

More than a word. Reconciliation takes action

- Sermon outline

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Scripture:

Romans 12:1-21 1 John 3:16-18

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:16-18, NIV).

The big idea: Love in action.

Sermon summary: Genuine love goes beyond saying we love people, beyond claiming we want equality, equity and unity for people. Genuine love is seen in our actions and attitudes. We cannot claim that God’s love lives in us if we do not act on that love to help those who are in need.

Introduction: The three most important words.

From time to time there is discussion in private and public spaces about the three most important words ever uttered. If I asked you, what would you say are the three most important words?

I was wrong. I am sorry. I need help. Yes I can. I forgive you. Can I help? How are you? I see you.

I hear you.

Apparently, the most common answer is, “I love you”. Certainly, these are indeed powerful words that we hope everyone would hear in their life, but many among us will know all too well that words are cheap if they are not backed up by action.

Have you heard the saying: “Who you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying”? The reality is that if our actions do not match our words, then our words will quickly lose their power.

Love in action:

How, then, do we demonstrate our love? If love is more than nice words, what does it look like?

Romans 12 gives us insight into what love looks like in action: hospitality, contributing to need, giving aid, using our gifts, valuing the gifts and contributions of others, honouring one another and showing affection, pouring out our life as a living sacrifice, being hopeful and patient, rejoicing with people when they are happy, weeping with people when they are sad, living in humility, harmony and peace, offering forgiveness, providing for the needs of people even if they appear to be our enemies, allowing good to triumph no matter the challenges.

That's quite an impressive list. I imagine, for most of us, it's not one we can say with any honesty that we have fully achieved.

It is certainly worth asking ourselves on a regular basis if being a follower of Jesus is leading us to be more loving. Do I contribute beyond my surplus in an impactful way to those in need? Do I use the gifts God has given me for the benefit of others, or do I prefer to take an easier path? Using our gifts can be costly. Do I genuinely value other people's gifts and contributions and consider them as worthy as my own? Am I hospitable, do people feel 'at home' in my presence? Do I allow myself to engage with people at an emotional level, to genuinely share in their joy and their grief? Am I humble, peace bringing, forgiving? What about when people have genuinely wronged me? Am I patient – with myself, my loved ones, those who are 'other' to me in some way, or my enemies? Am I a bringer of hope and harmony to a world that so desperately needs those qualities?

Reconciliation requires more than education and verbal assent:

This week, on our nation's calendar, is Reconciliation Week. It is a time to reflect on the true history of the establishment of our nation. It is a time to acknowledge both the ongoing struggles and the significant contributions of our First Nations peoples. It is a time to commit ourselves afresh to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In an Australian context, there is no doubt that our First Nations peoples desperately need followers of Jesus to participate in reconciliation, by showing the love in action that comes from being a follower of Jesus.

What is it we are talking about when we discuss reconciliation in an Australian context? Most Australians, these days, understand something of the need for reconciliation in our country. After 20 years of Reconciliation Australia and almost three decades of Australia engaging in a formal reconciliation process, there is no doubt that we are making progress. The Reconciliation Australia website tells us that: "The 2020 Australian Reconciliation Barometer indicates a greater awareness of the complexity and magnitude of First Nations cultures and knowledge. Many more Australians have come to understand the brutal impact that British Colonialism and the Modern Australian state have had on First Nations families and communities."

It is true that now, more than ever in our lifetime, the number of people speaking up about the issues and injustices faced by First Nations peoples is increasing. People are learning, and, with their new-found

education, knowledge and understanding, they are speaking up, speaking the truth, asking hard questions of themselves and others, and seeing the challenging facts and data that make up the lived reality of the lives of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers. There are hopeful signs and encouraging moments, but it just isn't enough.

Young Indigenous men and women still die in custody at alarming rates. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still greatly over-represented in unemployment figures, incarceration rates and poor health statistics. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are still far less likely to finish school, live in safe housing or experience good health.

Systemic racism is rife. Inequality is often falsely justified. People continue to be ignored, denied or reduced.

Education is good and speaking up is fabulous, but it is only the beginning. Our sisters and brothers still suffer from inequality and inequity. There are still many people, perhaps even some in this room, who refuse to acknowledge or accept our history, or who believe that it should no longer impact people. There is still a lack of unity in this country we call Australia. There have been many words spoken, even apologies given, but if we are to see unity and equality then we need more, for all our sakes. Inequality does not only keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples oppressed, which should be enough to make us want to change things, but it limits and prevents us from being all we were created to be and benefitting from the gifts of all of God's people.

