

SERMON: “Measure for Measure”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, February 20, 2022

PRAYER: “Holy God, sometimes as we receive scripture we find ourselves confused or startled. The challenge strikes us as difficult, but who ever said a life of faith was easy? Help us discern with wisdom your words of life and love that are offered to us in Jesus’ teaching. Amen”

Shakespeare may or may not have been a card-carrying Christian, but we may recall that he did have some familiarity with scripture. He wrote one entire play based on a teaching of Jesus: *Measure for Measure*. It’s not performed as often as his other works, but maybe some of you are familiar with it. It’s generally a comedy, but it has a few dark moments. It’s an Elizabethan version of a present-day television soap opera. Vincentio, Duke of Vienna, apparently goes off on a diplomatic mission. He leaves his deputy, Angelo, in charge and disguises himself as a monk to see what happens. Angelo is a tough-nut moralist who sets out to enforce old laws against prostitution and premarital sex. Claudio is a young man who is arrested and destined to die for having relations with Juliet to whom he is engaged. Isabella, Claudio’s sister, is a nun who pleads with Angelo for mercy for her brother. Angelo will pardon him, if Isabella will sleep with him. Not going to happen. As the monk-in-disguise, Vincentio arranges with Isabella and others to play tricks on Angelo. Angelo gets to have relations with Marianna, who is his betrothed, in a dark room, believing he is sleeping with Isabella instead. He is also presented with a severed head that looks like Claudio’s, but isn’t. (Told you there were some dark spots). Truth to tell, having relations with someone to whom one was engaged was considered part of the process of becoming married in those days. The Duke “returns” as himself, hears the pleas of Isabella and Marianna against Angelo. Angelo denies his ruthlessness, but the Duke as monk, exposes the truth. Angelo is then sentenced to death, but only after he marries Marianna first. More pleading from the female characters succeeds in having the Duke lift that sentence. There are also a couple of sub-plots that have their own surprise twists. Even if you are confused by now, I think you get the idea. The closing act opens with the lines: *“An Angelo for Claudio, death for death; haste still paies haste, and leasure answers leasure; like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure”*. (Act V, Scene i) The whole play is an extended story of “what goes around, comes around”. The biblical reference is to a phrase from Jesus teaching: *“In the same way you judge others, you shall be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”* (Matthew 7:2)

That's how the gospel of Matthew records it as part of "the Sermon on the Mount".
Today, we heard Luke's retelling of it as part of a "Sermon on the Plain".
Luke arranges Jesus' teachings in a different order and makes a few additions.
The whole series is about encouraging people to be Godlike in all their relationships,
especially in the more difficult ones.

Let's listen to the list again:

Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you.

If someone strikes on one cheek, offer them the other one.

If someone takes away your coat, give them your shirt too.

Give to anyone who begs from you.

If someone steals something from you, do not ask for it back.

As you wish people would do to you, do so to them.

(It's easy to love those who love you and to do good to those who do good to you.

And if you lend only to those from whom you hope to receive something, no big deal.

Even godless people do the same).

But love your enemies, do good, and lend without expecting anything in return.

Nine God-centred options for living in right relationships.

But that's not all of them.

Be merciful, just as your God, Divine Parent, is merciful.

Do not judge or you will be judged:

do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.

Add five more recommended behaviours.

And you thought the Ten Commandments were tough.

All of these are gathered up in his closing words:

*"A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put in your lap;
for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (See Luke 6:27-38)*

All of these behaviours recommended by Jesus have that *quid pro quo* outcome attached to them.

All of them are ways of living out your congregational purpose
of "building relationships, living God's transforming love".

All of them are focused on maximizing our potential for exercising holy love.

All of them begin by being generated in generous, compassionate, thankful hearts and spirits.

None of them begin by asking "what's in it for me?"

For me, there's a direct connection to the two commandments upheld by Jesus.

"As you wish people would do to you, do so to them" [Or more often, "Do unto others ...]

This counsel is common ground in all other religions of the world.

It connects with *"Love your neighbour as you love yourself"*.

