

The Hospitality of Strangers

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 7 July, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Craig Linn

Pentecost 4C

**Contemporary Reading: An interpretation of Psalm 149 by Jim Cotter¹
Luke 10:1-11**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/c/PittStreetUnitingChurch>

A very good morning to everyone.

Today, I'd like to talk about acceptance, but I'd like to come to this topic a little circuitously. So let me begin slowly.

One aspect of the gospels that really delights me is the raft of near impossible requirements placed on a pilgrim who really wants to follow the way of Jesus. Let's look at just three²:

- Sell all your possessions, and give the money to the poor.
- Be prepared to forgive, "*not just seven times, but seventy times seven*".
- And of course the Golden Rule, particularly when framed in terms of judgement, that is, judge others only as you would like to be judged.

These are tough directives.

Jesus was not just a great teacher; he also possessed razor keen insight into the human psyche and its predisposition to self-satisfaction – that sliding into smugness, that falling into self-righteousness. We've all been there - well at least I certainly have.

It is this raft of near impossible directives that, thankfully, pulls one up, instils a little humility, and reminds us that we are far from perfect exemplars of the path, and had best go lightly with our judgements. So when I saw the reading from Luke for today I felt I had a starting point for a relevant reflection. For while this passage is not an impossible directive, it is certainly a difficult one.

"Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals", just two together travelling the world in faith, and much of it dusty and unwelcoming. How many of us have even contemplated such a mission, let alone actually set out?

For many readers the sending out of the 70 looks like an evangelical message plain and simple – go, spread the message, and prepare the way. But I have always read it primarily as a message about acceptance.

In it we have two sides, the householders who are prepared to accept, indeed welcome, strangers into their homes; and those on the mission who are to accept the hospitality of strangers. Now asking strangers in, or choosing to dwell with strangers is not without risk – are they really friendly or are they really cannibals and likely to devour us in our sleep? But then again, as the book of Hebrews reminds us: “*show hospitality to strangers*” for you may be entertaining angels³.

As an aside, I note that even in the first century there were of course social networks; so informal introductions were probably operating – it would not have been all cold-calling at alien doors.

But none the less, these folks aren’t from our village!

But let us return to the story.

Now carrying no purse, no bag, and no sandals is a difficult physical constraint on any journey. But the more difficult part of the directive is of course less physical. Let’s say we have been fortunate and found a house of welcome and peace. For a first century Jew, and that is what the 70 sent forth would have been, life is full of rules; and the house that welcomes us may not even be Jewish. But we are told not once, but twice, that we are to eat and drink whatever is provided.

So there can be no judgemental asking if that’s pork in the pot, or if the daughter of the house who handed us the food is menstruating, or if the kitchen adequately segregates meat and dairy products.

No, there can be none of that, the directive is quite clear. It is one of acceptance of those welcoming souls we encounter on our journey and acceptance of what they offer us.

“*Eat what is set before you*”, or perhaps in other words, “*Accept life whole, as it is, knowing it to be good*”⁴.

This was certainly Jesus’ way; for he offered acceptance and inclusion to ‘the unclean’, the sick, foreigners, sinners, outcasts, women, children, and even convicted criminals. His net was wide.

But still, “*Accept life whole, as it is, knowing it to be good*” might appear to some as a little overly positive. For, in times of hardship, particularly in the autumn and winter years of one’s life, it is sometimes difficult to see the “*good*”. So let me lift a few lines from a recent book by Pico Iyer, which while not directly relevant, does end with a resonant phrase.

“*Autumn poses the question we all have to live with: How to hold on to things we love even though we know that we and they are dying. How to see the world as it is, yet find light within that truth.*”⁵

“*How to see the world as it is, yet find light within that truth.*”

I like to think that the dictum to “*Accept life whole, as it is, knowing it to be good*” is simply a more optimistic framing of Iyer’s autumn truth, but you may prefer Iyer’s version.

But I am drifting from the primary message of acceptance, something we need to explore. So let us look at three aspects of acceptance:

- first, the inner integrity that allows us to be open and accept the world, but not be overwhelmed by it;
- second, the filters we use in accepting a person or situation;
- and finally, how to hold within us the often disparate things we have accepted into our lives.

So let us start. How does one remain open to the world and not be overwhelmed by it? We cannot simply accept everything – despite the essential goodness of God’s creation there is much that is simply wrong and degrading to the human condition.

