

## SERMON 10 SEPTEMBER 2017

Tomorrow I am going to an Ethical Ministry training. There are two of these compulsory trainings each year, focussing on different topics. Tomorrow we are looking at Social Media, a very complicated subject. We are given, in advance, a number of case studies which are all based on actual situations. We have to think about these, select one and write a response. It is really rather worrying reading about these situations. Whatever the particular topic for the training, they all involve boundary issues, and, obviously, unethical behaviour. For tomorrow's training I chose a situation where a minister had been invited to friend's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party. It was to be fancy dress (cringe) on the theme of "alternative futures", in other words, how one's life might have gone. The minister had decided to go as a homeless person. He dressed in a shabby coat, didn't shave for a day or two and mussed up his hair. He took a bottle in a brown paper bag. Maybe this was risky, but, one could also say, it emphasized that anyone can become homeless if their situation suddenly changes. A day or two after the party he got an email from a church member saying she thought his behaviour was inappropriate and that she had brought it to the attention of several church members. He asked her what she meant and she told him she had seen photos of him on Facebook and had re-posted them. He was not on Facebook himself and didn't use technology much so went to his son who opened up the page and showed him photos of himself looking highly disreputable and seemingly drunk. The photos were now making the rounds of the community.

When we write our responses to these case studies we have to look up the Code of Ethics and quote the paragraph, for example 1.3, 1.4 and so on. These workshops make me feel enormously sad when I realise what a state some churches, what situations some people, ministers or lay, get themselves into. I feel sad that we need to have a Code of Ethics and regulations about discipline, a Committee on Discipline and that that committee is overworked. I feel enormously sad that our churches cannot be taken for granted as being safe places. The Uniting Church has Safe

Church trainings, also compulsory, which are not just about the physical safety of our buildings but about safe and unsafe behaviour. I might have felt that this was somewhat unnecessary had I not also heard an alarming number of stories from churches about unethical and immoral behaviour. What has happened to us?

But then, this behaviour, these challenges are not new, because they are about human life and relationships. The church, being made up of humans, has its fair share of flaws. It shows us, inescapably, the gap between how we are called to be in our relationships with each other, in the church and outside of it, and the way in which so often people fall down a slippery slope of unethical behaviour that can be harmful to themselves and to others. In days past, people were hauled before their church council or Session to face accusations of immorality or whatever. I remember hearing terrible stories from maybe 300 years ago, of young women, girls, who had been seduced, and then were made to stand in front of a formidable array of men in dark suits and answer for themselves. Nowadays, as we have seen, we turn to the Regulations or Code of Ethics and set up a more remote process which is long and painful for all involved. I have been asked to be a support person for a number of people so accused, and it is not easy for anyone. It goes on for weeks by the time the process is set up and the wheels start turning.

When I read today's gospel reading, I wondered, at first, how on earth we might understand this here and now in Lindfield Uniting Church and in our own lives. How often, if we have seen someone hurt, wrongly, or even rightly accused by someone else, go and talk to the accuser? And then, if they don't listen, do we go back with two others as witnesses? We can't imagine, if that fails, telling the person that they are going to be excluded, even just for a while, to allow them to think about what has happened. That maybe what still what happens in some places, like in Amish communities, when someone is shunned, but it seems to go against what we understand the gospel to be about. It also seems to be very derogatory as Matthew records Jesus saying these people are to be treated as tax collectors and Gentiles.

There are very few people, fortunately, who like conflict. Mostly we avoid it at all costs. Yet we are being told in this reading to face up to it, deal with it and confront wrong. There was a minister who had been at a lunch with a number of colleagues, who made some derogatory remarks about someone who was not there. He himself told of how, a short time afterwards, one of the others who had been at the lunch came and knocked on his door, sat down, and pointed out to him his behaviour. The minister realised how wrong he had been and that he must always guard his tongue so he did not hurt anyone, even in their absence. He told this story because he had had to learn humility. He was very grateful to this colleague for coming to him directly.

