St Andrews on The Terrace Sunday 3 February 2019 Epiphany 4 ‘Love is walking in another’s shoes’

|  |
| --- |
| **Readings for the Gathering**  **Hebrew Bible The Call of Jeremiah Jeremiah 1:4-10**  4The word of God came to me, saying, 5“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” 6“Alas, Sovereign One,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” 7But God said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. 8Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declared God. 9Then it was as if God reached out a hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth. 10See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” |
| **Epistle 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13**  13 If I speak in the tongues of humans or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.  4Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.  8Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became adult, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.  13And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Gospel Jesus reads the scripture in his hometown synagogue Luke 4:21-30**  21He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”  22All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked. 23Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’” 24“Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 25I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. 26Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. 27And there were many in Israel with leprosy[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+1%3A+4+-10%3B++1+Corinthians+13%3A+1-13%3B++Luke+4%3A+21-30+&version=NIV&interface=print#fen-NIV-25091a)] in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”  28All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. |

**Contemporary reading The Core of Martin Luther King’s Vision** by from ‘Martin Luther King's Solution to Racism’ by Charles Gilmer

Dr. King did not speak in terms of tolerance. His ideal was love. *"Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."* (*Strength to Love,* p. 51). Yet, in current discussions of race relations the word *love* is seldom mentioned. Dr. King insisted love was the dominant or critical value by which we could overcome racial strife. The love he spoke of was a biblical love, one that is unconditional, unselfish and seeks the absolute good of another party. That kind of love is a tough love, one that confronts wrong and injustice with the truth -- absolute truth as decreed by an all powerful God and enables the individual to love their enemy.

**Reflection for the Gathering**

Ever found that something you thought was one thing, isn’t? I thought, probably along with a lot of you, that the saying “walk a mile in another’s moccasins” was a native American Indian proverb. It just sounds like it came slowly and quietly out of the mouth of a wise American Indian elder. Not so!

# The original expression is attributed instead to Mary T Lathrap who wrote a poem in the nineteenth century called “Judge Softly” or “Walk a Mile in His Moccasins”. Mary Torrans Lathrap lived in the state of Michigan, USA, from 1838 to 1895. Her poem was originally called “Judge Softly” when written in 1895, but later was referred to by the famous line: “Walk a Mile in His Moccasins.”

Mary was a poet, licensed a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1871, a temperance reformer, and a suffragist, co-founding Michigan’s suffrage organization in 1870. For 20 years, she was identified with the progressive women of Michigan. Temperance, purity, and prohibition were their watchwords, and the white ribbon as their badge.[[1]](#footnote-1) Born a Presbyterian, Mary became Methodist on her marriage and it is said “Her lectures were always successful, and she was equally at home on the temperance platform, on the lecture platform, in the pulpit or at the author's desk.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is interesting then, that, given her evangelical fervour as a preacher and her temperance interests, she evidently did not develop into a judgmental type. Her poem is long, but relevant lines such as these show her original title to be her character – “to judge softly”. The full poem is in the printed script of this reflection. Here are some lines:

Judge Softly

Pray, don't find fault with the man that limps,/Or stumbles along the road./Unless you have worn the moccasins he wears, /Or stumbled beneath the same load.  
  
There may be tears in his soles that hurt/Though hidden away from view./The burden he bears placed on your back/May cause you to stumble and fall, too.  
  
Don't sneer at the man who is down today/Unless you have felt the same blow /That caused his fall or felt the shame/That only the fallen know.  
  
You may be strong, but still the blows/That were his, unknown to you in the same way,/May cause you to stagger and fall, too.  
  
Don't be too harsh with the man that sins./Or pelt him with words, or stone, or disdain./Unless you are sure you have no sins of your own,/And it's only wisdom and love that your heart contains.  
  
For you know if the tempter's voice/Should whisper as soft to you,/As it did to him when he went astray,  
It might cause you to falter, too.  
  
Just walk a mile in his moccasins/Before you abuse, criticize and accuse./If just for one hour, you could find a way/To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.  
  
I believe  you'd be surprised to see/That you've been blind and narrow minded, even unkind./There are people on reservations and in the ghettos/Who have so little hope, and too much worry on their minds.  
  
Brother, there but for the grace of God go you and I./Just for a moment, slip into his mind and traditions  
And see the world through his spirit and eyes/Before you cast a stone or falsely judge his conditions.  
  
