

Love and anger

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 12 August 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 12B

Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51;

“To your table,” a blessing by Jan Richardson

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

There's more bread this week.

Jesus said to the disciples, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”*

The images of *“Bread of Life”* and *“manna in the wilderness”* from last week's lectionary continue into this week's passage. The Gospel writer intentionally links Jesus' story with the faith story of the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness.

The story of God's sustaining manna there becomes enfleshed and enhanced in Jesus. Jesus has become the channel through which God is more deeply heard, more deeply understood. So, the Gospel writer begins with a story with which the people are familiar: a truth they already believe - and moves them to a new understanding of the way in which the holy is now known in Jesus.

In this case the bread that nourishes is enduring: living, breathing, dynamic bread that brings eternal life, life at its deepest, life through which meaning is forged. Jesus is offering relationship that moves and grows with the people of faith, which will sustain them in an unknown future.

Each section of John's gospel is a variation on the single theme - that the Promised One offers this life to all who believe the offer and embrace it.

The offer is not uncontroversial and dealing with rejection of the offer is an important sub-theme in John's Gospel. In the version that we heard read, the opponents of Jesus were described as *‘the religious leaders.’* However, in most English language translations, they are referred to as *“the Jews.”* But the Jews who, like Israel in the wilderness, murmur or grumble about Jesus are really only some Jews, because of course Jesus and his disciples are also Jews.

But these Jews, the unbelieving ones, the guardians of temple power, find the claim of Jesus to have come down from heaven offensive. They know his parents!

John addresses their unwillingness to understand what Jesus is about. Only those whom God draws come to Jesus. Only they are “taught by God” and therefore come. It sounds like a closed system with no possibility of border crossing.

There are huge problems in this text, if we read it as an exclusionary system in which some are destined to respond, and some not. Such a system would contradict other parts of the gospel.

The same gospel which uses this language of those who are “given” or “drawn” by God, also claims that anyone can believe, and then proceeds to identify those who choose to believe as the ones who then join the ranks of those who are “given” and “drawn.” A contradiction!

Australian theologian Bill Loader suggests it is easier to understand such language if we look at the positive statements. Those who respond positively are special. One way of saying that they special is to describe them as chosen or given.

It's similar to the kind of language that we find in romance film and fiction when people declare that their true love is their only possible partner in the whole world (“*you were meant for me*”), but the chances are really that they could have found a number of successful partners in their life.

We understand the way such affirmations work. They are not accurate descriptions, but celebratory statements. What they are doing is more important than what they are literally saying.

John's gospel, though, comes to terms with the refusal of many Jews to accept the gospel by employing these categories of exclusion.

But, it is dangerous language. John uses it often. The most striking use is on the lips of Jesus in John 8, where Jesus declares of “the Jews” that they are the devil's children (8:37-47). We heard a reference to “the devil” in the reading that Des read, from Ephesians, where it's used metaphorically as the opposite of kindness.

But, loosened from its context, words describing a group of people as “*the devil's Children*” opened the door to anti-Semitism. Even within its context, such language is not unproblematic and requires careful exposition.

It's hard for us to understand the idea of a devil! We do understand the idea of bedevilling. It is easy to bedevil those who disagree with us, effectively declaring them hopeless cases and writing them off. We do that with politicians who perpetrate injustice against refugees. I know I sometimes do it with conservative Christians who oppose the full inclusion of LGBTIQ people in the church.

The good news in the gospel is that this is precisely not God's approach to humankind. And yet the presence of such language in biblical texts has been the warrant for some of Christianity's worst abuses.

This is one of the many passages in John's gospel that has contributed to Christian intolerance and persecution of people of other faiths, especially of Jews.

The appalling history of Christian anti-Semitism requires that we do not simply attempt to understand what this passage means on its own terms but that we commit ourselves to undoing everything in our religion that contributes to “othering” the religions of others.

Some members of our congregation are involved in dialogue and relationship-building with people of other faiths. This work is crucial for overcoming the kind of enmity and distrust that at its worst can lead to hate and violence. It is the kind of conversation that Christians should have had with Jews throughout history, the kind of conversation that might have prevented the holocaust.

So as profound as this text in John's gospel might be in terms of turning us toward Jesus in order to understand the sacred, we can no longer read it without addressing Christian anti-Semitism, and all violence against religious, racial and sexual others.

The bread of life is a gift to us, but it is a gift that requires a response, a commitment to getting to know those who are seen as other in our community, and standing with them in solidarity when they are targeted because of their difference.

But we should also tell stories of hope and transformation. One of the people who inspires me in this area is Valarie Kaur who is an American civil rights activist, a lawyer and a practitioner of the Sikh religion.

