

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 10th September 2017*  
*Matthew 18. 15-20 (Ezekiel 33.7-11; Romans 13.8-14)*

## ***Love and Listening***

*Alison Hobbs*

Last week we celebrated a wedding here: Tom and Ulli's, and as many of you know, that was my son and, now-daughter-in-law's wedding. So we had lots of both Tom's family and Ulli's family descending. It was brilliant, we had a great time, everyone was full of love and happiness.

Well, almost.

Well, okay, it had its moments.

Well, okay, so over the three days people were typically gathered there was the odd wrinkle and bang; the occasional frustration, irritation and offence taken.

Was that inevitable?

Well, families can be messy, individuals can be carrying a heap of baggage that we are unaware of until a certain level of sleep deficit and high emotions make the cracks appear.

Then things are said that get misinterpreted, small hurts get bigger and grievances are aired.

However, I discovered when I looked back, airing the grievance had resulted in an opportunity to at least attempt to hear each other, to later give and receive flowers as tokens of forgiveness and a desire to live in love and greater understanding, and attempt to be closer and more attentive to each others' needs subsequently, and hopefully for the long term.

So when I saw the readings for today, they felt very relevant to a little bit of the experience of last weekend that was for me, not so happy.

I was struck in this gospel passage by the directness of Jesus' teaching. So often he speaks and teaches in parables, pointing indirectly through stories to the consequences of our actions and allowing us to make up our own minds which is the better course, the way we will follow.

Here, it is absolutely plain instruction.

Matthew recounts this instruction with Jesus using the term 'church' which would have been the new word for the followers of Christ that was coined after Jesus' death.

Jesus wouldn't have used the word 'church' but presumably was addressing that community that was forming around him that came to be the church. And that is us.

Christ's family on earth, and like every family, prone to fallouts.

Whichever way we are made temperamentally, this seemingly simple teaching is aimed at correcting us.

If we are inclined to bottle up our feelings and never let on, it is an instruction to take courage and admit to how we feel – which would probably be a really scary prospect.

If we find it easy to admit how we feel but only and always to a third party, it is a clear instruction to take it first, and only, to the perpetrator. Mmm.

If we are genuinely terribly good at turning the other cheek and 'not minding' when wronged, it is a call nonetheless. to graciously correct the behaviour and point out the fault.

Following this instruction means not working in triangles:

it is the very opposite of the model where the offended person off-loads to a friend who takes it on themselves to tackle the offender.

It is the very opposite of the sides-taking that happens when the rumour-mongers get to work and the offence is told and re-told in many whispered words throughout whole chunks of the community.

We all know the misinterpretation, judgements and general poison that can generate from those stories.

There can be a place for wise counsel to be sought and given by a third party, sometimes processing the situation with another trusted person is a necessary intermediate step.

Sometimes a mediator may be appropriate.

Jesus makes no comment either way about that but he is very clear that the relationship that needs to be restored is between two people who need to find a way to deal with it honestly and straight.

It seems **not**, though, to be in order to gain anything for the one who is offended, the victim. There's no mention of a good argument or show down, no mention of getting a retraction, explanation or apology.

The purpose of this seems to be in order to regain into the community, the one who has sinned. The one who has committed the sin is the focus, they are the ones who by their actions have potentially isolated themselves longer term from the community.

If this is not about getting even, it has got to start with the wronged person having forgiven the one who offended them. The wronged person cannot go to meet the other in hot-headed accusatory mode: if that is your temperament and inclination you have to first cool down and find that difficult and elusive stance of forgiveness.

Only in the mode of forgiveness when the offended person has been able to put aside their own sense of hurt and being wronged, can they talk to the offender, if it is genuinely to be for the purpose of reproving the other and regaining them in forgiveness into the community.

At this point I'd like to take a step back into the reading from Paul, because its all starting to sound very hard to understand, let alone do.

The reading from Paul starts "*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*"

The only thing we can never over-spend is love.

To love irrespective of the recipients merit: we are not called to like each other but to love each other.

To like each other is a happy bonus but to love each other is our challenge.

If we are truly to be children of God we must love as God loves us.

No fault in the neighbour and no sufficiency in ourselves excuses us from love.

Love is the fulfilling of the law.

If we can achieve this gracious, God-given love, and find in ourselves the means to love the one who has offended us, we are going to come to the meeting in the right mind.

First we must know ourselves to be wholly and fully loved by God, to be dependent on the love from God, first and foremost, then it is an awful lot easier to contemplate rejection and hurt from another because we are not primarily dependant on *their* love and approval, however desirable it might be.

It is in this spirit of limitless love and forgiveness that we go, initially privately, to seek reconciliation with one who has hurt us – sinned against us.

Going privately allows the other to save face and be quietly reunited.

However, if the love and trust offered to the offender is not heard, another or two others may come alongside; and if necessary, the whole body of the church.

At each step in this, the redeeming action is for the one who is at fault to listen.

A very passive and non-aggressive stance.

You have to be very open and quiet to be able to listen.

When we find ourselves in the position of the one who is at fault – and we will from time to time – listening to the hurt, owning that we were at fault, repenting and accepting the forgiveness and love of the one we have wronged is really hard – so much easier to justify our position and wrong actions – but so necessary to accept the offered reproof and be reunited.

As the church family, we have to strive to manage this sort of way of relating to each other.

It is a way that is characterised by love and trust.

I remember hearing that Bishop John's single rule for a group joining him on pilgrimage was that no-one was allowed to talk about anyone else.

It struck me as a good starting point for being a community that could aim to communicate directly with each other, and not indirectly through another.

To be a community that practises love and forgiveness because without such forgiveness, the community cannot correct the wayward,

pray as a united front,

and have Christ in its midst.

*Amen*