

What we inherit to hold, let go, pass on or re-define?

Pitt Street Uniting Church and Glenbrook Uniting Church, 12 July, 2020

Contemporary Reflections on the theme of Inheritance

Pentecost 6A

Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

LIZ WATSON

Inheritance is of course a mix of many elements. In essence these are not things over which we have much or indeed any control.

But we do have a choice about what we make of, what we do with, all of that rich, messy, perplexing, testing, wonderful, poignant mix that constitutes our inheritance.

So, what of all of that extraordinary mix - that is, my life to this point - do I think I have held onto and treasured most? What am I especially grateful for?

Let me attempt to name the ways...

I am very grateful for my upbringing.

I was raised in a single-parent family in the 1950s when divorce was rare and very much frowned upon and when divorce proceedings were published in the papers and avidly read by all and sundry. It was a highly public affair. Not an easy circumstance. And yet, I and my two brothers, were raised in a very wise and loving home.

Both my parents were highly ethical and principled and placed great value on personal integrity and on giving back to the community, to the wider society. They emphasised hard work and not giving up nor giving in because it has all become too hard. They also valued kindness and generosity, of not jumping too quickly to judgement, of seeing the other side of an argument – perhaps more than one side.

While I cannot claim to have managed to exercise these virtues as I would have wished, they have provided standards, markers, frameworks, guides for my life.

I am immensely grateful for my upbringing in the church.

I grew up in a liberal Congregational community which encouraged questioning and exploration. And while my faith has changed and deepened over the years, I am forever grateful for that open-ended, questioning community with its emphasis on seeking and learning, of being open to change, of embracing the possibility of being stretched and challenged. It was a wonderful foundation.

My experience of university and of involvement in the Student Christian Movement remain with me as profound influences. And the friendships formed then continue to this day.

As for other gifts...

From my mother, I was given a deep love of poetry and of its importance, a valuing of language and careful and grammatical writing and a delight in good literature. Our house was full of books – something my contemporaries still comment on – all those books, books everywhere.

From my father a deep love of classical music, especially chamber music and choral music.

Poetry, literature, music feed my soul and, along with my faith, have been rich resources in dark times.

I have been blessed with wonderful friends, a splendid church community and a loving family.

I am very fortunate. I have been surrounded by, upheld by and encompassed by love, all my life; and I am immensely grateful.

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JOHN THORPE

I grew up in a poor family, so survival was our motivation along with “keeping up appearances”

But...by good fortune I became involved in the small, local Presbyterian Church whose membership included many migrants from Scotland and a high percentage of members under twenty.

I came away from this active group with a strong sense of the rights of every person and our collective responsibility to work to encourage this in the community. This became central to my work and stays with me still.

Working in rural education as a city boy (only nineteen or twenty) I was shocked to discover that indigenous children, at that time, had limited opportunities to access education and as members of families of itinerant workers could rarely find support. With others, I helped establish acceptance for a number of students, some even gaining admission to secondary school. The local Mercy Sisters were also actively providing access for many,

I later became involved in working with refugee and disadvantaged communities. We developed a positive attitude to these children, rather than the prevailing political and media approach of blaming these children for their different life experiences and labelling them therefore, as failures.

Nevertheless, I’m not confident that things have changed: for example the plight of asylum seekers seems to be largely ignored in the wider community.

Barrenness, greed, indifference, partiality, deceit, inversion, struggle. These are all elements of the ongoing story that now plays out in the time of Rebecca and Isaac, as heard in the Genesis reading today. Yet again there are no offspring in the line that has been promised to be parents of a nation, whose numbers are to be greater than the stars in the sky. That is, there are great expectations that a promise will be fulfilled. But yet again there seems to be no tangible means of it coming to fruition. It's a predicament frequently encountered in these ancient stories.

Doesn't that sound familiar? How many times have we asked: *how on earth are our dreams, our visions, our expectations, our hopes to be realized*, given the situation in which we find ourselves? Almost anyone, anywhere in the world right now, could well be asking that very same question considering the Covid 19 pandemic that has changed pretty much everything for everyone.

