

Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing
And my heart's stirring before You,
LORD, my rock and redeemer.

(Psalm 19:15. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. Robert Alter, 2019.)

We are the church, we are building the Kingdom, we are sharing the Good News; that's what the song says anyway and its catchy. I can't get it out of my head, now that I've sung it, and maybe that's a good thing. An even better thing might be if I couldn't get it out of my heart, that would surely be the place for it. That would be a sign that the good news was bearing fruit. But how would anyone know it was in my heart?

Our gospel reading (Matt 18:15-20) reminds me that God's Upside-Down Kingdom, God's Commonwealth of Love, lives in hearts, it's tangible and real: It can be seen and heard and felt: It can be alive in us and it can enliven us. Now that's good news. But good news doesn't live outside our complex messy lives. It lives here and now, with us.

Conflict and brokenness and violence and indifference; they are all part and parcel of our messy human existence. And being in the church doesn't decrease these challenging realities, in my experience, it often makes them worse. Why? Maybe because we want to be seen as being good. Maybe we can be caught out trying to be 'nice Christians' and end up turning a blind eye to mild misbehaviours that fester and cause even more harm. Maybe we are too ashamed to admit when we are struggling with complex situations because we're frightened people will think we have little or no faith: Maybe we just don't trust that the forgiveness and grace of God is beyond any of our imaginings and that God knows and loves us, in all our imperfection.

I don't know; but when we hear in scripture, that we need to address other's misbehaviour, either directly in one to one conversations, or with two to one (if we aren't listened to), or even within the whole community if necessary, we can be certain that Jesus is under no illusion that his followers are, or ever will be, perfect. But if you are like me and you've tried this approach and failed then I encourage you to take serious heed of the context of this passage. Which I will be doing next time.

There was a time when I had serious concerns about the offensive behaviour of a fellow minister, he had been in the presbytery for some time and I was fairly new. I thought about trying to talk with him, but decided to talk to our presbytery minister instead, I was afraid. I was afraid because the minister in question had many friends among the other ministers, and I was afraid because he was known to be powerful and influential in the leadership team. Well, the presbytery minister did not give me the advice Jesus offers in Matthew 18. I was encouraged to take the concerns I had directly to the councils of the church. The Pastoral Relations Committee, (voluntary HR department) appeared not to recognise the depth of my concerns. It seemed as though for many years this committee had also surrendered to the overpowering behaviour of this particular minister. The short and long of it was; I only made things worse.

Now I'd like to think that the presbytery ministers of Gippsland would offer the advice Jesus laid forth in Matthew. Go to him (the offending minister) in love and humility, and do it for his benefit and not for your own self-serving ends.

Getting the balance between discipline and grace is a challenge. Our gospel reading Matthew 18:15-20 is set within the care and building up of the humble 'little ones' (Matt 18:1-14), and Jesus' emphasis on forgiveness, 'seventy seven times' (Matt 18:21-35); it looks to me like addressing others' misbehaviours can only really be attempted within the restorative processes of building others up and forgiving them. Restorative justice, like South Africa's 'truth and reconciliation commission' is built on the concept that healing relationships requires courageous conversations: These kind of conversations are not aimed at belittling or powering over others, they are our best attempts to honour the humanity and equality of each person, regardless of who's at fault. In a way they recognise that we can just as easily be the one misbehaving, because life is messy.

This is where the Upside Down Kingdom, or the Commonwealth of God, can be seen and heard and even felt. When we love someone enough to bring them to account for their misbehaviour; when we do this, we trust that they can do better, and we give them a chance to get there. We are helping them to grow and we all need to grow in some ways. None of this is all that new, we have done this, all of us, at some time or other, either with our own children, or with someone else's children. It begs the question, for me anyway, why do I freely do this with 'little ones' and not so freely with others?

For me, I guess the experience of being disciplined through power and fear is too familiar. I don't mean that I have had an excessively harsh life, but I'm aware that our systems of education, of politics, of law and order, of just about everything really, are built on the forces of fear and power.

God's system, the gospel, overturns everything. In the Commonwealth of God, it is love, not fear, that addresses misbehaviour. In the Upside-Down Kingdom, it is love not power that in humility forgives and forgives and forgives. That kind of love can be seen and heard and felt. It is not perfect, it is Godly.

When we care enough about one another, not only to bring others to account for their misdeeds, but to hope that we too will be brought to account for ours, then friends, the good news is bearing fruit. Trusting, forgiving, and reconciling relationships are at the heart of the good news of God. When we take heed of Christ's words to discipline within the framework of humility and forgiveness, the good news can be seen and heard and felt, even in the complex messiness of our lives together, here and now.

My prayer for our community is that as we get to know one another and move into the future God is calling us to, we are a blessed sign and a small taste of the reconciling life of Christ for the world. Amen.

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity.

By its very nature hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds us.

Love transforms with redemptive power.

Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love.

