

Sermon on Galatians 5: 16-26

Paying Forward the Fruit of the Spirit

There's a very good movie... called... *Pay it Forward*.

A 7th grade school teacher gives his class an assignment to come up with one revolutionary idea which will change the world.

Trevor, a boy in the class, has an idea he calls 'paying it forward'.

When we as human beings do something kind for someone else, the conventional expectation is that we might 'pay it back'.

If someone loans us some money in the supermarket we would remember and want to 'pay them back' at some point.

Trevor's idea of 'paying it forward' turns this expectation around.

Rather than 'paying a good deed back', the emphasis would be on taking that act of generosity and paying it forward.

Passing it on to someone else who might be totally unrelated to the first exchange.

So one's moral responsibility in receiving a gift would be to pass a gift on elsewhere rather than to the giver.

Trevor wagered that if everyone took this concept and applied it to three people, pretty soon there would be an exponential growth of giving to others – strangers, neighbours, friends.

It would be like an epidemic of generosity, infecting the whole world like a virus.

So, in the movie once this starts happening all of a sudden random people are found offering love and generosity to anyone they meet in the street.

And in every situation it's received as a surprise, an unexpected and serendipitous grace offered out of the blue, or so it seems.

Pay it forward.

It's a special day in the life of our congregation today as we commission 4 new elders and give thanks to God for 2 who have stepped down from this particular ministry.

As such it's a day of transitions; a day when there's a hinge point as we look back and look forward at the same time.

Time is a crucially important theme in the church's belief and practice, it actually frames much more than we think.

I wonder if you've ever thought of worship as the coming together in the present time of God's past and God's future set among God's people?

That there's a gathering of God's time, God's eternal moment and hope in worship?

That it's not just a nice routine, but the weekly expression of faith which anticipates God's eternity, as embodied and enfleshed in Jesus?

Worship both looks back and looks forward through the lens of Jesus.

It prefigures the fullness of the Kingdom even as it recollects the memory of the Kingdom's breaking in, in past generations.

Think about communion.

It is a sign of heaven brought into the present.

Bread is broken and wine shared, and everyone gathers together and all are fed, and all receive God's love tangibly and in peace.

Remember in the old days how in certain communion liturgies it was impressed upon you that taking communion while bearing a bitterness in your heart towards someone was a sin?

And to be reflected prayerfully upon and thought better of?

That was a reflection of the fact that communion, as the very word suggests, was the sign par excellence of God's making peace with disobedient humanity.

This was grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy.

Communion shows us what it is to be in heaven when there is no more pain and bitterness and anger as we are all one in Christ.

Forgiven. Reconciled. Made whole.

So to bear a grudge or to hold onto anger against another puts a serious thorn in the side of the purpose of the whole thing.

Week to week, the sharing at the table is a Kingdom moment of incorporating all that is past and all of what is to come in God's purposes in Jesus.

So we better be paying attention to God, to ourselves, to each other.

Well, in a slightly different way, that's exactly what is happening as we offer thanks for Narelle and Liz's ministry as elders, and commission Barbara and Tony and Sue and Geoff by the power of the Spirit for this very important ministry among us.

As we're all aware, the passing of our earthly time changes things.

It changes us, it changes the church.

Time, like a rolling stream, as the old hymn used to say, bears us all away.

We're all time bound in that sense which means the earthly witness of the church is always changing and moving.

The Uniting Church BOU got it right when it described the church as a 'pilgrim people, always on the way towards the promised goal'.

Today we have seen how this is true as there has been a change in the eldership.

Two faithful people have sensed that this is the time to lay this burden of pastoral responsibility down and four other faithful people have sensed by God's grace that it is time to take it up.

And we give thanks for them all.

We give thanks for the many years of service in this role that Liz and Narelle have offered.

I was a little concerned not that long ago to realise that Narelle has been teaching Scripture in the schools around here since before I was born.

She has faithfully tended the Kangaloon flock for generations of its life, and it was her grace, itself a gift from God, more than anything else, that ensured that as we took the hard decision to close the Kangaloon church, and I don't exaggerate here, there was not one word of bitterness from anyone.

Sadness, of course, a certain kind of grief, but no bitterness or anger.

I then think of the many hours Liz has spent, among other things, helping to lead the Good Neighbours, a ministry designed to see that no-one in our church, however long or short their tenure here, is forgotten or left alone.

People, often people for whom socialisation is hard and who sit somewhat on the edge of the church's life, have been loved and surrounded through the GNs, all the while being overseen by Liz and Ros, with no fanfare or seeking of acclamation, rather just a loving kindness that flows from the eternal well of God's own love in Jesus.

Then I look at our four friends stepping into the role today and I anticipate the ministries they will exercise in months and years to come, service they have already begun in different ways through Wednesday lunch, playgroup, safe church, worship committee and in other areas.

And in amidst this great confluence of what has gone before and what is to come, so God holds our church and our life and our common witness in this present time; this middle time.

The Spirit of God working among us is the constant, even as in time our lives and the life of the church changes.

Even as eventually time bears us all away.

Even as it may be so for generations and generations to come until in the final time our Lord returns and makes all things new.

Through the changing seasons, God remains the same.

You might recall the verse in Hebrews 13 where the writer says, 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.'

Jesus, by the Spirit, has walked among God's people in times past, does so today, and will do for evermore.

It is in Jesus that the ministries exercised by Liz and Narelle and Geoff, and Sue, and Barbara and Tony are held together.

Just as they are held together with the ministries of Peter and Paul, of Mary and Phoebe, Augustine and Luther, Teresa of Avila and of Calcutta, and all the saints to come.

Different people, different times, but the same constant.

The God of love, and the love of God. And time never bears that away.

So, today at an important time in our church's life we might ask ourselves, what does the Lord require of us?

Well, way back in Galatians, one of Paul's earliest letters, he says the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

In different ways, through different people, and at different times, this is what has been passed down to us; the life lived in the Spirit of God which bears the fruit of the Spirit of God out to the suffering world.

And our calling, as it has been for all those who have come before us, is to pay it forward; to pay the fruit of the Spirit forward.

So that those who come after us, even after time has borne us all away, might see forward to God's glorious future too, and continue to walk the way of faith.

And in a strange way, in paying it forward, we also pay it back to our faithful forebears, we give honour to their service and witness by handing it on ourselves, so that others may come to know Jesus and his grace that saves us all.

All of this is done in God's strength of course, we, on our own will prove inadequate.

But through the power of God we can be his instruments in the glorious dance of love that welcomes others in, making the circle wider and wider.

In Jesus, God paid it forward.

He brought a glimpse of heaven into our dangerous world.

A glimpse of how things will be when there is no more suffering or pain, no more war or cancer, or grief.

When the scars of life bleed and hurt no longer.

And every day as we live by the Spirit, God's constant through time, he continues to pay it forward.

We have been blessed today to remember, and to anticipate, all at the same time.

So together we give all glory and praise to God, as it was in the *beginning*, so now, and ever *shall be*, world without end.

Amen.