

Sermon Series:

Love One Another

LOVE IN ACTION – Mark 1:40-45; 1 John 3:16-18

Becky Douglass (03/03/2024)

If you have been around children in last 40 years or so, then you know all about Elmo. He is one of the most famous of the Sesame Street puppets. He is particularly known for being friendly and caring. Like all famous people these days, he keeps in touch with his adult fans through his social media accounts and earlier this year, he posted a question: “Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?”

Well, this post unleashed days of heavy action on social media. Within a day or so, the post had been viewed by over 183 million people, and received 14,000 replies. That had grown to over 20,000 replies when I checked it this week. The overwhelming majority of replies were talking of people’s sadness, loneliness, anxiety and fear.

A day later, Elmo responded to what was happening by saying, “Wow! Elmo is glad he asked! Elmo learned that it is important to ask a friend how they are doing. Elmo will check in again soon, friends! Elmo loves you. ♥”

This interaction had many commentators wondering why people felt more comfortable sharing their problems with a puppet than with those closest to them. However, therapists have discovered that children often say things to puppets that they can’t or won’t to talk to adults about. It is hard to ask for help, to be vulnerable, and trust others. I’m not surprised that adults are no different to children in this.

Through this series, I think we’ve seen that God wants the community of His people, the church, to be a place where people’s vulnerability is met with loving care. But it is not always easy to know how to do this. I think Jesus’s example and the words of John can give us some guidelines.

An example of Jesus’s love (Mark 1:40-45)

One day, Jesus was approached by a man with leprosy. In Jesus’s day, the term leprosy could refer to any number of skin conditions that were highly contagious. Because of how easily these conditions spread, the law required people with leprosy to isolate from the rest of society. They couldn’t live in a town or work with other people or attend religious observances. And if they wanted to talk to someone, they were required to stand at a

distance of 50 paces from them. This reminded me of the regulations we lived with under COVID! Fortunately, our isolation was temporary - we could get better if we got sick and we knew medicine would eventually make the disease less problematic. For those with leprosy, there was no hope of getting better, no hope of rejoining family and friends. They were cut off forever.

This man, however, was so desperate that he was willing to break the law by coming right up to Jesus and kneeling at his feet. This action meant that Jesus would have to isolate for a while before he could do certain things – a bit like the early days when Scott and I had to isolate for a week because we were in the Chemist at the same time as someone with COVID. But this man was willing to be vulnerable and risk Jesus's anger and rejection. He cried out, "*If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.*" (v. 40) He knew Jesus could heal, but was He willing to heal an outcast like him?

However, Jesus's response was not rejection. We are told that he was "*moved with compassion*" and said, "*I am willing*". Instead, of pulling back from the leper, he moved forward and touched him. He didn't have to do that. There are many accounts in the Gospels where Jesus healed with just a word. But by touching the man, he showed his acceptance of him. Jesus may have been the first person to touch the man for years.

Jesus's touch healed the man both physically and emotionally. He was now able to re-enter the community and be restored to his family. His life was turned around because of Jesus's compassion. However, this action did not come without a cost for Jesus. We are told He was forced out of the towns into the wilderness because so many people were attracted to this kind of love and compassion. They wanted to experience it as well.

Our love for others – 1 John 3:16-18

John talks about this kind of love at work among brothers and sisters in Christ.

1. Real love comes from God

We see real love in Jesus's incarnation. Stories like the one we read today, give us a picture of responding in loving ways. And the cross demonstrates the extent to which true love will go – even to giving up one's life. This is the kind of love we should have for our brothers and sisters in Christ. However, our own love can never reach this standard. It is only as God's love is poured out in our hearts and changes us that we are able to love others. It is not our love at all. It is God's love working through us. My mother loved to sing a hymn from her childhood which talked about this. The chorus went:

Channels only, blessed Master,
But with all Thy wondrous power
Flowing through us, Thou canst use us
Every day and every hour.

As God fills us with His love, if we allow it, God's love will flow through us to those around us. He can use us to spread His love to those who need it most.

2. Real love shows itself in action

This love will show itself in loving actions. Jesus told the leper he was willing and then He reached out and touched the man, healing him and making him clean. John makes a very strong statement about the need for actions.

