

Sermon Prep – 19th Jan 2020 – Paraclesis – Who Cares?

Introduction

I think that for quite a while now God has been speaking to us about what it means to be a genuine loving community of faith. This is resulting in a shift in our thinking from coming to church, to becoming church. Jimmy's phrase of "Church building or building church" eloquently captures this.

Today we are beginning a new series that is designed to run alongside the material within our small groups this season. The title of the series is called Paraclesis. What's Paraclesis?

Over the next 6 weeks we will begin to unpack it's meaning but for now let us start with a definition of the word.

Paraclesis is the anglicised transliteration of 2 Greek words "Para" and "kaleo".

ParaKaleo means:

COMING ALONGSIDE OTHERS, ESPECIALLY FOR HELP, IMPLORATION, SUPPLICATION, ENTREATY, EXHORTATION, ENCOURAGEMENT, CONSOLATION, COMFORT, SOLACE, THAT WHICH AFFORDS COMFORT OR REFRESHMENT.

So Paraclesis essentially is what we want to see as the expression of loving community within the church. Namely, that in the journey of life, we come alongside to be with each other in an "other-centred" way. Paraclesis is the ultimate expression of care, compassion, support and concern. It is expressed in one of the roles given to the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete of God (The Advocate, Comforter).

In each of the next 6 weeks we will unpack what it means to be a people that operates in Paraclesis with each other and with our wider communities.

Who cares? - Developing the core value of care

Luke 10:25-37

25 AND BEHOLD, A CERTAIN LAWYER STOOD UP AND TESTED HIM, SAYING, "TEACHER, WHAT SHALL I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?"

26 HE SAID TO HIM, "WHAT IS WRITTEN IN THE LAW? WHAT IS YOUR READING OF IT?"

27 SO HE ANSWERED AND SAID, " 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND,' AND 'YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF.' "

28 AND HE SAID TO HIM, "YOU HAVE ANSWERED RIGHTLY; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE."

29 BUT HE, WANTING TO JUSTIFY HIMSELF, SAID TO JESUS, "AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?"

30 THEN JESUS ANSWERED AND SAID: "A CERTAIN MAN WENT DOWN FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO, AND FELL AMONG THIEVES, WHO STRIPPED HIM OF HIS CLOTHING, WOUNDED HIM, AND DEPARTED, LEAVING HIM HALF DEAD. 31 NOW BY CHANCE A CERTAIN PRIEST CAME DOWN THAT ROAD. AND WHEN HE SAW HIM, HE PASSED BY ON THE OTHER SIDE. 32 LIKEWISE A LEVITE, WHEN HE ARRIVED AT THE PLACE, CAME AND LOOKED, AND PASSED BY ON THE OTHER SIDE. 33 BUT A CERTAIN SAMARITAN, AS HE JOURNEYED, CAME WHERE HE WAS. AND WHEN HE SAW HIM, HE HAD COMPASSION. 34 SO HE WENT TO HIM AND BANDAGED HIS WOUNDS, POURING ON OIL AND WINE; AND HE SET HIM ON HIS OWN ANIMAL, BROUGHT HIM TO AN INN, AND TOOK CARE OF HIM. 35 ON THE NEXT DAY, WHEN HE DEPARTED, HE TOOK OUT TWO DENARII, GAVE THEM TO THE INNKEEPER, AND SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE CARE OF HIM; AND WHATEVER

MORE YOU SPEND, WHEN I COME AGAIN, I WILL REPAY YOU.' 36 SO WHICH OF THESE THREE DO YOU THINK WAS NEIGHBOUR TO HIM WHO FELL AMONG THE THIEVES?"

37 AND HE SAID, "HE WHO SHOWED MERCY ON HIM."

THEN JESUS SAID TO HIM, "GO AND DO LIKEWISE."

If you have been around church for any length of time you will have probably heard this story about the good Samaritan before. I like it because it is one of the clearest teachings and examples we can find within scripture of how God expects us to treat others. I want to draw your attention to several things in this passage:

The Priest and Levite were part of the religious people of the day – The churchgoers if you will. They were not the villains of the story. The villains were the robbers who caused the harm in the first place. Let's not forget that.

Perhaps the Priest and Levite represent people who might have been like us. Busy people, preoccupied with life, perhaps caught up and absorbed with the importance and demands of our own religious world. Their busyness and self-absorption did not necessarily make them bad people, but it did make them bad neighbours.

The Samaritan on the other hand was considered an outsider. Outside of the promises of God, outside of the community of faith, outside of social structures and to be rejected by any God-fearing Jew.

For me this story isn't just about the things that the Samaritan did. They were important but the story is much bigger than that. We can all do a selfless act from time to time and even congratulate ourselves and pat ourselves on the back for it. But what Jesus is getting at here in my view is the cost of what it means to fulfil the 2 great commandments, namely loving God and loving our neighbour. Remember, John said that if we cannot love the brother that we do see, how can we love God who we cannot see? 1 John 4: 20

If loving our neighbour is God's compass setting for us, then the Samaritan demonstrates the orientation of the heart that it's going to take to get us there; namely genuine compassion and care.

