

Weaving Kindness into Daily Life

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 15 January 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Clare Brockett

Epiphany 2A

Micah 6: 6-8;

Contemporary Reading: “*Wild Geese*” by Mary Oliver in *Dream Work*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

My father spent his working life as a GP. At the end of his year as a house surgeon, (which was also the first year of his marriage to my mother), he and she moved to Christchurch, in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. He had purchased a GP practice in a very low socio economic area, and began what would become 40 years of serving and knowing families, generation upon generation. He was gentle, yet firm, and had an understated way of being in the world. I grew up, absorbing some of the stories of his life as a GP, and I realize in latter years how much his being shaped my own philosophy and understanding of care for another human being.

Let me tell you the story of the wood. It was winter, and Dad arranged for some wood to be delivered for the house. It duly arrived and was dumped outside their garage, also blocking the footpath. It was before I was born, and the house my family lived in was attached to his surgery. The house had two fireplaces and we weren't as conscious of pollution from coal fires as we are now! During the evening surgery, a well-known patient had come for her appointment. Before she left, she commented on the pile of wood. *'I see you got some wood delivered Doctor,'* she said. *'You might want to move it by tomorrow night, otherwise there's no knowing what those boys of mine will do with it.'* According to Dad, she was showing him great respect by giving him warning that if he didn't get his act together and shift the wood the next day, it might have walked down the road to her house!

You may wonder why I think about the stories of my father's working life, as I stand here to reflect on our readings and speak about my work as a chaplain in aged care.

As I have reflected on my life, and my role in working with older people, I appreciate more and more who I am and what I bring to this ministry.

I was shaped by a life of privilege and opportunity. As I became more aware of poverty, the role of education, and the sheer struggle faced by many families to make it through each day, I grew to recognize the impact we humans have on each other: Impact for growth and possibility, and impact that can hurt and crush the human spirit.

Like some of you, I have also been shaped by illness, wonderful encouraging friends, grief at the death of family and close friends, joyously falling in love and becoming a step mum. In my ministry, I have been deeply moved and humbled to sit alongside people during some of the most vulnerable and ordinary times in their lives, and known the presence and grace of God.

In New Zealand particularly, my years of ministry have also known a shadow, as the church debated and legislated whether people like me were suitable to be ministers, because I am a lesbian.

This leads me to the passage from the prophet Micah in the 8th century BCE. The prophet pictures God charging Israel with a crime and taking them to court. The 'will of God' is the topic of discussion. We could say it has been a matter for discussion ever since, especially what it means in reality!

Imagine this court room setting where a somewhat long suffering God is having it out with the people of Israel. You might expect the tone to be one of righteous anger; however it strikes me more as one of sheer bewilderment. And even in the frustration, Micah almost shows God recounting what has happened in the exodus with a sense of graciousness.

The people then respond, at first a little astounded that God could want more from them. They try to guess which offerings and sacrifices could get the back on track with God. They think, maybe, if they worship correctly, that will do it. Maybe burnt offerings will work; the typical daily offerings at the temple, maybe calves, rams, oils, or maybe, just maybe, it needs to be the firstborn child!

Micah's response of what God requires is simply stated; *do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.*

The time has come to walk the talk, enough of all this attention on the detailed practices of religious faith. To offer sacrifices out of their religious context is meaningless. They will be like empty words. It is time to get down to the nitty gritty. Time to face responsibilities, and in particular, ethical responsibilities. Time to respond to God's challenge, to remember the covenant made with God, and use this as the starting point for being in right relationship.

When I first came to live in Australia, I worked, as many of you know, in an aged care home for people living with low level dementia. For 6 months, my role was a pastoral one, offering care and providing a report about this care and the impact it had on people's lives.

It was one of the first times I had taken time to put on paper, the essence of my work, and what it meant to be made in the image of God, when your body and mind no longer function as they used to; of reflecting on the role of the church towards its members who may become hidden from view, or put in the pastoral 'too hard basket' because of our own sense of inadequacy and helplessness.