If someone has this world's resources and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion – how can God's love be in that person? Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. (v. 17-18)

And lest we think this is just about giving people money, the phrase “this world's resources” does not mean only money, it is referring to all those things which help people to live in this world. It includes money, but also resources like physical labour and skills and even companionship. We all have some of “this world's resources” which we can share with others in need.

I've been reading a book called “Life Together” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a minister and seminary professor who was imprisoned and ultimately executed by the Nazis for his resistance to Hitler. It is a classic work on building Christian fellowship and community. He includes the following list of how to lovingly serve each other that I found very thought-provoking.

Before you do anything you need to cultivate the right attitude toward other people.

- **Accept** people as they are. You don't have to approve of everything they do, but every person is made in the image of God and loved by Him and therefore we need to learn to accept them with God's love.
- Be willing to **defer** to others. This doesn't mean that our own desires and preferences don't matter, but we need to be willing to not always have things our own way. Sometimes we will need to be uncomfortable ourselves in order to make others comfortable.
- Cultivate the skill of **listening** carefully to others. Often, we come to someone with our own assumptions about what is needed. Only by learning to close our mouths and listen carefully will we be able to help others in ways which are truly helpful. This is not easy, and it takes time to learn how to ask good questions and listen well.

Once we have begun to develop these attitudes of acceptance, deferment, and listening, we will be able to show our love in concrete actions.

- **Pray** for God's work in the lives of others. And as you pray, ask God to show you how you can best help. This is spiritual work – we are loving people with His love – and we need His guidance to do this well.
- Being willing to **serve** in any way that is needed. Service can often be menial work and that requires humility. Service may involve more than what is easy to give, but love gives generously. If we make ourselves available for whatever God wants to do through us, then He will enable us to do what He calls us to do.
- Finally, we can **speak** the truth, encouragement and comfort that is needed. Too often, we start here, but I think Bonhoeffer is wise to put it at the end. If we listen well to others, and to God, He will give us the right words to say at the right moment. If we start with words, we often miss the mark and are less helpful and sometimes even hurtful. But we mustn't be afraid to speak – just be sensitive to what is needed and trust God's guidance.

Loving others is not simple or easy! But with God's love within us, and dependence on Him for guidance, we can love others as God calls us to love one another. And, just as Jesus' love attracted people, I believe our love for each other will spill over to those around and attract others to God.

Grace Christian Church

So how does this impact our church? We started this series by looking at our verse for this year:

And this is His commandment: We must believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as He commanded us. (1 John 3:23)

As the Council thought about what God wants us to focus on this year, we have used this to guide our priorities which you will find in the 2024 Mission Plan. For the last four years, most of our work has been determined by some things outside our control. We needed to deal with the realities of COVID, and Rob's departure, and new government requirements for how we function in safe and responsible ways. But now, these are largely dealt with, and now, I believe, we are in a good position to look ahead to what God has for us in the future. We have a great church in so many ways, but as the world around us changes and our needs change, we need to think about how this impacts our life together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

If we were a church of young people and families, we would need to think about things like weddings and parenting classes and playgroups and Kids Clubs. These are things that are needed to love and care for young people and families. But that is not who we are now – we are a church of older people whose children are now adults with their own families. Many of us are retired – or are looking forward to retirement! – and our time is structured differently. We are dealing with aging bodies and, painfully, funerals are more common than weddings. So – given that this is who we are, what does it mean for us to love each other? What kinds of activities and structures will help us do this? What kind of care is helpful?

Under the “LIVE” section of the Mission Plan you will find a series of questions that we will be exploring this year to help us think about this. There may be others we need to add to this, but these are the ones we will start with.

- **What more can we do to ensure people make connections and feel they belong?** This is partly about welcoming new people to the church, but also thinking about how we help people to stay connected as their circumstances change. For instance, how do we stay in touch with people if they are in aged care or are not well enough to get out much? What role can this church family play in their lives then?
- **How can we help people to continue to grow as Christians and contribute to the life of the church as their abilities and needs change?** From my years working with children and youth, I know that people need different things at different stages of their life. A preschool Sunday School class is quite different to a High School class! So – what is most helpful and appropriate for us in this season of our lives? I believe that everyone can have a meaningful relationship with God, but it doesn't always look the same as they go through life. What we have done for the past 30 or 40 years may not be what we need now or can do now – and that is OK. How can we help each other make these adjustments?
- **What might help us become more comfortable and skilled in giving and receiving care?** One of the unfortunate realities of growing older is that we are no longer as independent as we used to be. But it is often very hard to admit we need help. And it can be hard to know how to give help without making those on the receiving end feel inferior. On the one hand, we need to learn how to listen and serve better. On the other hand, we need to learn how to share our needs and allow others to help. Neither comes

naturally! In May, I have invited a friend who trains people in this area to visit us one Sunday and share some things she has learned. I think this will be beneficial for all of us.

