

Sermon preached in St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street Sydney 9th August 2015 by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary readings: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 32-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4: 25-5:2; John 6: 35, 41-51.

Be Yourself

“Just be yourself.” We're sometimes advised. Is this good advice? What does it mean? Who is this “self” that I am? Is it a good idea to have the self that I am to be my guide through my life? Is whatever I decide to be of value to be the sole judge of right or wrong or conditional, black or white or some shade of grey? Is it practical for you or I to act like a preacher and to urge listeners to just “Be Yourself” and see some good come out of it? Would it do more than just confirm them in their limited understandings, practices and attitudes?

What did Shakespeare mean when he had Polonius say?:

“This above all: to thine one self be true, And it must follow, as night the day,
Thou canst not be false to any man. Farewell, my blessing season this in thee.”

In Ephesians, we get a number of images of God's expansiveness, boundlessness, vastness and inclusiveness. And then we come across this affirmation by Paul: “You were created to be like God and so you must please him and be truly holy” (C E V 4:24.) This serves as an introduction to our passage for today, which has a whole lot of ethical injunctions, sayings which have many “do-s and do-nots.

I am helped in understanding the dimensions of the phrase, “Be Yourself,” by the approach used by Kierkegaard. He pictured the self as a bundle of relationships. So you have to understand yourself as a bundle of relationships that includes your relationship with yourself, your relationship with your neighbour and your relationship with God.

What intensifies these relationships is that we can also take a relationship to the way we relate to self, others and all that is. And then we can take a relationship to the way we have related. You will soon see that other layers of relating can progress to infinity.

All this is to say we are not static, fixed and pre-determined selves. We are dynamic. In this sense of always relating to our relationships we mirror God, who is depicted as active, dynamic Being.

So the self the preacher in Ephesians is addressing with a whole lot of ethical injunctions is a self who is capable of taking new relationships to his or her own behaviour and attitudes.

That means we acknowledge our present state and attitudes and realise that there can be a different future if we so decide. We agree with the preacher: “Yes, I am part of the same body as you, so you're just as important as I am.” “Yes, I am prone to lying and can start telling the truth.”

“Yes, I get so angry sometimes that I create a separation between me and you, between me and God and between me and myself. I can give myself a cooling-off period so I don't go to bed angry. I won't give the devil a chance to widen the gap.”

“I am a thief, true enough, but I can acknowledge what I get from others and be honest and hard-working instead of sponging off others. Instead I will be able to give to others in need instead of regarding myself as the neediest person around.”

My dirty talk happens most when I disparage others rather than acknowledging that they are coping remarkably well when one considers all the circumstances. My mother said, when asked “How are you going?” - “I'm coping.” That's the right thing to say at the right time and helps others to cope with their approach to the life's issues and challenges.

When we attend to our relationship with God, self and others, we “Don't make God's Spirit sad, and can be sure that someday (we) will be free from (our) sins.”

How important it is for us to “Stop being bitter and angry and mad at others.” We all have our lives to lead and each of us decides how we are going to live.

Hopefully that will be in a creative, affirmative and positive way. It takes just as much energy to be affirmative as to be mad. The reward is that sometimes we receive affirmations from the least likely sources or people.

When we “yell at one another, and curse each other or even be rude” to them and then wake up to how badly we are behaving, we can instead take a fresh attitude and be “kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave us because of Christ.” What a change that new relationship can bring!

So, we begin to get a feeling for what the preacher in Ephesians is doing. He is asking us to take a fresh approach to our relationships, to all of them, to self, to others, to the universe. That's why he says, “Do as God does. After all, you are his dear children. Let love be your guide. Christ loved us and offered his life for us as a sacrifice to please God.”

If we may pick up and turn around a phrase from after our current passage, in 5:5 we can reverse the assertion that people who behave in unloving ways “will never be part of the kingdom that belongs to Christ and to God”

We can assert instead that “People who behave” in the way that “let(s) love be (their) guide “will always be part of the kingdom that belongs to Christ and to God.”

That is the way to be a self, to be like God who made us, according to Genesis, to be like God's self, to be like God, to be in the image of God. To be one who relates lovingly to one's own self, and thus overcomes self-hatred, who loves the neighbour instead of pushing aside the neighbour, and who opens himself and herself to relate positively to all that is, rather than to the limited universe to which we sometimes narrow ourselves.

“Be yourself!” This is an order I have received from my Father, as Jesus says in John 10:18: “The Father loves me because I give up my life, so that I may receive it back again. No one takes my life from me. I give it up willingly! I have the power to give it up and the power to receive it back again, just as my Father commanded me to do.”

This is taking a creative relationship to one's relationships. Taking responsibility for oneself and not blaming others for what they're doing or not doing. Affirming the power to be able to take a new relationship at any given time. “A sacrifice that pleases God.”

If it is true that in Jesus Christ, in baptism, all of us have been made God's beloved children, then it is not so far-fetched to expect us to act somewhat like the Father, even to 'imitate' God. When we show unselfish love toward someone, it's not so remarkable, because in Jesus, unselfish love has been shown to us.

We can be gracious to each other, because God has shown us graciousness. We can be true to our real selves, that is, to a self that is continually relating, not to a diminished self, but to that developed self which includes oneself, neighbour and God.

“I am the bread that gives life!” No one is turned away from the bread of life, which is our relationships. We are fed and nourished and will be raised up at the last day. We live forever in our relationships. Our relationships are our eternal life.

“Just be yourself.” Good advice, providing the self is God-like. Expansive, kind, merciful and forgiving. Like the “life-giving bread” of Jesus' self. May this “blessing” be “seasoned” in us. In our expanded understandings, practices and attitudes. Then it follows, as night the day, we can not be false to any man, including oneself.” I can choose to be myself! You can Be Yourself!