

To Care

Psalm 4/ James 1¹²⁻¹⁶/ Luke 10²⁵⁻³⁷

Helen began last week a small series on Pastoral Care. Pastoral Care is the term we give to the particular skill and duty we have as Christians to care for others. We are preaching about pastoral care because we believe it is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian community – a faithful community. Pastoral Care can vary. It can be as simple as doing what you've said you'll do around the home and as complex as counseling a person as they learn to cope with a terrible childhood or a traumatic event in their life. It can be as basic as being a good friend and as complex as learning how to relate well to a person with a mental illness. Whatever the case, pastoral care lies at the heart of a truly Christian life and a truly Christian community. Unless we learn to care for others well we will not create the kind of community God wants. And this won't ever be easy. To care for someone is to become vulnerable and open to being rejected and hurt. It is to begin learning some often difficult truths about ourselves and it is learning to enjoy all people – not just the ones we naturally like or who are easy to like.

Where does caring start? How can I begin to care for you? We talk about 'Pastoral care' but the truth is all true care is 'Pastoral

care.’ We just like to add the word ‘Pastoral’ because it reminds us that for the Christian community caring is such a priority that we’ve made it into a special skill – a special ‘department’ in the Church. In fact, for we who call ourselves Christian, caring isn’t an optional extra rather, it’s the essence of how we are with each other; it’s the essence of our being together. So if someone were to ask, ‘What are those Christians like? – a complete stranger who’d been with us for a day or even an hour should answer ‘They **care** for one another like no other community I’ve seen.’ Which means that if you ask yourself the question – ‘What am I aiming to be, as a Christian?’ The answer will always involve this word care. ‘I am aiming to be a person ‘who cares about others,’ whose passion is to be **concerned** for the other, to understand the other, to **care** for the other.

And it also means the opposite. It means that every thought, word, feeling and inclination of our heart **not to care** must be resisted with every resource we have within us. It means that we must be alert for these opposite inclinations not so much because they indicate that **we** are evil or wrong but because these thoughts tempt us to desert our primary duty as Christians to care for others

But again, let us ask ourselves ‘Where does caring begin?’ Theologically caring begins with forgiveness – the forgiveness of Christ which enables us to enjoy the care of God. We know we

are cared for because the Cross of Christ guarantees our forgiveness before God.

- If we are forgiven then we are accepted.
 - If we are accepted then we are adopted.
 - If we are adopted then we are children of God and if we are God's children we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are cared for and that we can count on that care.

God's care doesn't end with the forgiveness of Christ. You see we are not forgiven just for ourselves. Rather, the forgiveness of Christ lives within each one of us **so that** it might be extended to the world God loves. We are forgiven **to forgive**. We are cared for so that we **might care for others**. Mercy has been extended to us **so that we might be merciful**. We are to love the world that God loves. We are to be the caring face of God in the world.

And so how do we care? In the same way God has cared for us. **Caring begins with forgiveness**. I cannot care for you while I hold something against you. I cannot offer what must be offered if I hold something against you. Interestingly the difference between love and lust can be seen to come down to forgiveness. Love forgives, lust does not. When we are infatuated with someone, when we 'lust' for another, forgiveness is never an issue because infatuation is, in fact, a love for the feelings another person produces in us and not for

them as they truly are. We want another for the feeling they produce in us, not for themselves. However, the moment we truly have to forgive them is the moment love either begins or dies for only love forgives.

Love begins with forgiveness. Forgiveness is the test of love and love that is love that is still born. Forgiveness is the act of accepting offense without taking it. [Repeat] When we **for-give** we give something '**ahead-of-time**' we **fore-give**! The truth about forgiveness is that in every relationship it is not the exception but the rule. Any relationship worth its salt requires that we forgive the other. The problem we have is in recognizing that we are forgiving. The truth is that any time we overlook something in another which is offensive – we are forgiving.

Am I being slightly annoying to you but you have chosen to ignore it or let it go – you have forgiven me. Is my deodorant not working well today and my body odor is more powerful than usual but you've chosen to overlook it – you have forgiven me. Is my speech confusing or annoying but you have chosen not to get irritated with it – you have forgiven me. Is my political opinion wrong, my singing off-tune, my eating loud and messy, my clothing ridiculous, my hair a mess my breath smelly, my intelligence questionable, my preaching boring – **but you have chosen to overlook these things!** You have forgiven me. And in

doing so – you’ve begun – just begun mind you – **to care for me.**

But Richard – what about **honesty!?** Where’s honesty if we can’t tell the truth about each other to each other. Where’s honesty if you have to keep covering up your feelings about the other person? Where’s honesty if you have to keep overlooking what the other person is really like!!?

My friend, you can be honest with me when you are able to be honest with yourself. The truth is we hardly know what is honest and to call simply expressing every feeling we have – honesty, is to place ourselves mindlessly back with the animals whose behaviour is largely instinctual and unthinking. In the Bible it is our hearts which are the seat of our emotions and will but what does God say about the heart? God says this...

**⁹ The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it? (Job 26)**

And this, friends, is where caring begins in us. Yes it begins with the forgiveness of God and it begins with our willingness to forgive others but to do that we must deal with our hearts.

Caring is a heart issue. Before I can truly care for someone my heart must become involved and it must be committed to the caring task for all true caring is a meeting between two hearts, a loving of the other. Jesus understood the centrality of the heart

in determining a person's motivation and, eventually, action for He said...

¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” (Matt 15)

The heart must be dealt with if we are to care for each other and only God can truly do this. Uncaring people and an uncaring Church are a sign that our hearts are not being dealt with by God – that we are closed to God's Holy Spirit and that we have shut God out. We cannot be like this if we wish to follow Jesus. Following Jesus begins with a heart decision and it continues with heart decisions. Are our hearts truly open to God? The Psalmist encourages us to search our hearts – to consider truthfully what we find there and to seek God for change.

Martin Luther King Jnr loved to preach on the Parable of the Good Samaritan and in one of those sermons he pointed out that the difference between the Samaritan who cared for the beaten man and the two religious people who did not was the question he asked himself for the Samaritan choose to ask himself a question of the heart. The other two, according to King, asked asked question of head, 'What will happen to me if I

help?' The Samaritan asked 'What will happen to him if I don't!!?'

We need God to be asking us some question today friends. Indeed, this year at Leith we are going to ask heart questions each week – questions we think it would be good if we all asked God. We need God in our hearts not just when we come to Christ but every day. We need to hear the questions God has for our hearts. We need to grow some 'caring muscles' if we are going to become the Church God wants us to be, the people God wants us to be. Who wants to hear those questions from God? Who wants to be challenged to grow up into a caring person. Then pray with me please.