

**SIGNPOSTS SERIES – NO 7**  
**LOVING THOSE CLOSEST TO US**

**Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 22 October 2006**

**Ephesians 4:29 – 5:2; 1 John 3:11-24; John 13:34-35**

\*[Series based upon the book of the same title, by Trevor Hudson]

[Explanatory note for written copy: This title is Number 7 in the book, although this is sermon number 8 in series based upon the book. Most recent topics:

- Topic 5: The Family of the Church (George Niven – Sunday 1 October)
- Topic 6: Becoming Holy (Graham Beggs – Sunday 8 October)
- Topic 8: Discovering God’s call for our lives (Julia Denny-Dimitriou – Sunday 15 Oct)

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There’s a Peanuts’ cartoon I used to have, that goes something like this:

Lucy asks Linus, “So what are you going to be when you grow up?”

He replies, “A doctor”.

She says, “You can’t be a doctor! To be a doctor, you have to like people.”

To which he replies, “I can’t stand people! Its humanity I love!”

And so the point is made, that we can have lofty ideals about humanity – that great mass of people ‘out there’ – and yet have problems with loving people in our own backyard, literally.

That’s a suitable introduction to today’s topic, “Loving those closest to us”, one of the Signposts suggested for those who are followers in The Way of Jesus Christ, in Trevor Hudson’s book which we’ve been using as an outline. Although I will cover some of the points he does in this chapter, I also have some additional points to bring into our brief examination of this topic.

In fact, this is about very down-to-earth practical spirituality for those who believe in God and follow Jesus, so it should be simple and straightforward, right?

Take the opening quotation from Trevor Hudson’s chapter:

“Compassionate caring is the acid test of the authentic follower of Christ. Practices of spiritual disciplines that do not result in others, especially those closest to us, feeling more valued and loved are hollow and empty.

Genuine growth in relationship with the Holy One evidences itself ... in an ever-deepening capacity to care for others. When this does not happen, we have failed the acid test.”

*(Page 97 – words slightly adapted for verbal delivery due to complex sentence structures)*

I’m not sure of anyone else’s reactions to that, but mine is “Ouch”! I know full well that I do not always pass what he calls “the acid test”. A little further on, he writes:

“Learning to love particular individuals is an indispensable component of (our vocation to follow) Christ. God, as we have already noted, is extravagantly, sacrificially and unconditionally loving. Jesus, God come in the flesh, lived this love and taught what he lived. The language of the kingdom is the language of self-giving love. Participation in this kingdom demands one central commitment. It requires sharing with others the same kind of compassion, mercy and caring that we have received from God. This is the essential distinguishing characteristic, ‘the acid test’ as I’ve called it, of being a follower of Jesus. Ponder again those startling words spoken by Jesus and heard in today’s reading from the Gospel:

‘A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ (John 13:34-35).”

Well I certainly cannot claim to have comfortably passed the acid test, and I remember a preacher some time ago saying, whenever a preacher talks about love and marriage and family, he or she hopes their spouse and family are NOT in the congregation! J

But then, that takes us directly onto one of the first practical steps Trevor suggests, in living a life of love just as Christ loved us, moving from abstract to the practical, from theory to practice. He suggests that loving those closest to us begins with confession: Confession of our inability to love the Jesus way.

For all the great material, technical and scientific advances of humanity, we have advanced little in the way of love. Whilst every generation may have the benefit of the cumulative material and scientific knowledge of previous generations, and be able to build upon it, matters of the heart and spirit have to be learnt from scratch by each person. I may benefit from the faith, and the loving, of others around me; but I have to learn from the beginning how to live that for myself.

And we need to confess our inability consistently to love others in the way that Jesus modelled for us. Humanity doesn’t know how to love perfectly. Our true God-given nature is imprinted with the image of God, and is capable of being loving, compassionate and self-giving. However there is another side to us in which this Godly image is distorted – what Trevor calls our “sin-condition” – resulting in significant capacity for self-centredness.

Thus it is said, that the closer we are to God, the more the God-given nature is nourished and developed. The more estranged we are from God, the more the destructive, egotistical and self-centred side develops. I can't speak for anyone else, but hearing that, produces another "ouch" for me and highlights my own shortcomings.

