

11th October, 2015

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12: 12 - 27

Sermon: Relationships

One of the things I find most distressing as a minister is when I hear of the breakdown of relationships between members in a congregation and I am including ministers as being among the members.

It saddens me to hear that people have left a congregation because of something that someone has said which has annoyed them or upset them or hurt them rather than trying to deal with the issue in a spirit of love.

It saddens me to hear that someone has left a congregation because of the tone of voice that was used in saying a particular thing. As we all know too well, the tone we use when we say something can turn a comment into an accusation.

It saddens me when I hear that someone has felt as if they have been bullied by someone. It saddens me when there is a clash of personalities and people are shunned or talked about in an unkind manner.

It saddens when others stir what is already a difficult situation. It saddens me when someone sticks the same knife in again and again just to remind people of what was said and to wind people up once a wound is beginning to heal. There are people who will not let go even when what was said in the first place actually had nothing to do with them.

It saddens me when people begin to take sides or mutter behind people's backs. It saddens me when people go in the huff and throw their toys out of the pram instead of trying to understand a situation and work towards some kind of resolution.

At some time in our lives, we all stand guilty of some of those charges but it is nothing to be proud of. It would also sadden me if we thought we were totally innocent because in a way that would be a bigger problem. Solutions can only be found when every individual is willing to see the part that he or she plays within the membership and within a particular situation.

No one stands alone and immune from what is happening because we are all part of the one body. When one part of our physical body hurts, it affects the rest of our body and our whole sense of well-being. The same is true of the body of Christ, the body which is the Church, which is the people, that is, you and me.

The same is true of relationships within any family or organisation. Ill-feeling between two people in an office at work casts a shadow over the whole workforce and makes that place a very unpleasant place to be.

We just sit there waiting for the next cutting remark or ultimately, the explosion. What is happening to one person or between two people impacts on everyone else. How each person reacts impacts on everyone else whether we realise it or not or like it or not.

If we are controlling and disregard the feelings or the opinions of someone else, we have a problem.

If we consider that the other person is always to blame, and we are always in the right, we have a problem. You know the phrase: I'm not often wrong, but I'm right again.

If we are unwilling to take on board that we are not always the target when someone lashes out at us, even although we seem to be and we feel as if we are, we have a problem.

All of us have histories and pressures under which we live. All of us have things going on in our lives of which other people are oblivious, even in a small community. Our lives, our hidden lives, our hidden thoughts and anxieties, which are not out there for everyone to see, those things will impact on our reactions in particular situations and on our reactions to things which other people say.

Those situations and those reactions can then be blown out of all proportion and we speak with our feet, or in inappropriate ways with our tongues, and relationships break down.

It's not a healthy way to be within the Church so what can we do? Well, sometimes we need to say 'sorry' but 'sorry' can be one of the hardest words to say. When 'sorry' needs to be said, often we become like children in a playground. 'I'm not saying sorry because I didn't start it.' Who started something is ultimately unimportant. What is important is who finishes it.

That is at the heart of the gospel message. From the Cross Jesus said: **'Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing.'** He didn't say: 'Oh, to hang with them. Let them stew. Let them rot in hell.'

He reached out and asked God, not to say sorry to us but simply to forgive us. The thing is, though, that by the time there is a breakdown in our relationships with one another, we all need to say sorry because we have usually all said things which might have been better left unsaid.

The gospel teaches us to drop things, to forgive and move on. Jesus said, 'Forgive them. Don't hold this against them, Father. Let it go and let's move on.'

Throughout his life, and even at the point of death, Jesus set an example for us to follow. He reached out in love. He forgave. He listened. He explained at times why a particular course of action was wrong, even when the law allowed it.

The woman who had been caught in adultery and who was being stoned was saved by Jesus when He simply said: **Let Him who is without sin cast the first stone.** We are so quick to sit in judgement over others without understanding anything about their background or their present situation, and yet, we want to be understood and we want to be shown compassion. Can we show that same compassion and understanding to others?

What do we do as a Church when people walk away? Do we say: 'Oh, well, tough', or do we go and try and resolve the situation. It is possible that people have walked away from this congregation without us even realising that we have said something to hurt them but that is where elders come in.

If someone has stopped coming to Church, do you, as elders, ever ask why that has happened and if there is a

problem, do you ever try to resolve it or do you just get frustrated and start thinking that we are better off without that person?

I hope that is not the case although I know it happens within Churches. We have a responsibility to care for everyone in our districts and as elders, you actually have a greater responsibility when it comes to visiting and supporting than any minister.

Ministers nowadays get caught up in the business side of Churches in ways you wouldn't believe and that can take up an inordinate amount of time, and not just in their own charge.

Elders are charged with the spiritual care of those in their districts but the body ought to be nourished and cared for by its members. If we have an itchy nose, we don't sit there suffering the itch while debating which part of the body should be scratching it. We get on and we deal with it. We need to start thinking about treating with respect and compassion, the irritating parts of the body of Christ, of which we may well be one such part.

As we see in our Scripture reading from 1 Corinthians 12, every part of the body belongs to the body and as such is to be treated with equal concern by all other parts of the body. All parts of the body are of equal value and have an important role to play in maintaining the health of the whole body or of the whole congregation. Whether we are frustrated or disgusted with one part, we have the same responsibility to that part as we have to the parts we like.

It can be challenging. It is often challenging when we are dealing with people but no more challenging that it was for Jesus and still is for Him even today.

Let's decide in every instance to think about what Jesus' response might be in a situation before we jump in with two feet and say something which will impact on everyone else. Let's try and follow our Lord's example and show forgiveness and compassion. We will also get it wrong but it is to be hoped that in those circumstances, we will also be shown the same forgiveness and compassion as we seek to show others or as we would want others to show us which is not quite the same thing.

Whether that happens or not, we are still only responsible for our own actions and our own words which will influence the well being of the whole body of Christ. No matter how anyone else reacts, we are still responsible for following Christ's example of love and forgiveness in every situation in which we find ourselves.