Just when it looks like our efforts, I don't know, to manage the situation have shown results, it flares up again - or shows its otherwise silent hidden self. Once again, many are in lockdown, wondering what it actually will take for life to get going again.

But this is life. What we have right here, right now, is life and yes it's costly - and we're noticing it. It will mean not doing things like we used to and maybe for a long time. For some it will mean a complete change of life as businesses close, incomes and plans disappear and new goals need to be set.

For others it will be debilitating as their health suffers due to the virus. For some it is fatal. These kinds of challenges are with us all the time, one way or another, not just during a pandemic. But in the pandemic, they are with us all every day and they're in our face. We can't ignore them. This is the life we have.

So, how are we going to live it? What will drive us and motivate us? What resources and skills and gifts do we have to draw upon? We often talk about having skills and being gifted. God gifting us. Now is the time to call upon those skills and gifts and be creative, visionary even, in how we can claim life and promote life in others in these challenging times.

Back to the Genesis reading. It's not fatality that Rebecca is concerned about as she observes the friction between her twin sons, something she recognises very early in the piece, in the womb. They are very different, her sons. According to tradition, the older will receive the fuller and richer inheritance and be the one to carry on the family line. The younger will receive a lesser inheritance.

Indifferent to the big picture and the vision for a great future for his people and his unique role in it, the elder son sells out for an immediate reward, for short-term gain. Now that sounds familiar too! Not a good model! The younger now has to find ways of carrying the responsibility and making something of the inheritance.

Parents show preferences, never a good practice. Deceit leads to the sell-out becoming a reality and no one is happy.

What is one to make of this as a foundation for the future? Is the future of the divine promise to be based on such treachery? Is the future world to be inhabited by people who are at each other's throats? Where is God in all of this?

Well God is in all of this. Not intervening, not interfering but working with what is there, making the most of what is possible because, regardless of what we might imagine, God's promise of a great future will be fulfilled. It just might take a few twists and turns to get there, given the tendencies of the humans involved.

Personally I find that comforting, but perhaps just a little tiring too. Clearly, for us to realise our dreams and visions - God's promised dreams and visions for us and for the world - is not about waving a magic wand. If only! But, step by step, breath by breath, day by day, relationship by relationship, generation by generation, bringing it into being and giving the promise life.

Whether the promise be to end a pandemic and all it brings, or to bring an end to all forms of inequality, degradation, slavery, poverty, violence, greed, hate, famine - all the things we work to change and all that causes it. But for Jacob the story goes on. He has to learn to face who he is and what he stands for and what his so sought-after inheritance really means.

That brings me to the reading from the Romans, attributed to Paul, where the writer talks about the law not necessarily leading people to doing the right thing, or indeed being good - no matter how good the law might be. We can see that in the previous reading between the twin sons of Esau and Jacob, even though there was clearly a law or principle about birthright and inheritance, it played no role in either of their lives. There was something stronger in each of them that played out.

Some might once have sought to disentangle the individuals from this predicament by calling it evil, even personifying it to something beyond them making them do it. But the early writers of the ancient scriptures will not have any of that. Neither will Paul.

Paul declares the law, its practices and traditions weak. That would be the Law of Moses. Weak!? Because the law was seen as set of directions to be followed by humans who were ultimately committed to little more than following its instruction and when this interfered with their own intentions it proved less effective. Just think back to Esau and Jacob for example.

Or for something perhaps closer to home, what of the closing of the borders between some states right now here in Australia. I've heard some phone-ins on radio concerned that this is unconstitutional. That the basis of the Federation is the states can freely trade. Nobody argues with that. So that would be a law or principle which, if followed to the letter right now, today, without reference to anything else, would put people's health and life seriously at risk. Rather, we are to be driven by a different motivation, the care and well-being of others. And when expressed in terms of faith that is called love.

So, regardless of what the Constitution might say about trade between the states, (which hasn't actually stopped by the way) there is something more important to consider: the welfare of all the people, our relationships with one another and the shared future we have as people sharing the same earth. We are working on it together in the circumstances. Here the greater good is to be the motivating factor for our behaviour.

