

'five principles to guide our way forward'

An excerpt from an Address given during the sermon time

at St. Philip's Anglican Church

June 20, 2004

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Introduction

Most of you will be aware that the Anglican Church is presently engaged in a painful conversation around the issue of how we as a community should approach the issue of same sex relationships. It has not been my habit to focus my preaching on issues. I believe that the church's function is to focus our attention upon the living presence of God known to us in Jesus Christ. And, if there is one factor that has landed the Anglican Church in its present difficulty it may well be the fact that we have allowed ourselves to focus our attention more on issues than on holding up the transcendent reality of God's presence revealed to us through Jesus.

We live in uncertain times and some of this uncertainty is going to have a direct impact upon us here at St. Philip's. So my primary concern is how we conduct ourselves in this community in the face of the difficulties confronting us and the wider church.

I want to share five principles that I think should guide our way forward.

1. People before issues

God is always vastly more concerned with people than with issues and right answers.

The Bible is a deeply relational book. Everywhere we look in Scripture we find people in relationship to one another and in relationship to God. The Ten Commandments are first concerned with our relationship to God and secondly with our relationship to one another. Jesus was profoundly concerned with anything that might present a barrier or a hindrance to human beings realizing their relationship with God. Jesus' fundamental goal was to open up relationship between people and God. The sins about which Jesus was most concerned in the New Testament were the religious sins that had the potential to get in the way of peoples' relationship with God. Jesus did not address issues. Jesus dealt with people. It is true that the writers of the letters in our New Testament address certain issues facing the church of their day. But the first concern for all the epistle writers is the sanctity of the relationships between brothers and sisters in Christ.

2. I am responsible

I am responsible for my conduct in my relationship to all other people who claim to be followers of Jesus.

The Christian Church is an extraordinarily diverse and incredibly varied body. There are people who call themselves Christians with whom I can find almost nothing in common. I recently saw a clip of a television preacher. While I don't doubt this man's sincerity, I have to tell you that I really couldn't find anything in what this man said that bore any resemblance to what I understand to be the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, this man is my brother. Whether we are institutionally connected or not, we belong together. And I am responsible to live in respectful relationship with this person.

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3. Support for your life in Christ

My only responsibility to you is to support you in your life in Christ.

If you look at the Gospel stories, you will find that Jesus dealt differently with every individual he encountered. We are all at different places in our spiritual journeys. And God works uniquely in each of our lives. I may need something quite different than you need at this particular stage in my life. And in the end, I must respect that I do not know better than you what is best in your life. Your spiritual journey is ultimately between you and God. I must trust the Holy Spirit's work in your life. And if you genuinely and sincerely believe that eating chocolate ice cream is what you need in order to grow in your life in Christ, then I will support you in that. I may disagree with you but I will honour your right to eat all the chocolate ice cream you desire, until God shows you another way.

4. The goal is love

Our only goal is love.

Love is not the same as sentimentality. I believe that human beings were created by God to operate in a certain way. And while I may have a responsibility to tell you that a more balanced diet will be healthier, my first goal is to love you. And to love you means to be open to you, to be gentle with you, to be kind, respectful, genuine, and tolerant. There is no place in love for condemnation or judgementalism. There is no place in love for violence, abuse, manipulation, or force. Love starts with an attitude of welcome and embrace. Love communicates acceptance, trust and confidence.

5. Faithfulness is always our base

We trust in the faithfulness of God. God has declared absolute love for us. There is nothing else we need. We do not need to win. We do not need to succeed. We do not even need to save the world. We need to know that we are loved and to live from that deep inner assurance of God's commitment to us. Everything else is secondary. So we can relax and not get caught up in the drama of institutional turmoil.

And in the same way God remains faithful to us, we have a responsibility to keep faith with one another. We live in a world that is desperately torn by conflict. It is essential in the church that we demonstrate that there is another way of being together in community. We are called to model a quality of human community that is grounded in faithfulness and trust. This means that we will always be willing to follow Jesus in relationship with one another. We will be willing to lay down our lives for one another, to turn the other cheek over and over, to let go, to surrender. We do not look for victory. We look for humility, honest, and hope.

Conclusion

We are a community of faith. Our life together is based upon the living presence of God. We are only together because, as Paul says in Galatians, we *"have clothed ourselves with Christ."* It is the bond of Christ that unites us. I pray that we may continue to grow together in our ability to demonstrate that with God's love there is never a time to give up. But, the way we live in the present will largely shape the future we are able to achieve.

I pray that we may live in love with faithfulness and truth in the unity of Christ.