This week is the 6th anniversary of the attack on a Sikh Gurdwara or temple in Wisconsin in the US, where six worshippers were gunned down by a white supremacist.

The shooter dehumanised people who were of a particular religious faith, people who because of their distinctive appearance were targets. Initially, media stories, and the Sikhs themselves, suggested that the killing was a case of mistaken identity, assuming that the killer had believed that the peaceful Sikhs were in fact Muslim.

Valarie Kaur was disturbed by the implications of this narrative.

She realised that identifying the problem as "mistaken identity" was dangerous. "Mistaken identity" implied that there is a "correct" target, and it implied that hate and violence could be legitimately directed at Muslims.

It also misses the bigger picture: we must end violence against all people – Muslim, Sikh, and anyone else – and build a world without terror.

The Sikh community made a commitment to express active solidarity with Muslims. Although they are distinct religious communities, they have shared experience of hate violence, religious bigotry, and racial profiling.

In a Washington Post article Valarie Kaur spoke of connecting the dots between all the incidences of violence that have hate at their core. Among the list of names of people killed because of their difference, was the name of Matthew Shepherd, the young gay man who was beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die in rural Wyoming in 1998.

Reading that article, I was moved because I have seldom, if ever, heard religious minorities make connections between hate and misunderstanding directed at them, and homophobia.

Since that time, six years ago, more horrible incidences of violence against minorities have happened, and they appear to have increased with the rise of nationalism and white supremacy, legitimised by political leaders such as Donald Trump.

We are not immune to this in Australia, and it comes not just from One Nation, but from Malcolm Turnbull and Peter Dutton demonising South Sudanese migrants, and Barnaby Joyce suggesting that white people are more deserving of the support of the social safety net than others.

Last year, Valarie Kaur did a Ted Talk titled *“Three lessons of revolutionary love in a time of rage.”* The talk was delivered a year after the installation of Donald Trump as President.

She recognised that to say *“love is the answer”* is a trite response unless we put flesh on the bones of love, unless our love is embodied - as Jesus’s was when he offered himself as bread for the world.

Kaur says *“Revolutionary love is the choice to enter into labour for others who do not look like us, and to enter into love for our opponents who hurt us and to love ourselves. In this era of enormous rage, when the fires are burning all around us, I believe that revolutionary love is the call of our times.”*

Her first lesson in revolutionary love is that stories can help us see no stranger – see no-one as a stranger. She learned about that in making a film in which she told the story of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a friend of her family, who was gunned down at the petrol station where he worked, the first person killed in retaliation for 9/11; murdered by a man who called himself a “patriot.”

She covered in this film, the story of the response of his widow. She asked her: *“What would you like to tell the American people in response to what happened to your husband?”* She said: *“Thank You!”* And Valerie asked her: *“What do you mean?”* And she said: *“I want to say thank you to the thousands of Americans who came to my husband’s funeral – because they showed me who we are!”*

Kaur’s second lesson in revolutionary love is forgiveness of those who hurt us; but not a facile, easy forgiveness. The story that she told took 15 years to happen. She locates the struggle not directly against individual perpetrators but against the cultures and philosophies that have radicalised them. Kaur practiced forgiveness, together with the brother of Balbir Singh Sodhi when they made the decision, to contact his murderer in prison, fifteen years later. As a result of the encounter she says: *“Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is freedom from hate.”*

Her third lesson in revolutionary love is loving ourselves, including allowing the expression of anger. This resonates with the reading from Ephesians which does not identify anger as a sin, but as a legitimate emotion that may, or may not, lead to sin. The writer says: *be angry, but do not sin.*

Kaur says: *“...for too long we been told to suppress rage, suppress grief in the name of love and forgiveness. But when we suppress our rage, that’s when it hardens into hate directed outward, but usually directed inward. But ...all of our emotions are necessary. Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger is the force that protects it.”*

The third lesson in revolutionary love is to love ourselves, to breathe through the fire of pain and refuse to let it harden into hate.

1. In order to love others – see no-one as stranger
2. In order to love opponents – see the wound in the one who hurt you
3. In order to love yourself – feel joy, feel grief, and feel anger. Breathe and push through the pain...because as Kaur says you are brave.

Jesus' words in John's gospel: "*Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life,*" were not meant to be words of condemnation but words of encouragement, words of absolute confidence in our God who holds all of lives. Our religious belief does not require us to be in agreement with certain proposals. Our religious belief asks of us to be in a state of relationship – with God, with others, with ourselves.

The gift of manna is precisely that. It is a gift. A gift for all people, inviting us to the practice of Jesus, the practice of revolutionary love, no matter our race, or creed, or religion, gender or sexuality. This manna is for the whole world.

And every body is sacred.