In his chapter in the book, Trevor highlights several issues, and suggests some very practical steps in addressing them. There is not time to deal in detail with them, but in summary form they include the following points:

- He offers some practical suggestions for opening ourselves to the resources of God, in enabling us to grow in this area of our lives.
- He goes on to write about Listening as a crucial and necessary skill – very missing in most human interactions. Deep listening to another requires patience, care and a certain stillness within ourselves as we listen, in such a way that the person knows they have been heard, deeply and truly heard – and not just dismissed with pontificating or sermonising words which we are in too much of a hurry to say.

Two points he doesn't directly raise, but which I think important, are the following:

- Firstly: It is possible that some people may be thinking, "I'm not sure I've experienced the love of God in Christ. I hear talk about God and God's love and can accept God's love generally, generically, out there somewhere... but I haven't personally experienced it." It may be that this is the first of our challenges, to talk to someone who can be helpful in that regard, for our understanding is that God's love is also not only just for 'broad humanity' out there, but for each person in an individual way as well, to be known and experienced in a personal way, not purely as an abstract concept.
- The second issue is that of "boundaries". Each of us needs a defined personal boundary in order more effectively to relate to others, and to be appropriately able to love spouses, parents, children and friends, and people in the community and in work situations in general.

Being loving towards others does not mean we need to lose all distinctive sense of self, and completely neglect our own needs. In fact, to be able truly to love another, requires a true sense of our own self, distinct from any other person. If we have experienced dysfunctionality in our lives, it will potentially damage our boundaries of self, and we may need to look at that to help us in growing in love.

Loving others also is not a reference to all-tolerant, put-up-with-everything type of behaviour, including remaining silent in the face of that which may be abusive. In fact, love of others and for ourselves requires us to challenge that.

- A superb book in this area is "Boundaries", written by two Christians with appropriate skill and expertise (Drs Henry Cloud and John Townsend). I recently re-read it and found it enormously helpful, and I know that some of you have also

read it, for it was parishioners who first brought the book to my attention some years ago. Some churches have even run courses based upon the book, so practical and helpful it is in dealing with this crucial area, and it comes highly recommended by me.

Returning to Trevor Hudson's points, at the end of his chapter, he very helpfully discusses the issue of "love as emotion". I think we all know this point, though we may not always live by it: Love certainly includes emotive responses to people, but love by definition is NOT an emotion. Love is better defined by appropriate actions and responses to people, and cannot be driven purely by how we feel towards another. Loving, in the godly sense, is about acting in loving ways.

In marriage preparation, I always highlight for couples that love within marriage will involve frequently having to say sorry – for we most easily hurt those who are closest to us, partly because we live in close proximity or spend much time together. We need to consider our actions towards others, that which demonstrates love; do the people we say we love, know that we love them by the way we act towards them?

Again, a very popular book in this area, known by some of you, is that of Gary Chapman, "The Five Love Languages". In fact, he has written a series of them, which we first came across in terms of children – understanding the primary ways in which children need and receive love. But in the first book of the series, he makes the following point (from the back cover of the book):

"He sends you flowers when what you really want is time to talk. She gives you a hug when what you really need is a home-cooked meal. The problem isn't your love – its your love-language!

In this (book), Dr Chapman reveals how different people express love in different ways, in ... five specific languages of love: Quality time, Words of Affirmation, Gifts, Acts of Service, Physical touch. What speaks volumes to you may be meaningless to your spouse..."

In first coming across this, Julia and I had one of those "Aha!" moments, when the light comes on... The Marriage Preparation Course that I now use is a video-and-discussion based course put together by a British priest and his wife, Nicky and Silla Lee who are in ministry in central London. The course includes a session that covers these "love languages" and refers to Chapman's book, to help couples understand one another's primary practical needs when it comes to expressing love in practical day-to-day terms. I note too how the light seems to come on as couples consider the point.

Perhaps we all need to consider our relationships with people around us, considering how truly loving we are, and in what ways we need to grow in being loving. A final sentence or two from Hudson (page 106):

“Caring for those closest to us signposts us towards genuine growth in God. Through confession, empathetic listening and caring actions we embark upon the loving way. Stepping into this world of compassion, we step into the world of the self-giving God. Miracles of the Spirit begin to occur. Our lives and relationships (receive the gift of) healing and newness. Hearts of stone become hearts of flesh. We pass the acid test.”

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