Where the priest and Levite were indifferent and detached. The Samaritan stepped out of his comfort zone being moved by compassion and demonstrated genuine care and concern.

Martin Luther King Jr says of this passage:

The first question that the priest and the Levite asked was "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by and he reversed the question. "If I do not stop and help this man, what will happen to him?"- Martin Luther King Jr

The Samaritan in this story shows us how to live "other-centered" (Parakaleo). The Antithesis of paracletic is self-focused living.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 in the message Bible reads

3-5 ALL PRAISE TO THE GOD AND FATHER OF OUR MASTER, JESUS THE MESSIAH! FATHER OF ALL MERCY! GOD OF ALL HEALING COUNSEL! HE COMES ALONGSIDE US WHEN WE GO THROUGH HARD TIMES, AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, HE

BRINGS US ALONGSIDE SOMEONE ELSE WHO IS GOING THROUGH HARD TIMES SO THAT WE CAN BE THERE FOR THAT PERSON JUST AS GOD WAS THERE FOR US. WE HAVE PLENTY OF HARD TIMES THAT COME FROM FOLLOWING THE MESSIAH, BUT NO MORE SO THAN THE GOOD TIMES OF HIS HEALING COMFORT—WE GET A FULL MEASURE OF THAT, TOO.

So, we see that God Himself sets us a great example of Paraclesis by coming alongside us as we go through hard times and (sending others too) so that we can in turn also come alongside others who are also going through hard times. This is part of “freely as you have received, freely give”. Nothing need be wasted!

I think genuine care for another is one of the greatest examples of love that we can undertake. It's easy to say that we love one another, but I'm sure you know as well as I the difference between those that say it and those that demonstrate it. The ones that genuinely love are there for you, stick by you, help and support you and enter into your world (the joys and pain). They rejoice with you when you rejoice and weep with you when you weep. It is the high cost pathway because it costs you time, effort, resources and energy.

The low-cost way or if you prefer more urban vernacular, the “fob off way” sounds like this:

“Don't worry brother, God is in control”. “It'll be fine, I'm sure it'll work out”. “It'll happen for you one day”. “I'll be praying for you brother”. These remarks sound spiritual but often this is a type of fake concern that comes from someone who in that moment cannot pay the high cost of genuine care and even without realising it becomes like the Levite or Priest in the parable.

When confronted with the enormity of the care someone else requires, the fob off is to be like Cain who said to God “am I my brother's keeper”.

We see the same attitude in Luke 15 in the parable of the prodigal son, when the older brother says

v30 BUT AS SOON AS THIS SON OF YOURS CAME, WHO HAS DEVoured YOUR LIVELIHOOD WITH HARLOTS, YOU KILLED THE FATTED CALF FOR HIM.'

31 “AND HE SAID TO HIM, ‘SON, YOU ARE ALWAYS WITH ME, AND ALL THAT I HAVE IS YOURS. 32 IT WAS RIGHT THAT WE SHOULD MAKE MERRY AND BE GLAD, FOR YOUR BROTHER WAS DEAD AND IS ALIVE AGAIN, AND WAS LOST AND IS FOUND.’ ”

The older brother had also washed his hands of his younger sibling, but the Father corrects him by reminding Him once again that the prodigal is family nonetheless.

Heart of Cain – Am I my brother's keeper

Heart of Jesus – Woman, behold your son. To the disciple, Behold your mother!

So, are you your brother's keeper? Well according to Father, yes you are!

This is really important because unless we can see each other as brothers and sisters, then we won't value each other the way that God values us all as son's and daughters. Assuming for a moment that there are no deeply broken relationships, we value more highly those that we regard as family. Families pay the highest of prices demonstrating “other-centered” love.

There is a balance here. We simply cannot deeply care for everyone. We simply do not have the capacity to do so. But neither can we assume that caring for one another is someone else's job. Being led by the Holy Spirit is paramount here. God will open the door of opportunity for you to demonstrate Paraclesis and agape love. The love that changes the world. There will be temporary opportunities in the here and now if you are sensitive and listening. There are also people that you will have been

given by God outside of your nuclear family, that it is your job to deeply care for. It may be for a time or a season. There will be others that are tasked by God to deeply care for you.

2 Peter 1:

5 BUT ALSO FOR THIS VERY REASON, GIVING ALL DILIGENCE, ADD TO YOUR FAITH VIRTUE, TO VIRTUE KNOWLEDGE, 6 TO KNOWLEDGE SELF-CONTROL, TO SELF-CONTROL [D]PERSEVERANCE, TO PERSEVERANCE GODLINESS, 7 TO GODLINESS BROTHERLY KINDNESS, AND TO BROTHERLY KINDNESS LOVE. 8 FOR IF THESE THINGS ARE YOURS AND AROUND YOU, YOU WILL BE NEITHER [E]BARREN NOR UNFRUITFUL IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. 9 FOR HE WHO LACKS THESE THINGS IS SHORTSIGHTED, EVEN TO BLINDNESS, AND HAS FORGOTTEN THAT HE WAS CLEANSED FROM HIS OLD SINS.

