

11 Feb – *We will disappoint you – Psalm 133, Mark 2:13-22*

Today is our second Sunday in our series looking at our church goals: *Led by the Spirit, we will explore together what it means to follow Jesus today, build an inclusive, caring community and share God's love and justice through our words and actions.*

And so, today is: *Led by the Spirit, we will build an inclusive, caring community.*

And I am reminded, by this goal, of all the beautiful stories we heard people tell last year – as part of the church review – about why they had come to this church and why they had stayed and what they hoped for us in the future. It was an exercise that bears repeating, so closer to Easter, I'd like to invite some of you, again, to tell a brief story, about a significant moment in your Christian lives. If you'd like to suggest someone, please speak to me.

Do you remember Janelle Lamont describing the freedom she'd found to think and ask questions in this church, to wrestle with difficult issues and 'live with grey issues'. And this is classic Janelle! "I don't mean hair colour, although that mostly brings wisdom is my experience! I mean those issues that haven't got a neat and tidy Christian answer." And her thanks for the welcome Linley and Merilyn had given her.

Do you remember Kelli Hughes also speaking about being able to grapple with scripture and have opportunities to do things that can be hard – such as praying regularly – in this place.

Or James Cox saying he'd been 'loved in' to CBC. Or Richard and Karen Baumgart also putting their staying down to the welcome. Steve Blackburn spoke about how this community had sustained his faith and shared each stage of his life. Grace Stripeikis loved that we don't shy from difficult topics. And Val and Ray Spear spoke of coming to hear Thorwald and returning because of the preaching of a young woman in a bright red dress. (Not me! I can't wear red!) And finally, Paul Falconer also spoke of valuing a community that encourages people to seriously think though the meaning and implications of faith.

While on holidays I finally got around to reading our last Book Group book, the story of Nadia Bolz-Weber, the founding pastor of *House for All Sinners and Saints* in Denver, Colorado, an LGBTIQ inclusive church. In it she describes a very similar exercise they do, asking new members, "What drew you to HFASS?" and the answers they get; "the singing, and the community, and the lack of praise bands, and the fact that...they can comfortably be themselves....that we laugh a lot, and have drag queens and that it's a place where difficult truths can be spoken and everyone is welcome, and where we pray for each other."

And when everyone's spoken, Nadia gets up and says what I'd say, what I've said in the past, that it is wonderful to hear all these lovely things about our church and that I, too, love being part of a community that gifts its members with freedom as we, together, follow Jesus.

But at this point Pastor Nadia continues. She says, "*You also need to know that, sooner or later, this community will disappoint you. You will be let down. Someone will hurt your feelings. And you need to decide what you will do when that happens. Because if you choose to leave when the church doesn't meet your expectations, you will miss out on seeing how the grace of God comes in and fill the holes left by this community's failure, and that it is just too beautiful and real to miss.*" So, welcome to church. We will disappoint you!

So, the first thing we must realise about building an inclusive, caring community is that community will disappoint us. It will not be made up of people who we agree with all the time, or who meet our needs all the time, or who we even like – all the time!

In his short, but beautiful book on how Christian community should function, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer also states that community will disappoint us. But that this "great

disillusionment,” he says, “with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves,” is an important part of how God leads us from the wish dreams, the lofty ideas, of being an ideal community to experiencing genuine Christian community; experiencing, as Pastor Nadia writes, “the grace of God coming in and filling the holes...”

We are not brought together because we look the same or act the same, or think the same or vote the same, or because we do things the same way, but we are brought together, “through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ... We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.” In this way, Bonhoeffer writes, “the very hour of disillusionment with my brother [or sister] becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together – the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.” And he concludes with the psalm we read today, “How very good and pleasant it is, when kindred live together in unity!” We now know, he writes, what that unity is. It is Christ. Jesus Christ is our unity.

And the second thing we must realise about building an inclusive, caring community is that even knowing we will disappoint each other and even knowing that real community is based on divine reality, not human reality, we need each other. We need human beings to form community. So, welcome to our church. We need you!

We need each other, because we cannot live our Christian lives on our own resources – having heard our gospel story this morning we know that none of us are so fit or well or healthy that we do not need a doctor. We need the Words of Life that come from outside of us, that come from the Word of God being spoken, Bonhoeffer would say, daily and anew, into our lives, bringing redemption and righteousness, bringing God’s blessings.

