

## **8. Loving our community as we love ourselves**

Jesus commanded us to love God, neighbour and one another. How we do this practically demands understanding, sacrifice and determination. All of us need to take responsibility for ourselves as well as for others within the fellowship and beyond.

### **Core Texts**

Galatians 6:1-10, Mark 12:28-34, 1John 4:19 & 20, Matthew 5:13-16, Luke 10:25-37, John 8:2-11

### **Core Teaching**

- ❖ Biblical Principle of Relationships
  - Trinity – God in loving community [Gen.1:26-27]
  - We are made for relationships: God & each other [Gen.2:18]
  - The Fall damaged relationships with God & each other
  - God's redemption plan is built on / restores relationships
- ❖ Love One Another [Jn.15:17]
  - We Love because He first loved us [1Jn.4:19]
  - Unless we love each other we can't love God [1Jn.4:15]
  - Church unity meant to model / extend Jesus' love [Jn.17:23]
  - Church is inter-dependent community [Gal.6:2-5]
- ❖ Love God and Love Neighbour [Mk.12:30&31]
  - 'Vertical' & 'Horizontal' are interwoven
  - We are Salt & Lights in our various communities
  - Agents of relationship and community – *Your Kingdom Come*
  - Fable of Sun & Wind > Gospel by love not force
- ❖ Taking Down the Walls
  - Example of Jesus was vulnerability and risk [Matt.20:26-28]
  - Being accessible to our community, to give and to receive
  - A church that is Spirit-filled and Community-Loving

### **Some Initial Questions**

- What needs do you see in your community (ies)?
- What walls might we need to take down to let love flow out?
- What 'language(s)' of love has God given to you and how do you use it in church and in your community (ies)?

## **Value 8 – Loving our Community as we Love Ourselves**

- This evening I'm preaching on *Loving our community as we love ourselves*, and by the end of this month I'll also have preached on *Belonging*, and on *Responding to Injustice*. As I've looked over all three of these, I am struck by a single Biblical principle that links them all; the principle of relationships. It's what the Jubilee Centre [A political Christian think tank] calls – The 'R' Word.
- Relationship and Community are key attributes of how God created human beings and therefore they are characteristics also of the Kingdom of God Jesus inaugurated. We see it first at the very point of creation - *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,..." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them* [Genesis 1:26 – 27]. Notice how God refers to himself as 'us'. We believe God has revealed himself as Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit – and Trinity implies that God is, in some mysterious way, in community. At the centre of God, the God who is love, there are dynamic relationships of love.
- And in the second creation account we read, *The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone..."* [Genesis 2:18]. Human beings were made for relationship with God and relationships with one another. You could argue that our value of '*Loving our community as we love ourselves*' summarises God's desired relationship with humankind. The Godhead loves us as he loves himself!
- However, Satan's desire is to divide and rule. After falling to temptation and eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve have their first falling out and God banishes them from the Garden. Thus The Fall corrupted both our relationship with God & our relationships with each other.
- You can carry on through the Bible seeing how relationships are built into God's plan for redemption and New Kingdom. Through Abraham He creates for himself a people whose community life and relationship with God is intended to be an example to the world. Jesus comes into the world through that historic nation and then pulls around him 12 disciples, and a wider circle as well, with whom he shares his ministry.

- St John describes Jesus as, *The Word became flesh [who] made his dwelling among us* or, from the Message, *moved into the neighbourhood* [John 1:14]. Jesus acted always and only in harmonious relationship with the Father and prayed that the church would display a similar unity in His name. Thus the church that arises in the name of Jesus and the power of the Spirit is a community body where relationship with God and relationships with each other witness to the love and invitation of the Father.
- Jesus makes it clear that we are to love others as we love ourselves. *Love one another* [John 15:17] is an unmistakable command of Jesus to his disciples. St John reminds us that, *We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen* [1John 4:19 & 20].
- Our relationships as a church are meant to exemplify Jesus' love, and whatever ways we love our community are meant to be extensions of what we are already being and doing as a church. As we heard, St Paul talks in Galatians 6 about the practicalities of that in terms of mutual care and mutual accountability. *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load* [Gal.6:2-5]. Paul tells us here that bearing one another's burdens goes alongside taking responsibility for ourselves. Church is not a dependency culture but an inter-dependent community. Loving one another is made real through our church structures - homegroups, prayer-chains, Pastoral Assistants etc. - and our individual relations and awareness of each other.
- Jesus' summary of the Law makes it plain that loving God and loving our neighbour are interwoven and essential marks of his disciples. That's about more than just the life of the church community for we know Jesus taught us that we are salt that tastes of Him and lights sourced from His life. While we may be clustered here in one place at this time, what counts is where we'll be for the rest of the week.
- In his book, *Beyond Belief? Barriers and Bridges to Faith Today*, Nick Spencer reviews an extensive survey about 2 years ago of non-Christian views. At the start of the section on Social Bridges he says, *Respondents of all groups saw society as 'damaged' with decay of respect, family breakdown, 'consumerism' of everything, and instant gratification being the main culprits... 'Religion' or 'religious values, although not necessarily in their traditional Christian form, was perceived as some kind of antidote to these problems, even by respondents who had been aggressive in their criticism of it.*
- Loving our community means being prepared as God calls and equips to be agents of light and repairing the damage many people can see but feel helpless to address. A question from Churches Together that we're asking at our PCC awayday next Saturday is, *What needs do you see in the community?* As we lay that list before God we'll be seeking His view on how we love our community. When I asked Jonathan Couper to come and speak on our Weekend Away last May it was primarily because Christchurch, Bridlington is a church that has, under his leadership of over 20 years, grown in The Spirit alongside loving their community in practical ways.
- I realise that this is the deepest passion I hold for our church – to be Spirit-filled and Community-loving. What might this mean? We'll have to work that out together. I think, in God's time we will have to give up or change some of our dearly held activities or places, to make sacrifices, alter buildings, maybe employ more people. If it were up to me to tell God what to do, I'd imagine courses or groups on family & parenting, Marriage enrichment, Debt and finance counselling, more Edge Groups, Prayer walk-in centre... and more!!
- I am scared and excited in equal measure by this kind of direction, and I feel totally inadequate to lead such a church. *Loving our community as we love ourselves* is not a value in isolation but strongly tied to all the other 8. We start and continue with prayer to seek the Father's vision, the Son's incarnation and the Spirit's equipping, moving in obedience to God's heart of love and in the security of his love for us.