More than a word. Reconciliation takes action:

The theme of Reconciliation Week is, 'More than a word. Reconciliation takes action'. The minute I heard this theme I was reminded of 1 John 3:16-18: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (NIV).

This year, for National Reconciliation Week, we are being called from awareness to action, from being safe to being brave. Or, to put it another way, as disciples of Jesus we are being called to demonstrate love by opening our hearts and loving with both our words and actions. It could not be clearer; if we are unwilling to love our brothers and sisters with our actions, then we cannot claim to know the love of God or claim that God's love lives in us.

Love in action:

What does love in action look like for people who are seeking to bring about reconciliation?

Romans 12 is again a great place to start, but it will require us to be brave and ask ourselves some challenging questions.

How am I showing genuine hospitality to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? Am I a welcoming person who allows people to feel at home? How do I receive hospitality from Aboriginal and Torres Strait



Islander peoples? Sometimes being the one giving is easier than receiving. The giver can at times be in a position of power in a way that the receiver may not be. Am I humble enough to receive hospitality when it is offered?

How do I contribute to the needs of our First Nations peoples? Do I give aid in a way that allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to determine and address their own needs in culturally appropriate ways?

Do I use my God-given gifts to advocate and act, and to make sure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have their own voice?

Do I value the knowledge and gifts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? Am I willing to learn from these, my sisters and brothers, even if it shows up my ignorance? How do I honour them?

Do I allow myself to become emotionally engaged and connected with First Nations peoples? Do I celebrate with them? Do I weep with them? Their grief is a heavy burden to bear.

Am I humble in my speaking and interaction? Am I forgiving when mistakes are made? Will I pour out my life as a living sacrifice to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples flourish in the way that God intended them to?

Some of these questions may be challenging for us, but if we are not even willing to ask ourselves hard questions then we are even less likely to engage in action that will allow lasting change and be a visible demonstration of our profession of love.

The Salvation Army and reconciliation:

The Salvation Army in Australia has been on a long journey of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There have been successes and stumbles along the way, but there has also been an ever-increasing commitment to ensure that we are actively engaged in a process of reconciliation. The launch of our first Australia Territory RAP (Reconciliation Action Plan), in December last year, marked a significant step on this journey for our movement, but it is only in its implementation that we can claim to be genuinely engaged in reconciliation. It is not a reconciliation statement, but a plan to action that we have committed to. For our RAP to be a success, we each need to play our part to live out our vision for reconciliation.

As stated in our RAP: "Our vision for reconciliation is to be a faith-based movement committed to equity, freedom and the righting of injustice. We aim to respect, value and acknowledge the unique cultures, spiritualities, histories and languages of the oldest surviving culture in the world." Such a vision will clearly require more than words for us as a movement, but also as individuals.

So, what about us? What about you, what about me? How will we ensure that an active commitment to reconciliation is part of what it means to be followers of Jesus in Australia? Are we willing to lay down our lives for our sisters and brothers to ensure that their needs are met? Are we willing to love in word and speech, and also in deed and truth? What do we need to do to take the next step on the journey of



reconciliation? Is it education, awareness, cultural competence and knowledge? Do we need to be willing to speak the truth of our history and engage in social justice and advocacy? Do we need to work through Romans 12 and ask God to once again renew our minds and show us what we need to do to demonstrate ourselves as loving followers of Jesus?

Let us join in prayer together and pledge to support one another as we seek to be people of a love that is clearly demonstrated in our lives and actions.

Prayer:

Creator Spirit, Holy God, we thank you for your love of us, your children. We thank you for creating us, seeing us, and calling us good. We thank you for your invitation to join with you as partners in your mission.

We thank you for this beautiful land we call home, for its beauty and diversity. God, your creation is indeed good.

We thank you especially today for the First Nations peoples you placed here to care for your creation. We honour them today for their knowledge and wisdom that has sustained these lands for thousands of years. We honour them for their resilience, patience and grace. Help us, God, to learn from your people so together we may flourish in this land.

Forgive us for our ignorance and willfulness, which has led to pain and destruction. Renew our hope and desire to be your followers on a journey of reconciliation and love in action. We pray in the name of the one we follow on the journey, Jesus, our example of love and of peace.

Amen