

## Healthy relationships

Readings: James 3:3-8 & Mark 9:14-29

Recently I listened to someone describe their adult children's financial management. One lot didn't manage their money well. They earned plenty but spent more and the parents were always lending them money. The parents had always budgeted well and taught their children to do the same. However, now, the son and his wife wouldn't listen to the parents even though the parents frequently told them what to do!

I wanted to retort "Of course not! I wouldn't listen either, if I was him and if you speak to him in the same superior, judgemental tone you are using with me right now!"

My fellow travellers remarked on the way home "We saw you sitting next to so and so. Whenever we see them approaching, we head in the opposite direction." I could understand why. In the space of the hour and a half I sat next to this person, she had told several people exactly what they should do in relation almost every circumstance that was discussed.

This person is a Christian who means very well.

They have a caring heart but their propensity to dish out advice while not really listening doesn't make for good healthy relationships with anyone.

People avoid this well-meaning person like the plague.

The truth is that we all have relationships that are difficult at times. Who among us doesn't want healthy relationships? But is that desire in the too hard basket? Is it realistic?

There are two members of our extended whanau who haven't spoken to each other for years. Each one pretends they prefer it that way but they don't fool anyone. It's simply easier that way. They don't have to face difficult conflict or do any work on themselves.

One of the things I love about Jesus is that he never shies away from the hard stuff. Coming to bring reconciliation was his core purpose. Micah reminded us last week that Jesus was (and is) a peacemaker and not a peacekeeper.

This morning I want to think about the way Jesus brought about peace. I agree with Micah that it often meant he had to stir up conflict and nearly always had to dig deeper than the surface. I strongly believe that if we have the courage to walk the way Jesus did, then we too can be reconcilers; peacemakers in healthy relationships.

Micah quoted Dr Martin Luther King who preached on having a tough mind and a soft heart. A tough mind Dr King said is " characterised by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgment." He noticed that far too many Christians are soft-minded and gullible.

I believe this gullibility comes about because we believe that we are not good enough; not worthy of God's love for us or God's call on our lives. That is why songs like "Good, good Father" minister so deeply to us. God is good and we need the love of this tender-hearted God so deeply.

Knowing we are loved by God gives us a security that nothing else can. It means we can live with it when others don't appear to approve of us. We may prefer to receive their love and encouragement but we can cope when they don't.

There are always times when people won't approve of us or our actions. If we know we are held in the arms of our heavenly parent, that's okay. Being secure in God's love gives us confidence to work with the heavenly Peacemaker in bringing healthy relationships here on earth.

Jesus worked with God in bringing the Kingdom down to us. Genuine reconciliation was wrought because Jesus knew the unshakability of God's love.

As a child he went to his Father's house simply to be with God. (Luke 2:49)

At his baptism Jesus heard "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased". (Matthew 3:17)

At his transfiguration those words were paraphrased; "this is my Son whom I have chosen; listen to him". (Luke 9:35)

There were many times when Jesus would have reminded himself of those words during his life and ministry.

Jesus knew he was loved. That was what enabled him to be very, very good at listening. Listening was a vital key in his ministry of reconciliation. Jesus could listen to anything without feeling insecure. In this ability to rest in God's love Jesus was tough minded.

And yet Jesus heart was tender enough to genuinely love by suspending judgement to understand what was really going on for the people he encountered. He didn't just listen to words that were spoken. Jesus listened to what was not said. Tony Campolo and Mary Albert Darling call this 'soul-listening' in their book Communicating like Jesus.

Jesus also asked lots of questions to clarify what was happening for the person concerned. Those questions enabled him to see clearly what was going on beneath the surface and to address the deep need rather than just the presenting issue.

A question begins the healing process for the boy who has a demon, and for his father, and for his disciples:

"What is all this arguing about?"

The Dad spills out his frustration at Jesus' followers' inability to heal his son.

They weren't able to heal because they hadn't prayed – they'd tried to cast out the demon in their own strength without praying! Really! Perhaps they had a false sense of self-importance. They were the disciples; Jesus chosen ones after all!

Whatever – now Jesus asks questions of frustration. “How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you?”

These questions too have healing power. They bring the disciples up with a start. This is part of their learning, part of their own healing from self-reliance. Another question: “How long has this been going on?” He’s giving Dad an opportunity to really open up, to go deeper. And the Dad responds by telling Jesus what it’s like when the boy is possessed.

And he reveals his own need for healing “help us if you can.” The Dad is not really sure if Jesus is all he claims to be. He has insecurity issues; trust issues.

“What do you mean ‘if I can’?”

Confronted with his doubts the Dad has an epiphany. His own need is blindingly obvious. Dad realises his journey of faith is only just beginning.

His response is another of my favourite Bible verses. “I believe, help my unbelief.” The man acknowledges his need to trust in Jesus as the one who can do all things. The disciples may be helpless, Dad is helpless, but Jesus is not.

Preacher Tim Keller comments “Then Jesus heals the man’s son. We don’t need perfect righteousness, just repentant helplessness, to access the presence of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus could have given the guy a lecture about how he needed more faith and more trust. Instead Jesus asked a couple of well-placed questions that revealed the man’s greatest need.

Jesus is the perfect communicator – listening well and speaking minimally. He asks clarifying questions that result in awareness of our own deep need for a relationship with the Living God.

