, and sometimes at funerals. However, it was not designed for such occasions.

Rather, it was Paul's attempt:

- To describe the governing rule for Christian living – the rule of love.
- To describe to the church in Corinth how they should be behaving towards each other.

Why did Paul believe this was necessary? What issues was he trying to address; and do they still apply to us today?

1. He wanted to stress that all God-given gifts, including the gifts of the Holy Spirit he listed in the previous chapter, are worth nothing if they are used without love.

The Message version puts it powerfully when it says “If I speak with human eloquence but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate....no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.”

I have worked alongside teachers over the years, who have had a wonderful grasp of their subject material, who have been highly organised, but who have not been able to build any rapport with the students because they saw them as ‘things to be taught’ rather than human beings who need affirmation and encouragement.

While they imparted knowledge, they were unable to build relationships.

I have seen doctors who treat their patients as specimens to be worked on, rather than people to be nurtured and relationships to value.

How do we treat the people we deal with day by day, whether it be a client who comes to our business, or the check out person who serves us at the supermarket? Are we able to set aside our own agenda, our own busy-ness and value each contact we have with others, regardless of their place in our lives?

I visited Lesley Duncan in SeaViews last Wednesday. While I was there, one of the staff brought in a vase of flowers. She said “this will brighten up your day.”

Lesley said “I don’t have one complaint about this place” and I know that the way she treats the staff is reciprocated by the love they lavish on her.

2. Paul wanted to stress the difference between Jesus’ rule of life and the rules of the Jewish religious leaders of the day.

“The Jewish faith had become a religion saturated with regulations and ceremonial requirements. There were so many that they were almost impossible to keep track of, let alone fulfil....The Pharisees and scribes spent hours and hours tinkering with the fine print – until whatever life was still stirring within the law had all but suffocated in the dense smoke of legalese.”

Some time ago, on the radio, I heard part of a segment where people were asked to ring in and reveal a habit they were locked into.

- A number of people said they could only use toilet paper if the paper came down the wall rather than over the top of the roll.
- One person said he counted the number of times his car blinker beeped, and would only turn a corner on an even number of beeps.
- Another described the exact way he placed his cricket gear in the change rooms before going out to bat; and the ritual for walking out to the wicket. He did admit that he had made a duck in his last 3 innings, and perhaps it was time to change his ritual.

What behavioural rituals have we developed which lock us in, and interfere with our relationships?

What rituals have we developed in the practice of our faith that get in the way of a closer relationship with God and other Christians? For example, I was told recently of a person who believed that he had to be on his knees to pray. If he was not kneeling then he was only talking to God, and that was of less value.

“Jesus, in contrast to the religious leaders, saw the law differently. It wasn’t that he wanted to throw all the rules out the window. He simply wanted to open the window so that the spirit of God could breathe again”. According to him, the supreme requirement is what we now call The Golden Rule – “love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and our neighbours as ourselves.” In John 15 he is quoted as saying ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.’ The implication being that if we obey that law, we are well on the way of obeying all the rest of God’s laws.”

3. A third reason for Paul’s statement was to take what Jesus said, and what he demonstrated about love, and to put it in ‘down-to-earth detail’.

When trying to assess the spin politicians put on their policies, the question to always come back to is “what does that mean in practice?”

That’s what Paul was doing – asking himself “what does loving others mean in practice, in day to day living?” What we read today is the list he came up with.

However, before we become discouraged and say “I can’t live up to this list all the time”, we need to realise that it is a list that sets the ideal for loving behaviour and relationships. It is something to be aimed for, a guide to follow, by individual Christians, and by each church - each fellowship of believers.

Paul knew that he was setting an ideal when he said in v.12 “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.” We won’t be perfect in our behaviour, in our loving, until Jesus returns and we enter his Kingdom – but in the meantime we strive to do our best.

My guess is that *all* of us behave in each of these loving ways *some* of the time. Our challenge is to work at behaving in each of these ways *more* of the time.

4. Paul wants to show the difference between love as a decision and love as a feeling; between *eros* romantic love and *agape* God’s merciful love.

For the Christian, love is not to be primarily *eros* - a feeling; but *agape* – a decision. It is something we have control over. We can choose to love, or to withhold our love.

“When Jesus said ‘love your enemies’ he was *not* saying that we should have warm, fuzzy feelings about them.

If that was the case, he would be asking us to do something we simply don’t have the power to do. We can’t manufacture a warm, fuzzy feeling.

What he is saying is ‘Choose to love them. Decide to love them.’

We might object, ‘But Jesus, I don’t even like them.’ To which Jesus would reply, ‘So what? I’m not asking you to like them; I’m asking you to love them.’

‘But Jesus, I don’t know that I can feel that way about them.’

‘I’m not asking you to *feel* something; I’m asking you to *do* something.’

“But Jesus, don’t you have to feel it first? Doesn’t it have to come from the heart to be authentic? I don’t want to be phony about it.’

‘I can appreciate that. But if you’re the one who decides to do it – sincerely, earnestly, willingly, honestly – how can it be phony? It’s not something you just felt like doing. It’s something you chose to do.’”

The writer of that imagined conversation went on to say that there is a catch. If we decide to love someone, to put their interests ahead of our own, to work for their interests and well-being, we may just end up feeling something for them – we may come to like them in the end.

In the list of 14 elements Paul has put together, to describe what love looks like “on the ground”, he has divided it evenly between seven do’s and seven don’ts:

Let me refresh our memory of the list, using the NIV, NLT and Message versions of the Bible:

#### **The Do’s**

1. Be patient
2. Be kind – care more for others than for self
3. Rejoice in the truth
4. Protect those who are in greater need than us.
5. Maintain faith - Trust God always, and trust others who have earned that trust.
6. Always be hopeful – always look for the best in people and circumstances.
7. Persevere – keep going to the end, endure through every circumstance. Don’t give up on people.

#### **The Don’ts**

1. Don’t be envious – love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have – it isn’t jealous
2. Don’t boast – love doesn’t strut or have a swelled head
3. Don’t be rude
4. Don’t be self-seeking– love doesn’t force itself on others; it doesn’t demand its own way.
5. Don’t be easily angered or irritable – love doesn’t fly off the handle.
6. Don’t keep a record of wrongs
7. Don’t delight in evil – never be glad about injustice.

Paul caps off the list when he says “love never fails – love will last forever”. That statement only makes sense when we remember that he is not talking about the romantic eros love, because we know that does fade and let us down.

He *is* talking about the agape love – the decision to be for a person no matter what, because Jesus is for us, no matter what.

We must never forget that:

# The source of our love for others is God’s love for us.

# The more agape love we give away the more we have to give. God continually tops us up.

# Relationships are the greatest of God’s gifts – relationship with him through Jesus and the Holy Spirit; relationships with other people.

If our lives, to this point, have centred around material possessions, money, sport, the multi-media world of TV, computers, internet, etc; the challenge is to put our priorities in order and to get back to the real core of life – relationships with God and people, and preparing for eternal life in God's Kingdom, where love never fails.