What we require is an inner integrity that is sufficiently robust that we can without fear be open to the world and allow it to flow through us. To do otherwise, is to form a hard and brittle shell around oneself and drift into personal and spiritual isolation.

Karlfried Durckheim, in paraphrase, puts it this way:

“A mature person of integrity, is not a rigid point but the capacity for movement around a firm standing axis; a capacity for change without the loss of individual form; and a capacity for penetrability which permits no breakdown of its boundaries.”⁶

So what would form and maintain “a firm standing axis” in the sea of change that both constitutes us and surrounds us? I would say, quite simply, a set of beliefs that is founded on: kindness and care for all, forgiveness, acceptance of difference, and gratitude for life itself - with these beliefs being bound together with acts of prayer and reflection.

Moreover, we need to recognise that beliefs are not simply static things, but have their own life, and ways, and strategies for survival. So what we are really looking for is a healthy and dynamic community of beliefs that will work cohesively together for the good. Given that we are a part of the church let us call this community of beliefs a religion, but if calling it a philosophy makes you more comfortable, then that’s also fine.

Here’s a quote from the poet and writer Christian Wiman:

“To have faith in a religion, any religion, is to accept at some primary level that its particular language of words and symbols says something true about reality. This doesn’t mean that the words and symbols are reality (that’s fundamentalism), nor that you will ever master those words and symbols well enough to regard reality as some fixed thing. What it does mean, though, is that ‘you can no more be religious in general than you can speak language in general’, and that the only way to deepen your knowledge and experience of ultimate divinity is to deepen your knowledge and experience of the all-too-temporal symbols and language of a particular religion.”⁷

I hasten to add that Wiman is not implying other faiths should not be considered or explored, but that they should act to enhance and throw fresh light on one’s own core religion where true depth is to be sought.

It is this core religion, that wonderful community of living beliefs, that forms the “firm standing axis” that allows one “to accept the world whole, as it is, knowing it to be good” or alternatively, “to see the world as it is, yet find light within that truth.”

Now, let me turn to the second aspect of this reflection: the filters we use in accepting a person, a situation, or indeed the beliefs that best constitute a healthy version of our religion.

I believe the message of Jesus is simple here. Use a few positive filters, rather than a myriad of negative ones.

Ask yourself:

- Is this person kind and caring, do they speak truthfully but without harshness, are they quick to forgive, do they demonstrate fidelity to friends and loved ones?

Well accept them.

- Do you think they have the potential to come to some of these virtues?

Well accept them.

- Are they completely unknown to you, but have shown you kindness by welcoming you into their lives?

Take the risk and accept them, or in Luke's words "Remain in the . . . house, eating and drinking whatever they provide"

That is the positive approach.

There are, however, the negative filters – the filters of exclusion. These are the entrenched attitudes, ideologies, and dogma that are so tightly held by some that they fail to notice how easily these thought patterns can mutate into bigotry and exclusion of the other. Any difference can be enough for these people, be it: gender, skin colour, sexuality, race, ethnicity, . . . even Visa status. These people have long lists, and are ever ready to selectively quote chapter and verse rather than engage in mature discussion.

No good comes of this approach, nothing but division.

But what I've just said can all seem a bit trite, a little too simplistic. It's not just a matter of accepting the downtrodden and the poor. There is also the thorny issue of how to find acceptance in our hearts for those who enjoy privilege and feel it is their right to judge others.

Again let us look at Jesus, and his readiness to accept and include. Not only were those at the bottom of the social order accepted, but even the privileged and powerful if they would but show the smallest chink of openness.⁸

- So you have leprosy, that's OK, come closer, I accept you.
- So, you've had five husbands already, you've got a new fellow at home, and you're still hanging around this well - well I'll still talk to you, for you are accepted.

So far, not too big a stretch, but now . . .

- Hmm . . . So, you're a Centurion, you've oppressed and brutalised my fellow Jews for decades, and now you turn to me to have your servant healed. Well . . . Ok, the simple act of asking in humility has made space for acceptance and healing in the world. Go, your servant is healed.

But that was Jesus.

How are we to respond to those who do not share our views on acceptance? Those who demand the right to lecture already marginalised communities and tell them why they are not worthy of acceptance.

To at least start to approach this difficult issue I'd like to draw on the 2019 essay *The Three Dimensions of Freedom*⁹ by Billy Bragg. Bragg is a performer, an activist, and a writer and in his short essay he sought to analyse the relationship between liberty, equality, and accountability - and how these influence human agency.

