

## **Dirty Laundry (Chap 9, Searching for Sunday) – Isaiah 58:1-9a, Mark 5:21-24**

Two days ago, I received a message on my phone – the one from the airline saying check in for your flight is now open. And I said to Aron. *“Shall I check us in?”* And he replied, mishearing me or not really listening (*occasionally* that happens), *“Did you say, shall we confess our sin?”* (I should have said yes!)

Ten days from now Christians around the world mark the beginning of Lent by attending Ash Wednesday services. They confess their sin, and repent and in doing so, recommit to lives of following Jesus. And they receive, as a sign of this repentance, ash on their foreheads, accompanied by the words, *“Repent, and believe in the Gospel,”* or, *“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*

In chapter nine of Rachel Held Evans’s book *Searching for Sunday*, the book we are exploring over the next few months, she speaks an interview in which she was asked, why was she still a Christian? In response she says:

*I talked about Jesus – his life, teachings, death, resurrection and presence in my life and in the world. I talked about how faith is always a risk and how the story of Jesus is a story I’m willing to risk being wrong about. And then I said something that surprised me a little, even as the words left my mouth.*

*“I’m a Christian,” I said, “because Christianity names and addresses sin. It acknowledges the reality that the evil we observe in the world is also present within ourselves. It tells the truth about the human condition – that we’re not okay.*

Our Isaiah reading and this little section of Matthew that we read both do the same – they tell us the truth about the human condition – that we are not okay. These verses from Matthew come from a larger section called the antitheses, where Jesus takes Jewish teaching, *“You have heard that it was said...”* and contrasts it or replaces it with his own, *“but I say to you...”* But antitheses is not really the most accurate description of what Jesus is doing, for he is really following the Law through to its logical conclusion.

Commentator William Loader says, *“It is like saying: you know what they said the commandments meant? Well, let me tell you what they really mean!”* And here Jesus lists examples of bad human behaviour and links them to the Old Testament injunction that murder is wrong and will be punished.

Interestingly, the three behaviours he describes don’t really escalate in severity: one - hating a brother or sister (hating is a better word than anger here – we all get angry -but this is harbouring anger, holding onto anger); two - insulting a brother or sister; three – calling a brother or sister a fool.

But the penalties escalate out of sight! First there is judgement, second being taken before the council, the Jewish high court, and third is being condemned to the hell of fire. (Literally, *Gehenna*, a valley south of Jerusalem where rubbish was constantly burned and where, in the past, human sacrifices had been made. An accursed place. A figurative and a physical hell.) Jesus using hyperbole here. I am reminded of that moment, when as a parent, you say, *“One more word from you and you’re grounded for the rest of your life!”* What Jesus is saying here is, *“It is all bad. It is all bad. Harboring hatred, insults, ruining reputations. It’s all bad, and it’s all antithetical to being my followers, to being the church.”*

So, how should people seeking to follow Jesus, but who are also very human behave?

The writer of Matthew says this: *“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”*

What is the furthest you have ever gone back for something? Like when you get to the shops and realised you’ve forgotten your credit card or phone? Have you gone further? I once got to Lake George, heading to Japan, before realising I hadn’t brought shoes – I was wearing my Ugg boots (though I confess I bought shoes in Sydney rather than going back). Jesus is again using hyperbole for his Galilean audience. It would take days to return to Galilee and then come back to Jerusalem, and it was not an easy journey – but, even then, he says, go and seek reconciliation with your brother or sister before you seek reconciliation with God and offer your gift.

In contrast to this, there is a tendency for Christian communities, to pretend everything is fine. Sin isn’t a problem anymore. We’re all okay. We all love each other! Evans quotes Lutheran minister, Nadia Bolz Weber, who says, *“There is a long and rich Christian tradition which in Latin is called ‘totally faking it!’”* And she also quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s writing about this phenomenon in the underground seminary he led in Nazi Germany.