- **How can we improve our facilities so they are safe and accessible for everyone?**

We have a great building, and its flexibility to be used in many different ways is a blessing. However, there are a few accessibility and safety issues that we need to look at. As well as our Sunday gatherings, we also host the Crossroads group which has some special needs. And let's face it – none of us is as agile as we used to be! Now seems a good time to do this to set us up for the future.

Council will be looking at these things over the coming months and we'd appreciate everyone's input. Please feel free to write down your thoughts and give them to Becky, Karen, or Graeme. You can either email them or you will find a form with these on the Welcome desk in the foyer. Contributions can be anonymous or named. The Council will be discussing the last question about our facilities at our meeting later this month, so if you have thoughts about this it would be helpful to hear them before then.

Conclusion

As we finish this series, I'd like to share a picture that we have up in our kitchen/dining area at the manse. I've always loved the traditional Aboriginal drawings which tell a story. I became interested in these drawings when we worked for a time with Australian Indigenous Ministries and saw some of the drawings that their people were making as they taught the Bible. A few years ago, the Bible Society collected a book full of these drawings done by Aboriginal Christians. Through this book, I discovered an artist named Safina Fergie.

When we moved into the manse, we purchased a print of one of her artworks called "Commitment to Care" which depicts the desire to care for people with long-term needs within the community. The blue background represents water which gives life and security in the arid outback. The gum leaf is a symbol for welcome. The figures are seated around the campfire, the centre of the life of the community. If you look closer, you will see that the u-shaped figures are actually two figures – one wrapped around and supporting the other. This represents the need to come alongside those in need and care for them to keep them connected to the community. You'll also notice other circles around the outside which represent other services in the community which help provide care. I think it is a wonderful depiction of the love and care in the family of God. There is just one thing I would add to this picture. In the church, the "campfire" around which we gather is not a common ancestry, or interest, or even ideas and beliefs. Our "campfire", that which holds us together, is God himself. His love caused Jesus to give His life for us so that we can be reconciled to Him. His love is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. His love binds us together and enables our love. His love is what makes it safe for us to be vulnerable and ask for help and give help even when we don't do this perfectly. The glow of His love colours everything we are and do – it's what makes us His family.



GRACE CHRISTIAN CHURCH 2024 MISSION PLAN

Grace Christian Church is an older yet robust community of God's people who are learning to **BELIEVE**, **LIVE**, and **SHARE** God's gracious salvation in Jesus Christ that leads to life in Him.



Verse for 2024

And this is His commandment: We must believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. (1 John 3:23)

BELIEVE

We base our lives on God's truth found in His Word.

- Preaching series: God's presence; Love one another; Prayers of the Bible; Luke 4-9; Genesis 12-25 (Abraham); Romans 8
- Grace Groups: Apostles Creed; Luke 4-9; Hosea; Book study
- Provide the service videos and printed sermons for those who need them.

LIVE

We walk with Christ as He changes us to be like Him.

- **Focus: What does it mean to love each other as family in this season of the life of our church?**
 - **What more can we do to ensure that people make connections and feel they belong?**
 - **How can we help people to continue to grow as Christians and contribute to the life of the church as their abilities and needs change?**
 - **What might help us become more comfortable and skilled in giving and receiving care?**
 - **How can we improve our facilities so they are safe and accessible for everyone?**
- Governance
 - Finish getting all Safe Church requirements in place (almost there!)

SHARE

We bring the transforming power of Christ to our community.

- Continue our loving service to our community through Friendship Group, Crossroads, Padstow Community Care, Yallambee services, and school ministries.
- Support our international ministry partners through finances, prayers and personal encouragement.
- Keep people engaged with these ministries through the Prayer Update and regular Missions Sundays.