

## SERMON AUGUST 9 2020



**“Let love be genuine”**

**Romans 12:9-21 Matthew 15:21-28**

As this COVID-19 pandemic continues and dominates our lives, many of us are feeling like we are running a marathon. It is hard work. We understand the measures taken in Victoria and the warnings of our New South Wales government but when will it end? We love our home - but for some of us confined within its walls, this is a challenging time. Many of us miss our family and friends and those activities which give meaning and structure to our lives. We just want this to reach the end and feel normal again.

And as this pandemic continues and we cannot meet as a church community it is increasingly difficult to feel that sense of togetherness. What does it mean to be the church – the body of Christ in these times? As human beings made for relationships, we long to gather face to face. It feels like a marathon.

Paul says: **Let love be genuine!** The most important thing in these times is to live out our Christian love. A single stick is easy to break. However sticks tied together are strong and difficult, if not impossible, to break. It is love that binds us together into community and calls forth what we have to offer each other and to the world.

Love can mean many things. Last Sunday I talked about the compassion of Christ. Is this what Paul is talking about? Compassion is certainly part of love. Love in Paul's letter here is not about what I want or need or even like. It is not about “I” or “Me”.

But here love is not even about feelings.

(2)

Like Matthew, Paul wrote in Greek and the Greek word here for love is *agape* and *agape* is about intentionally putting the well being of another first. It is about our will and it turns us towards each other. It is self-giving love that builds community by binding us to each other.

And so in this COVID-19 season, part of loving may well be our will to keep each other safe. COVID-19 has revealed those who are vulnerable in our community like our most senior members especially those in aged care, like those with chronic illnesses, like our young people whose education has been disrupted, like those on bridging visas and casual workers in insecure employment, like those who are unemployed.....

I don't know a lot about long distance running but I read\* that "good distance runners don't just repeat over and over to themselves general messages in their minds like "Relax!" and "Stay loose" while they are running. They play much more specific messages over and over in their minds like "Let lower lip sag!" and "Feel how loose my fingers are right now!" And these specific messages help their whole bodies to relax and stay loose."\*

And it's the same Paul says for a community to live in love. Today I want to lift out three words for us to play over and over in our life together – three marks of Christian living to keep us focused in this pandemic.

As brothers and sisters with Christ, Paul says, let us love one another by showing mutual affection and mutual respect. And so the first idea is **affirm**.



We each receive messages all the time that tell us whether we are lovable, good, useful and valuable or not.\*\* Our sense of self-worth is central to whether we experience well-being or pain. I don't know about you but when I feel good about myself I can take on the world and tackle problems. And I can cope with setbacks better. I can contribute with confidence. When I feel bad about myself, everything seems that much harder and I do not feel free to contribute. I freeze and I stumble over things that at other times I can do well.

(3)

The late John Stott, was rector of Langham Place Anglican Church in London. He made an enormous impact as an evangelical leader internationally through his books. I met him when I was a young university student attending a conference at the Australian National University in Canberra.

John Stott led the Bible Studies. I was particularly moved by his exposition of John Chapter 15 of Jesus the vine, we the branches and the fruit being love. In fact when I was asked as a theological student many years later to produce a tapestry of my life and I thought of many influences that had shaped me over the years, John Stott's Bible Study was one of them.

I believe one of the reasons those particular studies impacted me so much was that one morning sitting at breakfast in the student dining hall at that conference I found myself next to John Stott. I was very shy and awkward. He was the great guru at whose feet we sat at the time. We had all read his book *Basic Christianity*. What could I say to him and not embarrass myself? Why would he want to talk with me? And yet he showed great interest in who I was, a second year music student from Adelaide University wanting to be a teacher and as the group around us grew the conversation continued. John Stott's genuine humility and the way he made us each feel valued impacted upon many of us. And for me, his interest and encouragement authenticated his words. He was genuine.