*It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!*

The fact is that we are sinners. And what Jesus is offering us is the gift of not living alone. In Christ we can be reconciled! Hatred is not the inevitable outcome of disagreement in the Christian community. *“Leave your gift...”* Jesus says, regardless of how far you’ve come, go and try to resolve things, *“then come and offer your gift.”*

You may be interested to know the practice of ‘passing the peace’, as part of Communion, comes from these verses. Perhaps we should pause at that moment – encourage everyone to go and try and resolve any issues – and pick up again with passing the peace and celebrating communion together the next week! I read one sermon that encouraged people to take their offerings home for a week (or pause their direct debit) - though church treasurers might not be so happy about that! - until they had taken the time to try and reconcile with one another.

There are formal forms of confession – Ash Wednesday services, as I’ve mentioned, or ‘Confession’ in the Catholic church, which is now called, simply and appropriately, ‘Reconciliation’. As Baptists we are meant to practice *“the priesthood of all believers”* which means that any Christian – not just a priest or minister – can hear a confession – can stand in Christ’s place to make God’s presence and God’s forgiveness real for us. And in Matthew 18:15-35, Jesus sets out a conflict resolution model for us involving first, personal reconciliation, then mediation, then the wider church, and lots and lots and lots of forgiveness! The most powerful way to deal with hatred and other sins is to acknowledge it, recognise its impacts and seek to be reconciled, *“as far as it depends on you”*, as Romans 12:18 says, with the other person.

Because, as this passage in Matthew is spelling out for us, there are grave consequences for ourselves, and others and the church if we don’t deal with hatred and resentment – and, alternatively, joyful and fruitful consequences - if we do!

We are still discovering the impact of psychological distress on our physical bodies. The nineteenth century missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, when visiting a missionary who was ill would also ask them, *“Does your brother or sister have something against you?”* Taylor knew full well the real impact of disease – dysentery and malaria and cholera. On his first visit back to England for furlough he completed medical surgical and midwifery training and he also studied Chinese medicine, but he was also remembered for believing – rightfully I believe - that hatred has a negative impact on our health.

The research of American psychologist John Gottman has found that couples who demonstrate contempt for each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illness (cold and flus etc) than couples who are not contemptuous. *“Contempt,”* he states, *“is the most poisonous of all relationship killers. We*

*cannot emphasize that enough. Contempt destroys psychological, emotional, and physical health."*

And hatred and contempt have a corrosive impact on community as well.

Quaker writer, Richard Foster, describes an exercise he once went through – not because he was burdened by some sin – but because he felt inadequate to meet the needs he was facing. He *"longed for more power to do the work of God"*. So, he prayed and asked God for direction, and over three days he sat with a piece of paper before him. On the first day he asked God if there was anything in his childhood that needed forgiveness or healing or both.

Anything that came to mind, he wrote down, without analysing or judging, trusting God would reveal anything that needed a healing touch. The next day he did the same for his adolescent years and on the third day, his adult years.

Then he went to see a Christian friend with this list. He read it out to him and at the end, when he was putting it back into his bag, his friend took the list and a rubbish bin and tore the list into hundreds of tiny pieces and dropped it into the bin. He then offered him absolution in the name of Christ who forgives all sins and prayed a prayer for healing for all the hurts of the past. *"The power of that prayer"* Foster writes, *"lives with me today."*

Foster goes on, *"I cannot say I experienced any dramatic feelings. I did not...the entire experience was an act of sheer obedience with no compelling feelings in the least. But I am convinced that it set me free in ways I had not known before.... There was [also] one interesting sidelight. The exposure of my humanity...sparked a freedom in my counsellor-friend, for directly following his prayer for me he was able to express a deep and troubling sin that he had been unable to confess until then. Freedom begets freedom."*

When you have been reconciled... *"Then come and offer your gift"*. What new freedom in God might we discover in ourselves, or might we spark in others, or might we build in community when we recognise that we are human, that we hate and hurt one another, but that forgiveness is abundantly available for us, and that as a forgiven and forgiving community, freedom begets freedom.

The year at Canberra Baptist is really getting underway! What gifts do you want to offer to God this year? Do you need to find an exercise of repentance like the one Richard Foster used? Do you need to go and be reconciled with a brother or sister? Is there someone to whom you can confess your sin? Can you then return and offer your gift so you and they and all of us, so God's kingdom, flourishes here?

Can I invite you to join me in a prayer of confession that comes from the Iona community and then we will sing together – *O come all you unfaithful* – a reminder that we are to have fellowship as the undevout – not just the devout.