That pretty much sums up what Paul is saying here. By being open to the transforming love of God's Spirit, we are free to choose to do the greater good, free to love - which is ultimately the fulfilling of the law.

Because the law as passed down by Moses, and considered divinely inspired, has only ever been to care for the well-being of people, protect the weak, give direction to the powerful and put God at the centre. Yet we have seen how this can backfire when personal wants get in the way if blindly followed without love as its motivating factor in any given situation.

To quote William Loader on this: *"when we operate out of sin and fear, we reproduce sin and fear. When we operate out of love and hope, we reproduce love and hope."*

Now that can be seen in many lives and backed up by any number of studies on the human condition. Love promotes love. Hate promotes hate. Greed promotes greed. Fear promotes fear. We should not be surprised then that Jesus so often said: *"do not be afraid"*, *"be at peace"*, *"love one another"*. No doubt that can only lead to good, even if it does at times prove a difficult path.

So where does this fit with the Mathew reading and particularly the parable of the sowing of the seeds - especially so liberally? In the early church there must have been concerns that efforts to promote love as a freeing of the people to do the right thing, to do good, was regularly falling on deaf ears.

The good news of Christ is about freeing people to love. And love leads to decisions and behaviours that promote good for all, not just some. And a person loves of their own free choice - that's what love is - because they too know what it means to be loved and to live life abundantly, even with life's twists and turns they inevitably come.

The challenge for the early church, as it is now and throughout all of time really, is that despite times of seeming failure, despite feeling our efforts have been futile, we need to keep faith in the promise that love will lead to a better future. To the world being the place where God's love is what motivates all people. That's the vision.

As soon as we start measuring the future by today's thin results or lower-than-expected standards, we will feel failures. We will feel that our efforts are futile. We will feel that some causes, even some people, even we, are not worth it. And as soon as we do that we are missing the point of love. It's not about perfection. It's about faith.

Like in a vessel at sea, we need to set our sights on the horizon - the vision, the promise - while carefully manoeuvring the ship through the peaks and troughs of the waves, mindful of the weather above and the passengers and crew on board. And every decision needs to be based on love; that is the well-being of the people, in the conditions, all the while focused on a destination ahead - which is the destination for the good of all.

There will be times when tired, we need rest. There will be times when energised, we need to carefully focus our energies. There will be times when we are confused or disgruntled or uncomfortable - or wondering just where to start, because there's so much to attend to and wondering whether we're up to it. How often do I hear that!

Whatever we do, whatever the focus, whatever the situation, whatever our condition, we need to remember we are loved with the Divine love that gave birth to the whole of

creation and is with us still. This is the powerful stuff of life itself and as we allow that love to be alive within us, it will see us through life's challenges. Not avoiding them but helping us to weather them.

That's the point of the seed being scattered seemingly with abandon, wherever and wherever and whatever is happening the scattering of the seed, doing what we do with love will make a difference. And love shown anywhere, anytime in thought, word, and deed will make a difference to the future, even in a pandemic. Even in isolation within closed borders, separated from our loved ones and friends, needing to change our behaviours, living in different circumstances.

Love will find a way. It will find a way in any time into which we come - and we come with all we inherit and all we have gathered along the way - some of which will serve us well, some which needs to be let go, for it's nothing but baggage that holds us back.

Of course that requires discernment; working out which serves best and which does not. And so many voices in our heads will try to tell us which is which! Except - to measure all we have and carry on and what passes on is not always that easy. The best measure is love, for love promises good. Love promises life and healing. Love is compassion. Love is inclusion and forgiveness. Love is grace and acceptance. Love is equality and respect. Love is reconciliation and encouragement. Love is care for the other in our midst.

This and all that carries this within it, is worth holding on to. Anything that is not does not need to be held. All of this is worth calling upon in times of challenge. It's worth passing on, for all of this is love. Any action expressed with love will make the very difference that actions lacking love will miss. So even in these challenging times in all we do, love generously scattered, even in the least likely places, will make a difference.