

## **Rev Geoff Peterson – ‘there is no reward’ – Luke 17:1-10, 2.10.2022 Wesley Castle Hill UC**

All of us find moments in life, probably many where people frustrate us. Hurt us or there are people we just don't like who are people who do things that we don't like, don't approve of, or who just aren't pleasant people. And we judge. We are unreconciled. I guess in these words, we distance ourselves, we judge, we push them aside.

In all these stories, in both those readings, these stories of grace and reconciliation, forgiveness. So let me tell you a story.

Miss Thompson was a fifth grade teacher in the US. The true story is Miss Thompson stood before her class at the beginning of the school year, which I think is around September. And she said, "Children, my name's Miss Thompson. I'm your teacher this year. Welcome to my class. I love you all equally. You're all equal in this class."

Now, I'm sure Miss Thompson was genuine in what she said and meant that. But like all of us, Miss Thompson had her favourites; the children that she loved more. And then there were those she loved less and treated so.

And one of those was Teddy Stallard. Teddy was this little sullen boy who was not very engaged, who would answer in monosyllables. His appearance was a bit grubby and his clothes were bit messy and wrinkled and his hair was messy. And he was just an unpleasant boy. And Miss Thompson didn't like him. And she took a perverse delight in putting big X's next to the mistakes he made in his homework or a big "F" in red at the top of the page when he failed an assignment.

But Miss Thompson should have known better because Teddy had reports, as did all her children from year one, and they said Teddy is a good student doing well. Shows lots of promise in year two. It said Teddy's home life is difficult. His mum has been diagnosed with cancer and it's terminal in year three. It says Teddy is struggling. His mum died this year. His father is not engaged and struggling. And Teddy himself is finding it hard. In year four, it said Teddy is a troubled child. He needs help.

The year rolled on and came to Christmas and all the children brought in gifts for Miss Thomson, whom they loved, all colourful packages, all nicely wrapped up, and one that was brown paper with lots of sticky tape holding it together. And that was from Teddy Stallard, and she was even surprised that he bothered. Anyway, on the day that she opened the presents, they all gathered around her desk and she opened them with a nod and thanked all the children for the gifts. And she came to Teddy's gift in the brown paper. She carefully pulled off all the sticky tape and opened it, and inside was a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a bottle of perfume that was only a third full. And the children began to kind of snicker and make comments. And wisely, she hushed them and she put the bracelet on and said: "Children, look, isn't it lovely? Look how the stones, glitter and gleam." And then she took the perfume and put some on her wrists and smelled it and said: "Smell this, Isn't it lovely?" And the children followed her cue and said, "Oh, yes, who?"

At the end of the day, the children all followed out of class. All except Teddy Stallard. Teddy sat at his desk, and when all the children were gone, he quietly got up and just walked forward to Miss Thompson's desk. And he said: "Miss Thompson: I'm glad you like the gift.

The bracelet was my mother's. I'm sorry that some of the stones were missing. It looks so nice on you. And thank you for wearing the perfume all day. You smelled like my mother and reminded me of her. Thank you." And he walked out.

Miss Thompson collapsed back in her seat, stunned. And then she just leaned forward and sobbed in her hands. She cried and she cried and she prayed. And she cried. And she prayed. And she asked for

forgiveness. The next morning when the children gathered in their room, they had a new teacher. It was still Miss Thompson.

But it was not the same Miss Thompson. That experience of the day before and her praying had transformed her. Teddy had opened her eyes to see differently. This Miss Thompson lived into what she'd said to the children beginning of the year. I love you all equally, and all of you will be treated equally and well.

In fact, she loved more equally those who needed more love and more care. Got it. And Teddy fared well among them. She brought them back in after class and did extra tutoring and helped them not only with their schoolwork, but with life. And she cared for them and loved them and affirmed them and looked after them as her own children.

At the end, by the end of the school year, Teddy Stallard had not only caught up, but had also done really well and was moving up in the class. And he was he was well up in the class doing really well and a much brighter little boy. They all went into grade six and the year went by and they left primary school and went into high school. Miss Thompson received letters from Teddy. One said, "Dear Miss Thompson, I'm nearing the end of high school. I'm second in my class. It's been really hard. I'm doing really well. Thank you." And then a bit later, "I'm in college now. College has been really good. I've enjoyed it. I'm doing really well and top of my class. Thank you, Miss Thompson." And then she received one a few years later saying: "Miss Thompson. As of last week, I'm Theodore J. Stallard, M.D.. Doesn't that sound wonderful? And even better news? I'm going to be married this year. I'd like you to come and sit where my mother would have said in church. You're my only family now. My father died this last year." Miss Thompson went. And sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. Teddy taught Miss Thompson what it meant to love.

She opened her eyes to what's beneath the surface. That he's a child loved by God. And she experienced that transformation in her heart and her being that we all need. And because she lived into it, Teddy and other children were blessed and affirmed and loved.