Jesus communicates with individuals and with families. Every family faces difficulties at some stage or other. All of us – everyone who lives alone, everyone with a family, every human being, has relationship difficulties with someone else sooner or later. It’s inevitable.

Often we react to those difficulties by setting a forest on fire as James puts it. We are too quick to speak and too slow to listen. Why is that? Why do we react rather than being proactive in building healthy relationships?

Reaction is normal; it’s part of the human condition. Ironically, sometimes we react because we have been far too polite for far too long – putting up with being treated unfairly when we should have spoken up much earlier. Something snaps and we react.

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<sup>1</sup> King’s Cross by Tim Keller, 121

Peacemakers are proactive; not reactive. Micah said that sometimes peacemakers are divisive. That can be true. People don't always like the truth.

Sometimes it is easier to live an on-going lie and be a peacekeeper than it is to ask questions that will rock the boat. The trouble is that the truth will out. If we aren't proactive we will react negatively at some stage.

So how does this apply to us a church?

My biggest learning curve has been that I cannot keep all of you happy for all of the time. In fact I can't keep one person happy all the time. And if I try, I am not doing what the Lord calls me to do.

I'm not saying I enjoy being disliked and disapproved of at times; just saying that I am learning to live with it.

Because my primary role is to lead as I believe the Lord is calling me to do. My relationship with God is first, then my relationship with my husband and family. When those relationships are healthy everything else falls into place. Our relationships within the church, our schools, and workplaces and the wider community will be healthier if our primary relationships get the attention they deserve.

Sometimes I will ruffle your feathers. Usually that is unintentional!

But my job is to listen to the Lord as he speaks to me and to lead us in obeying what he says. Of course I will get that wrong some times. I don't lead alone, I have two fabulous wardens in Marie Tilley and Dave Pritchard. And Vestry are good value too – we are getting better at governance rather than micro-management.

I am very open to you telling me and us when you disagree. I would prefer that you do in fact. It is unbiblical and unchristian to moan to others about stuff. God forgive me for the times I've been guilty of that. However as I become more secure in the Lord I am less afraid of honesty. Rather I view openness as an opportunity for mutual growth.

If we are to be a church that enjoys healthy relationships ,we need to be honest with each other. On seeing something that seems unfair we must talk with the appropriate person; hopefully we do that humility, seeking to understand what is going on and why.

We must not be overly polite. That can result in dishonesty.

One of the biggest surprises I have had is just how many of you didn't agree with the big building we had planned. I wish I had known. Really only a few people were outspoken about that. I've been astonished by how many people in affirming the new simpler and cheaper costly design have said they never wanted the other one. Perhaps unity was viewed as most important. I've certainly heard a collective sigh of relief at what we are now doing. Perhaps I didn't ask enough questions at the time.

My desire is for us as individuals, whether we are single or in families, is to be people who foster honest, loving, healthy relationships in every aspect of our lives.

I know as a parent of adult children, it can be difficult at times to maintain healthy relationships. We see those adults making choices we never raised them to make. But we have no right now to tell them how to live. We will simply alienate them if we try. All we have is the right to love them. If they ask us what we think, the Holy Spirit will help us think of some Jesus-type questions to ask. If we have a healthy relationship our children may well answer those questions honestly. If they sense judgement or disapproval, they won't.

The foundation for forming healthy relationships is a core belief, one which we hold onto with all the toughness we can muster; God loves us –  
no matter what,  
no matter how many times we stuff up,  
no matter what the devil or others may say – we are loved by God.

The other foundational aspect required to form healthy relationships is the ability to listen really well  
no matter what someone says  
no matter what buttons they push  
no matter whether they are right or wrong  
we listen.

Ironically, listening more and speaking less, means that we will be far better communicators. As we help other people understand themselves by asking caring questions, we will better understand ourselves and our own needs.

James seems to indicate it is impossible to tame the tongue. Perhaps it is impossible all of the time. However, the more we understand of, and experience for ourselves, God's love for us, the more we can listen to others without feeling insecure.

There is one more key foundational aspect of healthy relationships which I don't have time to go into today, but it needs to be acknowledged, that is the foundation of prayer. In prayer we come into line with how God sees the other; we get a sense of the Lord's priorities for them. And as we pray for others, we are often changed ourselves. That is our greatest hope in taming our own tongues.

I do need to give one caveat to all this. Paul writes to the Roman church "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18) Not all relationships can be retrieved, no matter how humble or kind or gentle and loving we are. There are always two people in a relationship and no-one should put up with being abused or seeing others who are. We prayerfully do our best but if the other person doesn't want a relationship with us, or is incapable of having a healthy relationship at this time, the only avenue we have is prayer.

Hopefully as we grow and mature as a church, there will be few forest fires, but also a greater honesty. Let's not strive to be nice people but rather let's pursue the love of God for ourselves and for each other.

And let's take those principles of being loved, of genuinely listening and of asking insightful questions, of acting in loving ways, and of prayer, with us into all of our communities; our families, our work places; our schools and our neighbourhoods.

Let's pause a moment and still our hearts before God:

Loving God, what are you saying to us about healthy relationships?

What truths are we not facing about ourselves?

Is there an unjust situation we need to stop being polite about and to face?

If so, show us where and when and how to do that.

And show us how much you love us please..... cos sometimes we forget.