- Jesus challenged our imaginations as to who our neighbour is and how we love them. If we are becoming distinctive in Jesus, the difference we make through him is among our neighbours. Our effectiveness comes as we're distributed daily through the various communities we inhabit: our town, our street, the parents at the school gate, our family, our workplace, the gym, the pub...
- We are agents who, through loving as we are loved, seed and create community through wholesome relationships. So when we pray, 'Your Kingdom Come', we are praying, amongst other things, about restoring and renewing relationships and breaking down the barriers that sin erects in-between people and between people and God. That's one reason why we also pray, 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'.
- How do we get this across? Is it by placard and soapbox? Many of you will know, by now, that the fable of the Sun and the Wind has been a strong, God-given picture for me about how we should approach our community through love and not by force. As a break from my voice, I'd like to show you another DVD by Rob Bell, which makes this point strongly but in another way. Incidentally, a 'Bullhorn' is another name for a Megaphone...
- I wonder whether the Religious Hatred Bill will stop 'Bullhorn Guy'? Just as an aside, that Bill has some good intentions but it needs serious changes if it is not to become a gag to free speech and stop people expressing different religious views. I'm delighted at The Lord's amendments that try to distinguish between offence given through threatening behaviour as opposed to offence taken because of differences in viewpoint.
- On the DVD Rob Bell makes his views passionately and asks the question, *Do you think its possible to scare people into loving God?* We know that Jesus did teach about the dangers and punishments for those who refuse The Father's offer of eternal life. How do we get that across?
- Maybe it's not done best down a megaphone that implies superiority, but by building relationships across which harder, less palatable truth can be shared? Does Hell strengthen our motive more than our message? You might want to ask what place there is for the urgency and reality of Hell alongside the call to love.
- At Pentecost I spoke of how the 5 Love Languages Gary Chapman puts forward give us models for the scope and style of love. The 5 languages are, Words of Affirmation / Quality Time / Receiving Gifts / Acts of Service / Physical Touch. Love can be given and received in a variety of ways and we need to be aware of our strengths – the ways we are best equipped to love others - and sensitive to the needs of others – the ways they most welcome expressions and examples of love.
- *Loving our community as we love ourselves* implies that boundaries between what is church and what is community overlap or get a little blurred. The desire for purity can make us into a ghetto with strong walls, but the example of Jesus is one of vulnerability and risk. Ever since I've lived here I've been cutting back undergrowth, shrubs and trees and every time I feel I am acting prophetically for the whole church here. I don't say this with pride but with wonder & reflection. The feeling came when we cut down the hedge around the Vicarage, when we reduced the height of the hedge along Chobham Road, when we cut down fir trees on the edge of our garden... In this last week we asked the gardener to start cutting lower the hedge by our drive at the entrance to the path around the church. The effect already is to allow light into a dark corridor especially via the street light at night
- When we risk taking barriers down it makes us more open to our community both to give & to receive. I'm delighted that plans for changing our church buildings have doors visible to the road! And I do sense God has been gently opening us up over recent years. Relationships and community are not quickly built but, as Jesus said of the kingdom, more like seeds planted and yeast in the dough. The Kings House has been an example for some time, and now we have Parenting Courses, Edge Group, St Saviour's open for prayer on Wednesdays, a Prayer Box at Brookwood Station, refreshments for people using Holy Trinity Hall, Living Well, regular contact with Baptism Families... & I know there's more through groups and individuals. And we are seeing effects, for example I am excited when I see how many baptism families make 20:20 their church and hear a Percheron drive family speak with pleasure of what the Edge Group has initiated. The relationships we are building & encouraging are a Kingdom Work.