Remember to walk a mile in his moccasins/And remember the lessons of humanity taught to you by your elders./We will be known forever by the tracks we leave/In other people's lives, our kindnesses and generosity.  
  
Take the time to walk a mile in his moccasins. Mary T. Lathrap

Whoever wrote it down first, the principle is well known, but I wonder if we fully understand how difficult it is to walk in another’s shoes. The illustration on the front of the order of service suggests why it is so difficult. To put on another’s moccasins means we need to first remove our own shoes. Those comfortable pumps or sneakers or loafers on our feet, those well-polished brogues or fashionable lace-ups – symbolise the comfort with which the ordinary middleclass New Zealander walks this earth. This week I had occasion to walk barefoot over concrete that had not been smoothly finished and I was surprised at how much that hurt my soft feet. I am usually comfortably insulated from the ground by sneakers, shoes or slippers. I don’t appreciate what my middle-classness protects me from. With that footwear come a whole lot of assumptions about the world, which I absorbed, as it were, with my mother’s milk – that the world is fair, that most people are honest, that if you work hard you will be rewarded, that Christianity is better than any other religion, that I will always be able to get credit, that a good education will get you anywhere, that parents are always reliable and loving, that you will be believed if you complain about a wrong done to you and well-meaning, compassionate people will put the wrong right. I also grew up thinking my word as a girl counted as much as a boy’s, (though that took a battering later.)

The prophet Jeremiah in our first reading today struggles with the call to more and different work because he does not want to change his indoor shoes to the open sandals of an itinerant prophet. In the Gospel reading little Nazareth struggles with Jesus’ proclamation of himself as the fulfilment of the scripture because they only can see him as the village carpenter. Nor can they imagine anything different happening in their town. Unlike the widow in Zarepath or Naaman, that Syrian commander, they are not prepared to envisage another way of life. Here we see an example of someone else taking on our shoes. Jesus knows on that day the harsh reality of being a small town prophet, feels the rejection of the tall poppy syndrome, knows what it is like to be disbelieved and discounted.

It is only as I take off my comfortable assumptions and expectations that I can truly see another’s experience, not through my rosy coloured spectacles, but through the plain glass of their experience. I remember well the first time I helped someone with their budget (an irony in itself since I am not the world’s greatest budgeter!). Once we had got the electricity reconnected and life flowing reasonably smoothly if fairly frugally, I made the rookie mistake of going with Ken (not his real name) to apply for an overdraft for a special project. As someone usually able to get credit, the bank’s refusal was a nasty shock. So was the patronising lecture we got from a young bank officer who had never owed a cent in his life and, if he was to be believed, had kept every receipt he had ever received and saved for everything he had bought. Fortunately Ken, the man I was assisting, was not intelligent enough to understand or be embarrassed by the scolding we received that day. It is hard to see the world from someone else’s point of view;

* To understand the trauma ever present in the lives of those who have been abused or experienced violence; the way flashbacks and memories can flare at a moment’s notice through unexpected triggers.
* It is hard for someone who has **not** lost a close loved one, to appreciate the aching loneliness of bereavement, and the feeling of no longer being quite complete, being in fact bereft.
* If you are happy in your own body, it is difficult to understand the imperative inside a person to change their gender on the outside to the gender they experience inside.
* It is hard to believe that a church community is a safe and welcoming place if every church community you have experienced has been cold and unwelcoming, hurtful and abusive. Equally it is hard to believe when church has always been a safe place for you why others might be wary and cautious about joining.

The #Me Too movement springs from the unwelcome fact that many, many women understand the trauma of abuse and the shame of not being believed, or worse, being blamed for their own abuse. In a sense, the shock should not only be about high profile women coming forward and bravely telling their stories, but it is shocking how huge the numbers are of women who ‘get that’ – how do they understand so well the dilemma? The unpalatable truth is that they have walked in those moccasins too. I found myself when I began to get to grips with the bicultural journey which everyone tauiwi New Zealander has to make, that my previous experience with feminist theory helped me understand to some extent what it meant to be Maori in new Zealand. The second-class treatment I had begun to sense as an emerging female adult helped me work out what it was like when you had lost your footing in the world. How difficult it is when thought you are tangata whenua, the whenua had been ripped from you and the concept of turangawaewae so integral to being Maori had become fraught in the extreme. It is not easy living with another class or race or type of person different from your own even when the basis for being together is mutual and loving. I remember how tired I felt as a new bride when situations arose where I had to explain to Roger why I did things the way I did or had to ask him why he was carrying out what seemed to me to be strange customs he was unconsciously importing from this family of origin.