How can we be a community of affirmation in these times? How are you showing an interest in what someone else is doing? How do we make space for people in their sadness or to share their good news?

Many of you are doing this but I encourage you especially now to get your address book out and ring or email or write to someone to find out how they are going and to pray for them. Who can you help right now? I have valued so much the kindness and enquiry and notes I have received these past months from many of you and your prayers – we all do.

I delight in the Gospel stories when Jesus made space for the little children and their anxious mothers to come and be with him, and when he showed compassion to the crowds and healed their sick and fed them.

In the story we heard today, Jesus seems strangely reluctant and irritated by a Canaanite woman who interrupts his time of rest and recreation. Jesus tells her - I am here primarily for the Jewish people, why should I give you any attention? They even bantered over family pets and crumbs under their tables. Yet his compassion won out as he affirmed her and her faith. So first - **affirm!**

(4)



And secondly **include!** In the movie Forrest Gump, there is a scene where Forrest is trying to find a seat on the bus and every empty seat he moves to sit in, someone says, "Taken." Then finally there is Jenny, who says, "You can sit here."

Love that stays closed off to others joining in is not love. Christ's church was never meant to be a comfortable friendship group to the exclusion of others. One of the things I love about Blacktown is that we are a vibrant and growing multicultural community of all ages. Paul says; Be open to each other in your diversity - None of us has all wisdom.

When Jesus, a Jewish man, affirmed that Canaanite woman, it was radical. There was a long and antagonistic history between the Canaanites and their gods and the Jews and their God. Yet here she kneels before Jesus acknowledging him as Lord. And here, Jesus not only affirms her trust but he draws her into his community as the prime example of faith and heals her daughter.

Paul says "Be hospitable to strangers – welcome people on the edge, people outside your circle, newcomers including migrants and refugees. When you write that note why not send it to someone you don't know so well and make a new friend.

In our church newsletter, we have been encouraging you to contribute groceries and toiletries to the Blacktown Community Hub for families doing it tough and ingredients to make breakfast packs for people who are homeless. This week there is also information about how we can support our Pacific Islander friends who are affected by climate change and rising sea levels. At this time we may want to draw up our drawbridges, but the pandemic is a great time to find new ways to include others in our circle of love and care. Indeed offering worship online has done just that.

**Affirm, include** and thirdly, **be gracious.**

(5)

Paul gives a lot of advice about overcoming conflict in community. *Live peaceably together if you possibly can.* Of course building relationships involves two parties but don't, urges Paul, be the one who doesn't do everything you can to get on with others. Bless those who persecute you and don't pay back those who hurt you.

Right now, it is so easy to become critical and resentful against those we feel do not support us or who we believe threaten the things which we value or who are not doing the right thing. Many of us are anxious and uncertain. It's easy to take offence. We all slip up but **let's be gracious** towards one another as God has been gracious towards us.

For some of us, it may be as simple as wearing a mask and sanitizing our hands - the tone we use to remind someone who has forgotten to stand on the spot in the supermarket or a smile as we step back. It may be going the second mile so as not to offend - it may be saying "Sorry" - it may be offering forgiveness.

**Affirm. Include. Be Gracious.**

As we continue to run this COVID-19 marathon, let's play these words over and over in our minds. **Affirm! Include! Be Gracious!** And the rest will flow. "Let love be genuine" and in this way we will make it and we will "overcome evil with good".

May God bless you and your families and us all.

\*Mark Reasoner, Commentary on Second Reading,

[www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=8/31/2008&tab=3](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=8/31/2008&tab=3)

\*\**Pastoral Partner Program*, Creative Congregations Series, p.33

\*\*\*William Loader, Pentecost 11, First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages from the Lectionary,

[www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~leader/AEpPentecost11.htm](http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~leader/AEpPentecost11.htm)

\*\*\*Rev Dr Keith Condie <https://www.mentalhealthinstitute.org.au/resources/staying-mentally-well-while-staying-home>

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**9/8/2020**

