

Loving God and Neighbour as self

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 October, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Pentecost 21A

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

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

Entrusted with the message of the gospel, let us love deeply and act with courage, in Christ's name. Amen

Love the lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength; and love your neighbour as yourself.

It sounds simple. It sounds easy. So why do we struggle with it so much? There's a whole world that could do well to know love in so many places that it doesn't.

Of course, when we think of love, we often think of romantic love. It's the first thing that tends to come to mind and it suggests that love is about emotions and feelings.

This is not the kind of love of which Jesus speaks, nor does the law in the prophets, nor does God - although we may have feelings attached.

But love, this kind of love, is a choice. It's a commitment. It's a lifelong commitment to love. And so, as we look more deeply into the sayings of Jesus: *love your neighbour as yourself, even love your enemies*, some find that impossible.

Many do; especially if we think it's about liking someone. Not the same as loving someone. Not the same as being in love with someone, and certainly not the same as having good feelings for someone. Hard to have good feelings for enemies. It also suggests that we will have enemies! I wonder if we often think of that.

So what does love mean? What does loving God mean? What does loving your neighbour as yourself mean? One of the very early acts of love of which we read in the scriptures is at the very beginning: *in the beginning God created*.

It's an act of love to give life and allow life to flourish and grow. And in many ways that is the essential meaning of love. The essential definition of the kind of love we're talking about. To allow the other to find life abundant. John 10 10: *I have come that you may have life abundant*. Abundant life.

It's not about being rich, but it is about being free and whole and respected; acknowledged, valued, and cherished. Able to live the best life you can and given opportunities to do that.

We could look at basics like having enough to live safely, with a roof over your head, purpose in life and people around you as community to support you.

These all seem to be basics. There are many millions in the world who don't even have those. So acts of love then come into how we care for one another - our neighbour as ourself.

It's not a new teaching. In Deuteronomy we hear of how loving God, for the Levites and Priests in the temple were to fulfil their days as holy people going about their work in holy ways, making sure everything was in a way that honoured God. An act of love.

For the Scribes and the Pharisees, more in the bigger towns than the villages, you would find the Pharisees - helping the people understand what loving God was all about. What the laws and the prophets were saying to them, to put it into their everyday lives. And for the Scribes in the villages all around greater Israel, greater Palestine, it would have been how to understand these for their everyday lives.

So when Jesus said: *love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and loving your neighbour as yourself* it wasn't a new teaching.

But the Pharisees were challenging. They're challenging the teaching to wonder: does this mean that some of the laws don't count anymore? This is the fulfilment of the law! All of the laws were there so that others would have life abundant! Life free, life whole, life valued, with purpose and safety and security and in community and family.

That's what they are all about. And at the centre of all of our relationships, if we have the love of God who is the giver of life in all situations forever, then we have an understanding of who we are to be as people who live in the grace of God. In the love of God. In the community that we've been given. In the life you need in the universe that we've been given.

So it's not a new teaching at all. But it is hard if it's about following rules and regulations. They can trip us over.

But if it's about a relationship, then we can let that filter into our everyday. And of course, being human, we don't always get it right. Don't always understand it. And sometimes we allow our emotions to overtake things. Often. We are emotional people.

So it's not surprising that Jesus would say: *how many times do I forgive?* as the answer to that question? Seventy times seven, daily and maybe even for the same mistakes.

So when you think of God, what do you think of? What images come to mind? I'm not talking about a physical image. What kind of image do you sense? What characteristics of God come to you?

Provider of life? Energizer? Inspirer? Creative presence in your life? In all of our lives in the whole world. Source of inspiration and wisdom?

There are all sorts of images that can come to mind and none of them necessarily have to be physical. We don't have a physical image for God and yet quite often physical images will help us feel in touch with God. Closer to God - and somehow, closer to that essence that is the inspiration for life itself.

Shortly I'll invite you to journey with me through some images that have been inspirational images for some of the people at Pitt Street Uniting Church. Not surprisingly they're all of nature. God's creation.

If we were to add images of people into those pictures what would they be? Who would they be?

Would they be our close loved ones? Would they be our neighbours? Would they be strangers? Would they be, indeed, those that nations consider enemies? Would they be those that once may have hurt us or we have hurt? Where does God's love fit into that picture as well?

Love the Lord your God. Well we don't use the word Lord so much these days, but love the God who gives you life. Love the God who created you and gives you life forever in so many different ways, through creation, through one another, through relationship.

Love God with all your heart, all that is from the centre of you, with your soul, all that is in you.

Spirit and links with others and all your strength, because it takes effort. It is a choice and it is a way of living.

And it is a way of being community together that will allow abundant life for all.

Come, join me on the journey.