I thought of that story when I read particularly the gospel story this week, where Jesus says to his disciples, having spent the last weeks in Luke's story of Jesus, the last four chapters, talking about the little ones and God's love for the little ones. In Jesus world, the little ones were probably 80 or 90% of the population, people who struggled, who were challenged economically, impoverished by the powerful and the wealthy, who controlled their lives through indebtedness and higher taxation and other things made life difficult. But then there were others who were pushed further to the margins because they were sick or disabled or had mental health problems or made bad life choices and were regarded as sinners. They were looked down upon and pushed aside to the margins. And in their culture, those who were wealthy and powerful were considered blessed. They must have been right in the eyes of God. That's why they had power and wealth. But those who were sick and disabled and so on must be coerced by God, and if they'd only repent, they would be restored. And Jesus constantly was opposing that kind of thinking, which was very prevalent in his day, and not so much different these days. In our world, it's those who achieve much, who are lifted up and elevated and prized, those who are very wealthy or very powerful or have lots of academic success or have done this or have done that or have achieved much, these are lifted up and prized. And those who struggle are pushed aside and marginalised. And we don't notice them. And there are so many invisible people. And Jesus says, it would be better for you to tie a millstone around your neck and jump into the sea than to make one of these little ones stumble and fall. And Miss Thompson was making Teddy's life harder and causing him to stumble and fall.

And when she was aware of what she was doing and who she was, there was enormous grief and repentance. And that's what Jesus is calling for in all of us. And the disciples seeing that Jesus is turning this world upside down, that we're to reach out to those who are sick, those who are poor,

those who do the wrong thing. And we want to judge and stay as sinners and push them to the margins of life.

Jesus wants us to reach out and forgive. And he says: if someone does the wrong thing to you seven times in a day. And asks forgiveness, you've got to forgive them. You can be right all day long and this person can be a wretched so-and-so all day long. But they're still loved by God and there's still grace for them and you. And it's not about who achieves that is the most in spiritual, who's right. It's not like we've got a meter on our chest that measures how good we are and how depending on that rating, we're rewarded. It's not like that in God's reign, because Jesus says, "beware, you're going to fail, too." You won't get it right. There's a time when you are going to make the wrong choice. You are going to be that sinner who hurts someone who does something. And you may be doing it right now, unconsciously. And Jesus says forgive be reconciled.

In the "*Basis of Union*" in the fourth paragraph. It says, "What is the church? The church is a fellowship of reconciliation in the world, and it's a place where everyone is welcomed and everyone's gift and has giftedness and being and is lifted up and valued. And everyone contributes to this thing called church. And so Jesus says, "forgive" and the disciples not sure how to cope with this say: "give us more faith, increase our faith," which sounds like a great thing, you know? Oh, God, increase my faith. And Jesus doesn't say like this, but basically says, 'You stupid fools. Don't you understand what I'm getting at?' He says: "If you had the faith of the smallest little seed, you could tell that gum tree to turn itself upside down into the creek or the stream or the river or the ocean." And it's not about vegetating waterways. It's about saying you don't need any more faith; you don't need more of anything.

The world around you says you need more of this, you need more of that. We need to be better, be more successful. You don't need any of that. All you need is that little tiny smidgen of faith that's already in you. And if you would be vulnerable and let go and do it, Faith says, 'I trust God, not me.' He'd be okay. And that's what it's about. It's about the faith that's already there in us realizing that. And trusting God, not me. And recognizing that this is not about being better than anyone else. It's not about proving myself or achieving. It's about being me, the me that God created. To be in all my vulnerability and weakness and with all the gifts that I might bring.

And it goes on and he talks about the wealthy people probably listening in. The Masters would have loved the last bit to a point where Jesus says, "Well, who of you that's a master; when the slave comes in from the field says to them, Oh, sit down, let me serve you dinner. No, of course not. That person's got a job to do. You'll say, Good slave. Now prepare my dinner. And when I've eaten, you may eat. And you can hear the master saying at times. "Someone put these slaves and servants in their place."

But then he says, he turns it upside down. He says, So if that's what you know what to do. Remember, you are all slaves. You are all servants of God. And just because you do the right thing, don't expect a reward. There are no rewards in the reign of God. There are no rewards for getting it right, for being better, for being more spiritual or more faithful or better people because all of us receive grace. All of us. And there's enough grace for everyone. And all of us are going to fail.

All of us are going to decline. All of us are going through sickness or mental health issues. Bad choices or decisions. Some judgmentalism in our lives. The things that we can't do. Aging and decline. We're all going to be the one who is looked down upon. We're all going to fail. And if a reward system is there, we're all going to miss out in some way. But in God's reign, in God's family, there is no competition. It's reconciliation and relationship. And God says, there's enough grace for all of you. Welcome. Come in and receive. And because you've received. Share it with those you meet, the ones you like, and the ones you don't. In fact, the ones you don't like, ones who are unscrupulous and horrible probably need to hear the grace stuff more than you realize.

So share this love and this grace, because that's what God is about and that's what communion is about. It reminds us that at this table we're all equal. There is no better and worse is no greater or

lesser. It's the same food for everyone, and we all come with our weakness, our vulnerability. We all come with our achievements and our successes. The things we can do, the things we can't do. Our doubts, our hopes, our fears, our uncertainties, our confusion, our vulnerability before a God who is love and says, "I love you all, I love you all equally, and I'll give you all what you need." We are loved. We are loved by a God who can't love us anymore. And won't love us any less. Go and share that love with the world, because that's the message our world needs more than anything else, that we are loved by a loving God. Amen.