For Jesus, there are few if any limits on that,
 because here, he extends to all those who are difficult to love:
 enemies, slanderers, people who abuse us, people who hate, people who strike us,
 people who rob, pilfer, steal, or borrow stuff without returning it.
 How deep does compassion within us run? How far can we widen our hearts?
 In my twenties, I recall a friend or two who borrowed some of my Gordon Lightfoot albums.
 They never gave them back. After asking for them back for over two or three years,
 I was able to give up asking; but at the time, it wasn't easy.
 Worse case scenario: some years ago, a congregational treasurer embezzled \$150,000
 from the congregation. It hurt a lot of people.
 Litigation was unproductive, only a pittance was ever recovered.
 It took over fifteen years for that congregation to forgive the theft.
 I can't say I've had to deal with any actual enemies. How about you?
 Certainly, there have been fallings out with friends, failed relationships, dissatisfied congregants,
 and a divorce. How have those inter-relational trials been for you?
 Letting go and moving on usually happens. But what about when you all meet up again?
 What part of our hearts do we tap into to manage those awkward and troubling instances?
 I suspect most of us have stories about being both unsuccessful and successful
 in re-encountering ex-spouses, former friends, in-laws who hurt or broke up our family circle,
 co-workers or even brothers and sisters in Christ from whom we have distanced ourselves.
 Love them, says Jesus, somehow love them without prejudice, without condemnation,
 without making judgments, without malice. And, as often as possible, forgive them.
 The measure we give is the measure we get back. Do unto others as
 Jesus invites us to live with empathic and generous hearts.
 That doesn't mean letting everything slide. It's important to have clear boundaries
 to which we hold ourselves and others accountable; discerning what's okay and what isn't okay.
 Brené Brown's recent research and writing in this regard resonates well with many.
 Her acronym for living and leading bravely and earnestly and compassionately is B.I.G.:
 Boundaries, Integrity, and Generosity. Here's how she puts it in *Rising Strong*:
*"Living BIG is saying: Yes, I'm going to be generous in my assumptions and intentions
 while standing solidly in my integrity and being very clear about what's acceptable
 and what's not acceptable.*
*When we combine the courage to make clear what works for us and what doesn't,
 with the compassion to assume people are doing their best, our lives change."* I
 Its sounds to me like she's captured the spirit of Jesus. Does it sound that way to you?

 There's that other key commandment of Jesus, the one about loving God with all we've got.
 I believe that here is another field in which "the measure we give is the measure we get back".
 Do we see worship as one vibrant way of expressing our love for God?
 of offering God our gratitude, our praise, our dedication?
 I wonder. I wonder if our deep immersion in a consumer culture has suppressed that.
 The question is: in a service of worship, who is being served?
 Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard fashioned imagery around the "theatre of worship".
 For him it isn't the leaders who are the actors nor is the chancel area the stage.

For him, the whole sanctuary is the stage where, prompted by the ministers and musicians, the entire congregation become the actors. The audience is God.

I wonder, how often do we consider that our worship is an act of service to God?

I meet and hear and notice a lot of worshippers today who attend services in order to receive.

It's often mostly, if not entirely, about getting: getting inspiration, uplift, getting food for thought, getting recharged in faith with "gas in the tank so I can make it through another week".

Those are not unimportant expectations about worship and its outcome, but could it be that they are secondary, not primary?

Nonetheless, showing up for worship matters.

In her wonderful book about keeping Sabbath, Marva Dawn addresses

the complaint sometimes raised up in some family homes: "I don't want to go to church!"

She notes that the earliest forms of Christian assembly were vibrant gatherings of God's people.

Over against a perception that the church is a static place

people go to for tired, boring rituals, she contends:

*"We are NOT 'going to church'! We are going to a **sanctuary** to participate in an order of **worship** together with other people of God gathered in **community**, to be nourished by all that we do there together so that we can go out into the world and **be church**."* 2

The nourishment we receive by "all that we do together" in worship "in community" is incrementally expanded by the amount of thanksgiving, praise, and "delighting in God" that we offer in the process of our also receiving.

I wonder if we curtail that by our withholding.

"Love God with all your mind, all your strength, all your heart, all your soul."

There is a place for reverence and holy awe before God; but there's also place for celebration.

What would it be like to free ourselves to really sing out, or make our own joyful noise?

What would it be like to add more bodily expression into our times of worship and praise?

What would it be like to free our hearts and souls to celebrate?

Could it be true that the more we put into our experience of worship, the more nurture and blessing we will receive?

"For the measure we give, is the measure we will get back".

What do we do with all that love God has implanted in us?

How do we grow that? How do we release that most fully?

Loving even enemies, and people who slander us or hurt us.

Loving those who beg from us, or borrow stuff they don't return.

Loving those who are difficult to love.

Foregoing any judgment, condemnation, prejudice on our part.

Being merciful. Being both giving and forgiving.

Doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Loving God too with everything we've got.

Becoming as Christlike as possible.

It's about the kind of love that is self-offering; Spirit-fed, godly love.

There's a richness available to us in all that isn't there? wholeness and fullness of life richness.

*“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure,
pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put in your lap;
for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”*
Wow! How awesome the possibility! An exchange rate that goes far beyond fair.
“Go ahead, make the investment,” says Jesus. “Life abundant awaits.”

Notes

- 1 Brené Brown, in *Rising Strong*, (quoted by Jamie Davidoff on sparksuccess.com/living-big-boundaries-integrity-generosity).
- 2 Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI: 2003 reprint), Preface, page 2.