How often do hurts linger in us? How often do we even nurse our anger at something that has happened to us or people we care about? How often are we more likely to go and offload onto someone else and spread our hurt and discontent about someone who has no right of reply and may not even realise what they have done? This is the way in which situations escalate and deep divisions can happen. Now I am not suggesting that everything gets blown out of proportion and that there are not many things which we, humbly, are better to let go of, and do. If we made every molehill into a mountain we probably would have any relationships or churches left! But some behaviours do need to be addressed. You may have seen a few weeks ago an article by Julia Baird in the weekend Sydney Morning Herald about two clergy who went for a walk along the beach to discuss what they were coming to recognise as abusive behaviour by some husbands in their congregation. As they talked it became very clear that they could not let this go unaddressed. They each of them began to speak, from the pulpit about how wrong it was to come to church on a Sunday morning and go home and hit one's partner. That should seem obvious. But it isn't always spoken about.

Jesus' teaching is very clear. Wrong behaviour should be addressed as it occurs, and, hopefully, people can be brought to an understanding of those wrong and hurtful actions. This is so openly expressed because it was essential for this young Christian community not to be torn apart by wrongdoing. These were the people who were setting out on the beginning of a journey to portray the kingdom of God here on earth. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done". They did not have Regulations or Codes of Ethics. They had the gospel. For Matthew's community, they had all the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount that was very clear both about how people should live and about how difficult and costly that way of living could be. Two thousand years later, we stand in their place.

But there is another very important dimension to this that is lost in the way the lectionary has taken out this passage we heard read. Immediately before this, Jesus has told the parable of the shepherd who has 100 sheep. One of them gets lost, and the shepherd leaves the 99 to go and find the lost one. The shepherd risks everything for the little one's sake. The verses we heard are then followed by Peter asking Jesus how often he should forgive a brother or sister who sins against him. Up to 7 times? Jesus replies 70 x7. Forgiveness in this new community of Christ's followers is vastly bigger than anything previously understood, far more than tradition and the Law expected.

What Jesus wants his disciples to understand is that the Christian community is to be a community of reconciliation. God wants the lost to be found, for forgiveness to be at the heart of life, forgiveness that is surely not easy and requires humility. At the same time, wrong and injustice have to be addressed, otherwise forgiveness can just prolong and excuse evil. The tax collectors and the Gentiles were not to be left on the outside. Indeed, as is clear, Jesus spent time with them. They were to be brought into the community with understanding so they could learn the way of God's kingdom.

There are so many things that can divide us, one from other, one part of a family from another, one church from another, one part of society from another, one faith from another. There are so many misunderstandings, well-defended claims to be in the right; so many hurts, often passed down from generation to generation. There is so much unethical behaviour. But there is also so much good, so much that offers a generous acceptance and listening even in the face of difference. There is so much, for those who seek to be people of Christ's way, that offers us encouragement, wisdom and a source of strength. I wonder what it could mean for us here to see ourselves as a community of reconciliation. To be such is always a call to be together as the individuals we are. For any group to be such a community always starts with looking at our own lives, our own hearts, with as much humility as we can, because when we carry unresolved hurts that have not found their way into the light of forgiveness, we are always living with a shadow. Sometimes, too, we need to be reconciled with our own selves and allow ourselves to know that we are offered forgiveness for secret shame we may carry. As Jesus lived among his followers, he showed them all of this. Perhaps fortunately we are not called to actually live together in that kind of community, but we are called to come together to be the church of Christ's followers that can demonstrate acceptance and love, inclusion and grace because we know this for ourselves. That's a pretty amazing thing to share!

It's not complicated stuff at heart, but it is never easy. There is costly grace involved. But let's hold this within the frame of the shepherd who goes seeking for the sheep that has got lost, the Christ who calls us to live as a community of reconciliation and shows us how to do that, and the forgiving dynamism of God in which is life. As Paul says in Corinthians: All this from God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ Jesus and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."