

Sermon: 'Inclusiveness' Sunday 19 May 2019

Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Silvia Purdie

Bible Readings: Acts 11: 1-18

John 13:31-35

When I was 12 my family moved from Tonga where we'd been living for 2 years to Lower Hutt. I didn't know anyone except my grandmother, and I didn't know anything about how to be a teenager in suburban New Zealand. I talked funny, I didn't know how to do small talk. I worked hard to fit in, and eventually I did.

Waiwhetu Methodist Church helped. I went to church with my grandmother, the indomitable Vivienne Ellis, short in stature, she wore bright coloured clothes, played the organ, helped old people get to the art gallery. You would have liked her. I went to church, and youth group, helped with Sunday school. It was a good church, a lively community hub, as many suburban churches were in the 1980s, something for everyone, an op shop on Wednesdays and a drop in for people with intellectual and physical disabilities on Thursdays. Youth dances for the district. I have a photo of me dressed as a piano for a 'P' theme dance – I won the best dressed prize!

It was good church, solid church, extended family, love in action held in weekly worship. Formative. I went on into ministry from there, youth work for the district then nationally. I went to other churches, discovered the depths of a eucharistic pattern of Anglican worship, and the passion of pentecostal worship. I went to Taize in France and revelled in the amazing atmosphere of holding silence with hundreds of people, candle-lit evocative mystery where the spirit poured out visions and stirred up longings. And through those growing years, in the 1990s, I would go back occasionally to Waiwhetu Methodist Church, and each time I went it seemed smaller somehow. Not just the numbers of people sitting in the pews, but the scope of concern of worship.

Each time I sat through a sermon it seemed to be the same sermon, the same message, and that message was this: Inclusiveness. It was all about how we all belong, and how everyone was welcome, and everyone was valued, and how we mustn't judge or exclude ... the quality of community.

Waiwhetu Methodist Church became firmly embedded in the trend known as liberal humanism, in which humanity became the centre of faith and human community became the focus of religion. I found it a bit boring. I noticed that for all the words about inclusiveness and diversity, the congregation was mostly white middle class, and for all the talk about welcome very few new people ever came to visit. My world was expanding and my heart was expanding and I when I went to worship I went to meet with the living God more than to meet with the other people in the room. I mean, it's nice to belong, it's wonderful to belong, but belonging is not enough. It's not the main reason we do church.

You could draw a continuum, and every church in the world could be placed along it ... from highly relational at one end to very impersonal at the other end. At one end, it's all about people, relationships, warmth and welcome, a place where everybody knows your name, home groups and family worship ... Waiwhetu Methodist was definitely down that end, as was my previous church, Milson Combined in Palmerston North. At the other end are the cathedrals of the world where you file in and file out with barely a greeting, or the huge pentecostal warehouses where the lights are out and it's all about what happens on the stage. Where would you place Cashmere Presbyterian? I know that many of you highly value the quality of welcome you receive here, and the welcome that you give to each person who walks in the door. But we are a more formal church than many, and we also like to give people space to sit and not have to chat. People visiting a church for the first time like to be welcomed but they often also like to be left alone, to pray, to watch, to feel, to listen.

So what does the Bible teach about how to be church? We are currently reading in the book of Acts, fabulous vibrant stories of the birth and growth of communities forged by the risen Jesus. Lots of wonderful, inspiring, revolutionary things happened in those early Christian communities, but one of the most extraordinary things was the crazy mix of people who got forged together into community, into this thing called 'church', around the risen Jesus. Possibly for the first time ever in human history, people met, really met, across barriers of background. And the biggest barrier to fall was the wall between Jew and Gentile. Jesus was a Jew. All his disciples were Jews. They weren't all good Jews, there was a mix of respectable and disreputable, but they were all part of the same social fabric, subject to the same law, the same rules and assumptions and hopes and ideals and issues and texts. As Jews they knew, all of them no matter their profession or status, that they were God's chosen people, in covenant relationship with the maker of the universe, tied by blood kinship to each other and to the land. Jesus had pushed the boundaries a bit, but his 12 disciples stood for the 12 tribes of Israel, he talked about the Kingdom of God coming, which to those who heard him would obviously have meant the renewal of the Kingdom of David, the house of Israel given a new lease of life.

Until the day that Peter walked through the door of a Roman officer called Cornelius. The story of how Peter came to be in Cornelius' house and what happened in the house was so important that Luke tells it twice – once in Acts 10 when Luke tells it as it happened, and then in Acts 11 when Peter retells it again for the church in Jerusalem. Why? It was a scandal, it was deeply shocking.