10 THEREFORE, BRETHREN, BE EVEN MORE DILIGENT TO MAKE YOUR CALL AND ELECTION SURE, FOR IF YOU DO THESE THINGS YOU WILL NEVER STUMBLE; 11 FOR SO AN ENTRANCE WILL BE SUPPLIED TO YOU ABUNDANTLY INTO THE EVERLASTING KINGDOM OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST.

Wow! If we will continue to develop in spiritual maturity following Jesus we can add these virtues leading to brotherly kindness and love. Those that are most spiritually mature are the ones that have the greatest capacity to receive and then give love. These will also be the ones who are the most fruitful with the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Real care exemplified in Paracletis is journeying alongside. Being present when needed and having a posture of availability when not.

We all have struggles that are not meant to be faced alone.

Anyone that knows us will know our journey into parenthood. For those that don't, Liz and I endured 17 years of struggling with infertility before we chose to become adoptive parents.

We prayed about this issue lots. We worshipped the Lord together, experienced lots of other breakthroughs and had lots of other testimonies of God's goodness and faithfulness. We knew the love of God powerfully and met with Him wonderfully in these years, but still we couldn't conceive. Then one time we did conceive. Only to find out weeks later that Liz had miscarried. The pain of these disappointments and broken hopes hurt so much.

We had lots of friends around us in this time. We had lots of well-meaning people say things like "your turn will come", "Keep praying and believing", "you just need more.....[insert Christian virtue here]". We had lots of people pray for us, prophecy over us, lay hands on us. We had medical staff prodding and poking trying to fix the problem.

We had so few that wept with us. So few that would bear the awkward silences and just sit silently with us and comfort us. So few that would incline their hearts and ears to listen to us and for us in our disappointment and pain. But, I am so thankful for them and that type of high cost genuine compassion and care. As much as we have the love of God in our hearts, sometimes we need love with skin on. Love that is present in the touch of a hand on the shoulder, the passing of a handkerchief to weep into, the hug of someone who understands, the burden shared when trying to cope.

Tell me, which kind of friends would you prefer to be there for you when you need help? High cost or low cost?

So the great challenge is, which kind of friend will you be to others? High cost or low cost?

Romans 15:1-2 (Message)

1-2 THOSE OF US WHO ARE STRONG AND ABLE IN THE FAITH NEED TO STEP IN AND LEND A HAND TO THOSE WHO FALTER, AND NOT JUST DO WHAT IS MOST CONVENIENT FOR US. STRENGTH IS FOR SERVICE, NOT STATUS. EACH ONE OF US NEEDS TO LOOK AFTER THE GOOD OF THE PEOPLE AROUND US, ASKING OURSELVES, "HOW CAN I HELP?"

Confronting the core value of self-preservation

You may think that being that kind of Christian is nigh on impossible and in part you are right. Everything I've said so far cannot be done unless the Holy Spirit has the reigns in your life. If He doesn't then the draw of self-centeredness, being obsessed with me, myself and I will inevitably choke your ability to discern, respond and be sensitive to the opportunities He gives us.

Egocentricity determines that self is all-important and the centre of the universe. It takes away our awareness of others and desensitises us to the need of the moment. It ignores the needs of others and neglects taking the time needed to understand or even consider another person's point of view or feelings. Excuses like, "I'm too busy", "it's not my problem",

From self-centredness to repentance

Through the way of surrender at the cross. The principle of self-surrender is that the self or ego is offered up lovingly once again. You can't really selflessly care for others until the very self you have served has been properly put in its place – into the hands of Christ. Yourself in your own hands is the problem. Yourself in the hands of Christ in the solution.

So come again and stand before the cross of Christ, gaze upward into the loving face of our Saviour and surrender yourself to Him afresh. Because if His great love for us we can withhold nothing from Him, not even our very self. Now we are free to serve others in His name.

1 John 3:16 (the message)

This is how we've come to understand and experience love. Christ sacrificed His life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves.

Amen.

One Step Further?

Then Jesus ups the stakes yet further giving us the greatest of all challenges:

Luke 6:

32 "BUT IF YOU LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE YOU, WHAT CREDIT IS THAT TO YOU? FOR EVEN SINNERS LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE THEM. 33 AND IF YOU DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO DO GOOD TO YOU, WHAT CREDIT IS THAT TO YOU? FOR EVEN SINNERS DO THE SAME. 34 AND IF YOU LEND TO THOSE FROM WHOM YOU HOPE TO RECEIVE BACK, WHAT CREDIT IS THAT TO YOU? FOR EVEN SINNERS LEND TO SINNERS TO RECEIVE AS MUCH BACK. 35 BUT LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DO GOOD, AND LEND, HOPING FOR NOTHING IN RETURN; AND YOUR REWARD WILL BE GREAT, AND YOU WILL BE SONS OF THE MOST HIGH. FOR HE IS KIND TO THE UNTHANKFUL AND EVIL. 36 THEREFORE BE MERCIFUL, JUST AS YOUR FATHER ALSO IS MERCIFUL.