

## Cultivating Love

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22:25-31

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

This week two members of the congregation shared their reflections on how the lectionary readings resonated with their life experiences. Ann worked as a clinical psychologist for many years and explores the nature of forgiveness. Rob continues to use his professional skills as a volunteer with vulnerable people in a variety of settings.

### Forgiving and Forgetting

I've been reflecting again about forgiving and forgetting since Elaine's recent thought provoking sermon in which she spoke about this. The process is intimately related to the Scripture we just heard from 1 John, about our starting place – being loved by God – and what follows: becoming conduits of this love to others.

A bit of background:

I studied psychology because I've always been interested in what people do, and why they do it -- as well as how best to achieve good mental health.

I've come to believe that in general people do the best they can – which, admittedly, in some cases leaves a lot to be desired. But we're all children whom God loves.

I was also fortunate some years ago to hear Bill Loader speak about the meaning of Christian “jargon” in every day language. He described “sin” as anything within us that compromises our ability to channel God to other people. I can't help but reflect how relevant this is to John's letter, in which he asserts that as God loves us, we must love each other.

From all of that, and more, come my ideas about forgiving and forgetting.

Of course, to start with we have Jesus charging us to forgive “seventy times seven.”

There are many interpretations and beliefs about “forgive and forget”. I don't mean to be simplistic about a clearly potentially complex process – i.e. our response as God's children to everything from petty annoyances to evil. And I'm well aware that the circumstances in my own life which have involved the question of forgiveness are in no way comparable to the injustice and/or evil that others may have experienced.

#### Some points about forgiveness:

The inability or unwillingness to forgive may arise from justified feelings of grievance and/or loss. It may involve anger, blaming, a perception of unfairness and victimhood, a feeling of “stuckness” and inevitability – and maybe much more.

We cannot control what other people do – specifically we cannot make the offender respond in a certain way. We can only decide what we will do in response, without taking account of whether the offender is remorseful or not.

From a mental health perspective, there's a good reason for us -- for our own sake -- to forgive others. It may involve the recognition that it's just too weighty/too

unhealthy to carry all those negative emotions, like anger, around – and about something that has happened/that cannot now be changed.

Carrying all that emotional sludge also results in a lot of what I think Bill Loader called “icky sticky goo” occluding the path within ourselves through which God’s love is channelled to others, so this way is also consistent with our maintaining ourselves to be free to love one another, as John advocates.

Finally, forgiveness removes that emotional load attached to the event/events of concern. So we can say “That awful thing happened” as a dispassionate description of the offensive act.

Some people seem to be able to forgive without greatly thinking about it; for others it is a hard decision – which may not come easily.

Forgiveness may not be a once-only action, but may involve an ongoing process.

#### About forgetting:

Once forgiveness has been achieved or at least commenced, forgetting becomes a thoughtful decision – that is, involving a rational choice about the consequences of our putting this event in the past – or not.

For some events, forgetting may be a sensible outcome. For example, think of a random, unintentional event that may have caused harm to oneself, where the chance of it recurring may be assessed as close to zero. You possibly won’t actually forget it – and in fact it may be a story you dine out on, but you’ll not be preoccupied by it, it won’t be eating away at you.

In circumstances of possible or even probable recurring or continuing harm or abuse to you and/or others, it is not rational – and it may even be irresponsible – to forget. Following forgiveness, however, the response becomes a logical consideration of how best to manage the situation – for example, by avoidance of the offender or by developing strategies to prevent recurrence of the problematic behaviour or by protecting yourself (and/or others) from future harm, or through exploring other options.

At this point this is where I am -- trying to find a way for me to best express God’s love, and to remember that we’re all God’s children. John’s words are so compelling that I need to keep trying to work on the human factors that may hinder my ability to follow his invitation.

## UNKNOWNINGS

In the Gospel reading John 15: 1-8 the branches that do not bear fruit are broken off and the ones that do are pruned so they will bear more fruit. Vines, fig trees, olive branches and the scattering of grain are metaphors with which we are familiar.

However, the commentator I read makes much of verse .... John 15, “Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit” One translation uses the word ‘abide’

So I have been drawn to ponder about what it is to remain in Christ?

Relating to this the writer, a Korean, writes of the euphemistically named comfort women and requirement that the Japanese be forgiven.

I don’t have enemies who persecute me. Nor do I have many opportunities to be a Good Samaritan

So how might I remain?

The Rev George Davies has spent most of his ministry working with marginalised folk. When last I heard him at St Aidan's he urged us to acknowledge the people who sell The Big Issue. My practice had been not to make eye contact as I do not want to buy the magazine. I have heeded George's words and now greet them and never has anyone asked me to buy the magazine.

So, for me, one way to think of remaining is to look for opportunities to acknowledge others.

I will never forget walking down a corridor of Qe2 taking a small bunch of obviously home-grown flowers to see our daughter the morning after she had been hospitalised with a brain tumour. A woman looked at me and smiled. It was smile of recognition "I can see you are distressed" and her smile meant so much to me.

I can think of these acknowledgments as 'unknowings'. I may never know what my acknowledgments of others might mean to them. Just as the woman in the hospital will never know that her smile meant so much to me.

So, the noun practice, with a c, to name acknowledgments as a way of remaining and the verb practising, with an s, as a reminder to look for opportunities to do it

Perhaps what I am getting at is the sentiments of what we saw often years ago as a car sticker:

"Practise random of kindness and senseless beauty."