It is important that we think before speaking. When we do not understand the depth of the background of the person to whom we are speaking, our well meant comfort and advice further perpetrates the problem. Not only being abused, but then also being misunderstood, thought to be a malingerer, or unnatural child or unloving sibling is a double and triple whammy.

If any of you were not born in New Zealand, you may well, how ever long you have loved here, roll your eyes occasionally at our funny ways here in Godzone just as we don’t understand at all what other countries do when *we* travel. That’s why there are so many Macdonalds restaurants all over the world. At least after a confusing day sightseeing and coping with different money and strange languages and customs, you can get a burger you are used to!

Our second reading, 1 Corinthians 13, is often read at weddings, where two families – her family and her bride’s family or the families of the two guys getting married or the families of the girl and the guy – two family systems are being brought together. Families differ in big things like social status and beliefs and political views, but they also differ in what and how they celebrate. They approach money differently. They have varying ways to raise children. They holiday in strangely weird ways. Even who puts out the rubbish and washes up is fraught with potential misunderstanding. As in that setting, so too today when we consider the rights and wrongs underlying Waitangi Day this week, it is useful to be reminded that true

love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

And as the passage also reminds us towards its end, we can make all kinds of sacrifices, arrange and negotiate all kinds of settlements, recompense and compensate and rearrange land titles, but in the words of 1 Corinthians 13, “If I give all I possess to the poor ... but do not have love, I gain nothing.” That is the insight of Martin Luther King Jr which Charles Gilmer highlights in our contemporary reading. We cannot shift the underlying mistrust and prejudice which underlies the shockingly unequal statistics between Maori and tauiwi populations without this thorough going love – which most of us struggle to show even our chosen most beloved partners and spouses. Many times we might tolerate, we might return assets, we might adjudicate what’s more fair, but do we always do so with love, the unconditional love which King had in mind?

I may have told some of you before, but I remember learning Maori language by the Te Ataarangi method, an orally based learning method. The tutor teaches a small group new words, then leaves, expecting the group to practise when they are away teaching others. The students are arranged and rearranged so they are with others at a similar stage. Towards the end of the course, I was in a group with three Maori men, two older than I and one younger. I couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t practise when the tutor moved away. Here was I, a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed ordinand wanting a smattering of Maori language to tick a box on my training programme. If I didn’t succeed very well, it would not be the end of my world. I thought being in a group with Maori students would help my accent to be better so I was keen to practise. Why weren’t they? I thought hard for quite a few weeks before I got it. It took me that long to take off my shoes and imagine putting on theirs. I was adding some extra language to my life in which I already spoke fluently the official language of the land. They were needing to re-discover their own language – for all of them a language they knew imperfectly. A language their people had lost because of colonial practice. Of course they didn’t want to practise in front of a privileged Pakeha woman! (and maybe not even when she was absent.) This was a feather in the hat for me, but for them their very cloak of their language was threadbare. Why? Because of my forebears. Maybe because of teachers (such as I was at the time). I worked it out, but also realised I still didn’t really understand it properly because I had not walked in their shoes for any length of time. The Te Ataarangi website comments: *“It takes only one generation to lose a language and at least three generations to restore that language"[[3]](#footnote-3)* One important learning for me on that course was how the language carries the values of the people. So it is doubly good to see and hear Maori language coming back into more common use.

Martin Luther King day, the anniversary of his birth, was 21 January in America. Let’s let his insight have the last word:

*Dr. King insisted love was the dominant or critical value by which we could overcome racial strife. The love he spoke of was a biblical love, one that is unconditional, unselfish and seeks the absolute good of another party. That kind of love is a tough love, one that confronts wrong and injustice with the truth.*

So may it always be, AMEN Susan Jones 027 321 4870 04 909 9612 minister@standrews.org.nz

1. https://jamesmilson.com/about-the-blog/judge-softly-or-walk-a-mile-in-his-moccasins-by-mary-t-lathrap/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\_Torrans\_Lathrap [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://teataarangi.org.nz/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)