Can you work your mind into the issue for the church in Jerusalem? Can you try to grasp why it was so hard to accept that Romans had received the Holy Spirit and been baptised? Can you empathise with those who initially reacted to this news with horror? What was at stake for them? What did the early Jewish Christians have to lose if they had to share their beloved Jesus with people who were not Jews? How did this redraw the lines of identity and belonging? What did the early church need to get over before they could grow?

There were big issues at stake, issues that continue to play out in the global church. Issues of the relationship between faith and racial & national identity. Issues of mission and cross-cultural communication. Issues of ethics, how to live, what matters and what doesn't. The gentiles, remember, were not subject to the law of Moses, and the Jewish Christians were baffled that God would so bless people who were unclean, impure, disobedient – how could a holy God indwell people who were not holy?

But at another level I guess it's only human that we feel comfortable with people who look like us. We like our home tribe. We naturally split ourselves into gender and age groups. All the big churches in town have groups for intermediate age kids, groups for older folks, groups for young adults, groups for young mums, men's breakfasts; of course, because we like people like us. We like defining who's in and who's out. I'm part of two different groups of other ministers, and each has its unwritten rules about who is invited, and they're a bit suspicious of each other – funnily enough I'm the only person who goes to both groups, – One is for Senior Pastors and when I asked if I could invite my friend who is in a team ministry I was told that wasn't appropriate, as the group needed to be safe space for senior pastors only.

Thankfully for us the Spirit of Jesus was not at all concerned about categories, as it turned out, as Peter discovered much to his amazement. What's extraordinary about the impact of that day in Cornelius's house is that the Christians recognised the Spirit of Jesus at work in recognisable ways, even in people who dressed different, spoke different and ate different, people who did not share the bonds of faith story and ancestry with Jesus experienced the power and presence of Jesus. It was the same God at work. There was no doubt, it was the

Holy Spirit, in the gospel heard and received, in the hearts filled with praise of God, in tongues loosened to speak in tongues, in a tangible sense of shared belonging, love and affection that washed over them and made them something quite new, in that house that afternoon. When Paul wrote about this a few years later he described this as a becoming new humanity,

2 Corinthians 5:13-18

¹³Are we really insane? It is for God's sake. Or are we sane? Then it is for your sake. ¹⁴We are ruled by the love of Christ, now that we recognize that one man died for everyone, which means that they all share in his death. ¹⁵He died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but only for him who died and was raised to life for their sake.

¹⁶No longer, then, do we judge anyone by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so. ¹⁷Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. ¹⁸All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also.

How do we really grasp this? How do we let Jesus break down the barriers we build between people who are in and those who are out?

A good place to start is that, actually, none of us deserve to be 'in'. None of us earned our place in God's good graces by anything we did. The Kingdom of God is not your birthright, even if you were born into a good Christian family. We're all lost children, misfits, cast-offs, no matter how respectable you look. It's only God's Father heart that gathers us up and takes us in.

I've known three woman with a very special calling, and one of them is our very own Shona. For some time Shona took in babies and cared for them until foster homes were found. And I know 2 other women who did this for years and years. They'd never know when the phone would ring and a tiny baby would appear at the door. What an extraordinary thing to do. What an amazing gift to a little person who would not remember you and could never thank you, for little financial reward, a sacrificial service from a big heart.

That's what God does for us. And it's from our own gratitude at being adopted into a home and family that springs our own determination to welcome others, to be a welcoming open inclusive community. So, as Paul says, we do not judge others by human standards, by what we see on the outside. Because we have received grace we can show grace. Because our own sins have not been held against us, so we can let our guard down with people who might take advantage us, might not live up to our standards, might be messy ... because that's what God does, through Jesus, steps through the door and gets down to business with our lives, making us new.

Inclusiveness is part of our calling as people of Christ. It's not our main purpose or reason for being, but it is a central characteristic of who we are together, how God is at work in our midst. We are for 'all'. We welcome because we have been made welcome. We commit to being safe space for all that God sends to us. We are committed to a global, inclusive mission. No one is too hard work, no one is beyond the reach of love, no one is not worth bothering with. We speak our own truth, we share Gospel together, we invite the Holy Spirit. We are formed, we are changed. We give the praise back to God. Thank you Lord, bless you, thank you.