I'd like to simplify and rephrase, in terms of "acceptance", one of the arguments he mounts in that essay.

Specifically, let me put it like this:

Be prepared to accept the many people who "offend" you, but equally well be prepared to stand firm against those who would "abuse" you or others.

The transition from "offence" to "abuse" thus represents a crossing of the Rubicon, so to speak. When that river is crossed, it is not just a matter of dissenting opinions, the fact of the matter is that people, sometimes very vulnerable people, are hurt.

We cannot, and should not accept this. Full stop.

There are countless academic analyses of where the boundary line between "offence" and "abuse" might lie. By all means read them, they have their value, but do not forget that "in the tenderest spots of human experience, nothing is more offensive than intellectualised understanding". For ultimately, this boundary line is actually felt, and sometimes very painfully, by those who have not been accepted. It is the rejected who know best where that line lies. So let all who enjoy privilege take a very simple step, ask members of marginalised communities for their views, and listen to their answers.

Finally, let me turn to the third aspect of acceptance - how to live with all that we have accepted.

It is one thing to let the world pass through you, but we are human and all of us seek to hold onto relationships and beliefs that are dear to us. Yet, as Esther de Waal puts it, this often entails "*living with contradiction*", for the things we accept may not all fit together as neatly as we would like. Using the Benedictine tradition as a framework, De Waal tells us that acceptance of contradiction is in fact essential to wholeness, both personal and societal wholeness. And in discussing the problems of fundamentalism, whether religious or political, she notes that "*the fundamentalist looking for certainty knows nothing of living with contradiction, the challenge of hearing the other, of openness to being changed.*"¹⁰

So how do we mediate the contradictions we have accepted in good faith?

De Waal expresses her "*need for withdrawal, for times of solitude and silence and contemplative prayer*"¹⁰; some 40 years earlier the Swiss writer Max Picard noted that those who hold the "*substance of silence*" within themselves "*may possess qualities that are incompatible but avoid a crisis, for there is room for contradictions within the substance of silence*"¹¹.

Ruminating on Picard's words Thomas Merton, a man who battled many inner contradictions, concluded simply that "*Contradictions have always existed in the soul of man. But it is only when we prefer analysis to silence that they become a constant and insoluble problem. We are not meant to resolve all contradictions but to live with them and rise above them*"¹².

And yes, there are plenty of contradictions in this reflection, but that is the fluid nature of acceptance, it is the balsam that lets differences heal.

So let us all,

"Accept life whole, as it is, knowing it to be good"

and offer this small prayer.

Beloved God, on this Communion Sunday, let us not only accept your presence, but let us accept each other wholeheartedly, not seeking to make each other, other than we are.

Amen.

References

1. Cotter, Jim. *Psalms for a Pilgrim People*. Morehouse Publishing, 1998. pp. 324-325.
2. Matthew 19:20-22, Matthew 18:21-22, Matthew 7:1-2 combined with Matthew 7:12
3. Hebrews 13:2
4. I have constructed the imperative "Accept life whole . . ." by combining phrases from two ancient sources, the *Tao Te Ching* and *Genesis*. The first part I have drawn from Chapter 21 of the *Tao Te Ching* (1944 Witter Bynner translation): "*The surest test if a man be sane is if he accepts life whole, as it is.*" The second part is drawn from Genesis 1:31 "*God saw everything [the world and all life] that he had made, and indeed, it was very good*".
5. Iyer, Pico. *Autumn Light*. Bloomsbury, 2019. p. 14
6. Durckheim, Karlfried Graf. *Hara – The Vital Center of Man*. Inner Traditions 2004. p. 75. Original German Publication 1956, English Translation Sylvia-Monica von Kospoth and Estelle R. Healey.
7. Wiman, Christian. *My Bright Abyss – Meditation of a Modern Believer*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 2014. p. 141, p. 19 Note: the internal sub-quote within the large quote from Wiman comes from George Lindbeck.
8. Matthew 8:1-4, John 4:6-26, Matthew 8:5-13
9. Bragg, Billy. *The Three Dimensions of Freedom*. Faber&Faber 2019. pp. 58-68
10. de Waal, Esther. *Living with Contradiction*. Canterbury Press 2003. p. x (ie. second page of Preface to Second Edition), p.101
11. Picard, Max. *The World of Silence*. Eighth Day Press 2002. p. 66. First published 1948, translation by Stanley Godwin.
12. Merton, Thomas. *Thoughts in Solitude*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 1999. pp. 80-81.