Many of us – and many of you sitting here - face changes to your health and well-being as you get older, and negotiate the challenge of living on a daily basis.

The old question of 'who am I' raises its head again, as you face some loss of movement in your body, or as your mind doesn't think as quickly as it used to, as you integrate the death of the person you have loved and look into your own future, knowing life is limited for all us.

Many of you have shown – and continue to show - great tenacity to wrestle with everyday struggles, to find new ways of doing things, adapting to limitations. You realize some things aren't as important as they once were, and you live more simply. Time shared with family and friends become more important.

In my ministry, I move among people who at times feel anxious, helpless, and who struggle to find meaning in their lives. People who were once sure of who they were, who knew they were valued, who had a recognized place in their family and community, and who now wonder how they will negotiate this strange land they have found themselves in.

I am challenged to face my own sense of helplessness as I offer love, kindness and care. I am challenged to educate myself and equip myself with the skills required, to do the hard work of learning from the life stories, not only of myself, but of others, and to face what it means to feel separated from myself and from God - at times in my life. For me, this is living out what it means to do justice.

I sometimes think people who live with dementia, are the forgotten people of our time, the modern day lepers. I continue to reflect on what it means to be made in the image of God, when we live with dementia. As we ourselves, family and friends face the impact of this illness, I wonder if we mistakenly think God is lost for people with dementia.

People may no longer know who God is for them, or be able to recognize, name the members of their close family and friends. Yet, as I remind people, God always knows us, even when we do not know or understand the mystery we name God.

I sometimes think we find it easier to think of cuddly new-born babies or bouncing toddlers as made in the image of God, than we do people with dementia. In them we see potential and hope, whereas, it is easy to fall into the trap or belief that everything is downhill leading to death the moment a diagnosis of dementia is given, that life and the fullness of life is now over, and the person is becoming lesser and lesser of who they used to be.

People with dementia are still and always will be - fully human – with feelings, with thoughts, bodily functions and attitude. Do we really believe we are less human because we have an illness that limits our function? Do we really believe we fail at this point to be made in the image of God?

Like any human being, people with dementia thrive on love and kindness, patience and understanding. It can be the most confusing of times. The words may no longer make sense, the frustrations seem difficult to manage, and the unpredictability almost too much to bear.

As people of God, we are called to understand inequality, to look out for the people others no longer see, or who they no longer recognize as needing our care and our love who may be *the least of these*. We are called to meet the struggles of illness and despair with the deepest kindness our hearts can offer. To continue to bear witness to the life of one another, even when it can seem unbearable to us.

For, you see, to be in right relationship is no easy, soft option. For me, it means facing the suffering I see in others, and facing my own suffering. It means choosing to move beyond the suffering, not letting it paralyze me, putting my words into action and walking the talk.

I offer care when people are at their most vulnerable and through this I become vulnerable myself. I come to the intersection between my strength and my vulnerability. I become both the *least of these* and the *most of these*. I am both giver and receiver, and yet it is more than this.

When I face uncertainty, vulnerability about what will best serve the people I care for, I am reminded again, that it is the serving of the people which must take precedence. This in turn takes me to my deepest learning point, asking me to draw on my skills, experience and compassion, in order to provide what is needed.

As my father before me, I am required to care for all who come into my midst, to treat all with the same respect, the same dignity, love and kindness, and not to favour one over the other. For all are equal in the eyes and the grace of God.

I have borne witness to expressions of loneliness, separation from self and God, struggles to find meaning in life, deep anxiety, and the desire to live in good connection with the people around us. I have learned to serve and not to fix, and to live in the present moment. I have come to know that kindness triumphs over judgment and resistance; and above all, that generosity of spirit can be given and received, regardless of mental capacity and physical ability.

My life is rich. I walk in the company of God's beloved people and I am forever changed. As a minister, as a human being, as a leader in pastoral care, may I continue to offer a framework for understanding what it means to *do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with my God*.