

**“An eloquent community” - Matthew 18: 12- 22 - a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 7 September 2014**

Teachers at Law School were fond of giving we law students hypotheticals. The case of Donoghue v Stevenson involved a person finding a decomposed snail in their drink bottle. The problem was they had drunk half the contents before they found it. The person suffered stomach problems. The House of Lords held the company negligent. So the lecturer in the classroom would say something like - Now Mr Enright, what if it was something more innocuous like a caterpillar ... would the company still be negligent? What if it had less effect on the person – would the company still be negligent? And so the class would proceed as we were presented with one hypothetical after another, testing our ability to argue a case from first principles. Then the lecturer would turn to someone else – “Now Ms Smith, you have heard what Mr Enright thinks, what do you think?” “I think he is wrong sir, as usual.”

I thought of those law classes when I noted the number of *ifs* in the gospel today. “If another member of the church sins against you ... if you are not listened to ... if the member refuses to listen ...” - hypotheticals preparing us for the day it will happen, encouraging us to apply first principles.

The gospel today gives licence to create a few of our own.

If a person at Knox neglects to pay another due respect, or they absent-mindedly walk past the person without acknowledging them, or appears to avoid them at morning tea.

If a person makes a throw away comment another takes as dismissal of their views or contribution, or treats lightly what another person regards as very important.

If a person makes a few sharp comments, with a certain lack of sensitivity, and another person feels criticised and undervalued.

If a person feels that some people in Knox get more attention than others, that their views are not given sufficient weight, that there are some who seem to get their way and others are disregarded, that there is an inner circle and an outer circle, people who seem to influence and others who have no idea what is going on, and the person is not of the inner group.

If the minister expresses a view, perhaps a theological view, a member cannot accept, that seems to expect the person to believe more than they can manage or to believe less than they feel is minimal.

If the way things are being run is not what it used to be, if valued practices are being undervalued and neglected.

If nothing really changes, minister after minister, it’s always the same old same old.

And so I could go on. Of course, these are not hypotheticals. They are instances of difficulty in congregations I know. I could keep going for a long time.

They sound minor when I put them in a sermon like this. A couple of weeks ago Peter declared Jesus the Messiah. Last week, Jesus spoke of going to Jerusalem, to crucifixion, to resurrection and he called us to take up our cross. In comparison, these hypotheticals sound like the Book of Order has intruded into the Bible!

Minor? Are you kidding me? Minor? Don't we know what it is like to feel sidelined? Don't we know what it is like to have a valued view ignored? Don't we know what it is like when people are not respected, when people are hurt, when rules change and we don't know what is going on? Don't we know what it is like to be not noticed again and again? Don't we know how much is at stake when we are talking about what is dear to us, what we have learned from long experience, what is crucial to the life of the Church?

When I was about 15 I was part of a church youth group. I had gone forward at a Billy Graham Crusade, and made one of the most momentous commitments a person could make, to seek to follow Jesus. And I came back to a church where the minister was in public dispute with most of the congregation, where people taped his sermons so they could use them in evidence, where you could cut the Sunday air with a knife, where the minister and the local vicar had an argument through the local paper, where eventually a special Commission was appointed. The commitment I made withered away - the Church's energy went on other things. It wasn't their fault - I take responsibility for that. But for a while their focus was elsewhere. I knew these people ... good, faithful, committed, respected people ... and something took hold.

It takes little for conflict to escalate and so we see a television programme devoted to an argument in a congregation. I have been a member and chair of enough commissions to know how destructive conflict can be. Indeed, the first time I came to this Church as a minister was to an Assembly in 1985, and I sat on a Commission dealing with a congregation torn apart by conflict. It ended up in the High Court and one of the protagonists had a heart attack and died.

Every church experiences conflict, sometimes destructive conflict. Knox has, does and will - people who have walked out, people who have drifted away, people who felt they no longer belonged, people who had strong views and did not feel heard, people who hold on through gritted teeth. It is, was and will be. And I am afraid to say, that during my ministry here it will happen again, and again, and I am likely to be the cause of some of it. One thing you and I share, clay feet, humanness. We hurt each other. The prayer of confession is not an archaic ritual ... it's how we are.

If we think the behaviour of a community is important because of what it does for people, Jesus certainly does. These hypotheticals sit between two stories. First, the story of the Shepherd leaving the 99 and going for the one, the one who has wandered away, or got lost, or become distracted - how braced off must the 99 have felt? "What about us?" they might have said. "There is more of us, and that sheep was always wandering off, absent-minded, not really committed, always on the edge." "No", says Jesus, "it's the one that counts!" Then after the hypotheticals, the question of how many times we need to forgive people - seventy seven times.

There is a legacy issue with this passage because it was used by our forbears to cast people out. "If they refuse to listen, let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." But who said these words - the man who ate with Gentiles and Tax Collectors. Each one of these hypotheticals, every *if* in this story is aimed at reconciliation, restoration, relationship - every single one of them. So if you have an issue, go to the person - find courage - they aren't as scary as you imagine they are. Go to them, raise the issue - there will be a way through. If that doesn't work, find another way, perhaps with some others to help you both talk it through - others might see a way the two of you cannot, might help you put things in perspective. Then if that doesn't work, have a meal with them, the way Jesus did with Gentiles and Tax Collectors. Sit down at the same table and have a meal together. You may

not need to talk about the dispute – just eat together – that’s what this Communion table is about – a weekly call to keep eating together.

There is an assumption throughout this reading, that we will have enough to do with each other that we will hurt each other, that we will offend each other, that we will strain relationships. There is one way to avoid doing this, and that is to be distant from each other, to be tolerant, respectful, but disengaged. That is clearly not what Jesus envisages ... he expects everyone who follows him to be so in relationship with each other that they will hurt each other. It is called, I believe, love. We will be a community of love. It was said of the early Christian community - “see how they love each other.” Did they argue with each other? The letters to the Corinthians and Colossians and Galatians and the other communities suggest they did!

Difficult yet thrilling as it is, this is how the gospel is proclaimed, through how we are together. There was a time when people might speak of the eloquence of a minister. Eloquent ministers are a dime a dozen - visit youtube or reddit or whatever. What matters more is the eloquence of the community, how **we** are, how **we** speak Gospel, Christ, love. Eloquent communities are rarer. May it be said of us, amid our hurting of each other, see how they love each other.