And this is where we step in. We become the communicators, the relayers of God’s Word of Life to each other. With all our human failings we have been given this divine task of bearing the word of salvation to each other, of challenging each other, of encouraging one another, of keeping the good news current in each other’s ears and alive in this community.

Theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, also writes of how vital it is that we, as the Christian community, speak the Word of God to each other, share the gospel with each other.

“The gospel,” he writes, “is a story with myriad subplots, intricacies, colours and textures... [perhaps as we discovered in our Sharing Stories exercise] It is not some truth that can be known without memory.... Stories live through memory, through being told over and over again, and in the telling new aspects of the story are discovered. [This] is why the church is so dependent on those who can help us remember the complexity of the story that constitutes who we are.” This is why the church must avoid isolating the young, the not so young, and the elderly from each other. This is why we must find ways for everyone to tell their story which becomes one thread in the great tapestry of our story

Towards the end of Nadia Bolz Weber’s book, she tells a story about good thing and a bad thing that happened to the church. They’d been meeting for a couple of years, but the attendance seemed to have plateaued at 45 which was driving Nadia crazy because she was sure that there were more than 45 people in the city of Denver for whom HFASS was right fit, when she was invited to preach at the city-wide Easter service, held in an amphitheatre used for open-air concerts, to around 10,000 people, and the next days the *Denver Post* featured the church, on the cover, with a photo of Nadia, with tattoos and clergy attire, looing sternly over glasses like, she says “I might kick your ass if you don’t listen to my sermons.” And the next Sunday their numbers doubled, and those people stayed. *(I had a similar thought after Monday’s Parliamentary service, that this morning our services might be full of politicians!)*

But - this was the bad thing in Nadia's opinion - these people didn't look like them. These were people who could have walked into any mainline Protestant church and been welcomed. They wore normal clothes, lived in the suburbs and – horror of horrors – were baby boomers. So, she called a church meeting to talk about the 'sudden growth and demographic changes' hoping that once those who had been around HFASS for a while explained who they were and what the church had been about, those who really didn't belong who realise this wasn't the church for them. But even as she did it she knew there was something wrong about it.

So, she called a friend, in a church in Minneapolis, similar to HFASS and asked if they'd ever had the same problem. But her friend refused to play along. "Yeah, that really sucks," he said, "You guys are really good at 'welcoming the stranger' when it a young transgender person. But sometimes 'the stranger' looks like you mum and dad." Sometimes, Pastor Nadia, says the Word of God comes to you in the form of a friend who will be just enough of an asshole to tell the truth.

So, in a different spirit, the meeting went ahead, and she invited the newcomers to tell their stories of why they had come to HFASS and they spoke of not knowing what they believed, but believing something real happens at Communion; of knowing that here their brokenness was welcome; of feeling that this was a place of prayer and of meeting God...and then one of the established members spoke. "As a young transgender kid who was welcomed into the community," Asher said, "I just want to go on record and say I'm really glad here are people at church now who look like my mum and dad. Because I have a relationship with them that just can't with my mum and dad."

And, at this, Nadia said, her heart broke open and she realised she had to die to her vision of ideal community, her idea of whose stories must be told, because the church God wanted had more life and freedom than the church Nadia wanted.

On Monday I went straight from the Parliamentary Service to Zach's beginning Year 7 Assembly and there the principal welcomed everyone to the new community they were not part of, but she said, "Not all of you will be friends, but all of you belong to this community, and should extend the hand of friendship to each other."

And this is an even greater reality for those of us who are Christians. Genuine Christian community does not bring us together because we are friends. It brings us together – even if we are strangers – even if we are enemies - because Jesus has brought us together, and in this spirit, we must extend the hand of friendship to each other. Can I encourage you - today or sometime during this week – to extend the hand of friendship to someone who you regard as a stranger.

And can I encourage you to keep seeking out the gospel story that is being told by others? And to keep telling the gospel story that you – and you alone – can tell? It is wonderful to be welcoming a new interim minister today – and we welcome Nathan warmly and we look forward to what he will say – but we need everyone's stories, we need your contributions in Sunday School, we need your contributions in worship – as pray-ers, perhaps as worship leaders, and in bringing the music of the gospel to us. We need your stories in our small groups, to hear the gospel retold by each other. And we need your stories and your Jesus-inspired friendship to fill the ministries of this church and flow through the Community Centre. We need you to tell those stories everywhere and to everyone. This community need to hear daily and anew the Word of God in Jesus and it needs the version you will tell.