

**Linda Driver**

**Athelstone Uniting Church #187**

**12 February 2023**

**Text:** Matthew 5:21-37 (NIV)

**Theme: From the heart** (sermon on the mount part 3)



Whew! That was a cheerie reading wasn't it! 😊

It's one of those readings that a preacher could choose to ignore in the lectionary – very confronting! I decided to take courage, be disciplined and give it a go!

Let's pray:

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

This is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany– the season of light and star gazing and wonder, new insights and a-ha! moments.

Next week is Transfiguration Sunday, and then we're into Lent. Hasn't that all gone by quickly!?

As we focus on the 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the Sermon on the Mount, I hope there might be some Aha! Moments for you as we learn from Jesus. We have heard Jesus teach about the Beatitudes and then images of Salt and Light. This week we go in deep to see what is in our hearts.

Our activity for the intergenerational creative space today is Labyrinths.



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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 19:14

Labyrinths have been in use for thousands of years. People have used labyrinths as a pilgrimage of prayer, as a time to ponder conflict, to look for God's direction or simply to quiet the chatter in one's mind.

In the middle ages, when pilgrimage was highly regarded,...

The less wealthy or less independent who could not go a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands, would imitate the pilgrims journey to the holy place or the 'centre'.

They would, walking or praying on their knees, make their journey to the centre of the Labyrinth, either marked out on the slabs of the cathedral floor, or set out on paving stones in the garden, or as pathways made by hedges all walls.

The labyrinth is not a maze! There is one path which leads you to the Centre. The same path leads you back out. They are simple: one path in. same path out.

Labyrinths must be walked slowly in silence – walk too fast and you lose your balance.

Sharonne Price, in her book, *Soulstice*, writes: "Walking the Labyrinth, finding new popularity today amongst seekers, is not a task but an experience. Backwards and forwards, in gentle turns and paradoxical directions, one comes to the heart.

But even then the journey is not complete. One must continue on in order to emerge once more at the outside edge [perimeter]."<sup>2</sup>

A Labyrinth is a path for prayer and meditation.

A tool for transformation and healing.

A walk with your soul.

I have been talking about the Seven B's of Athelstone. The Labyrinth is linked to Be. B E. Be. We encourage each other to spend time being loved and nurtured in the company of God



I want you to imagine using the Labyrinth as a journey inward toward your Heart.

They say the Heart is the seat of our emotions. In ancient times, it was also seen as the centre of our thoughts.

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<sup>2</sup> *Soulstice*. Sharonne Price. Page 136

Unlike Western cultures, which primarily associated the heart with feelings and emotions, Near Eastern culture emphasized its role in thinking, reasoning, and planning.

The heart was also related to human conduct and action.

The heart is the place from which people understood the true spirit of the law.

The heart is also associated with courage. Listeners are told to Take Heart and praised for not losing Heart.

Whether it be emotions, thoughts, attitudes, ... it can take Courage to look at what can lie hidden in our hearts.. those things that can be locked away.

The word 'courageous' comes from the root word 'cor', which means 'heart'.

We can take courage, or take Heart, because God is with us and will not forsake us.

So where am I going with this?

I am focussing on Behave – another one of our Be words! Where we teach and demonstrate Christian values and behaviour, markers of the followers of Jesus

The people of the towns and villages where Jesus lived in ancient Israel lived under Roman rule. That's a heap of Roman laws they needed to keep. But for a few centuries before this, they'd lived under Greek

occupation – learning to speak Greek and get their heads around Greek ways of doing things. Before this, they had been conquered by the Persians, who also had their own laws which the Jews had to heed. Of course, the Jews also had their own laws, founded on the one great commandment – to Love God with

whole heart, whole soul, whole mind. Over the centuries they had developed a whole stack of smaller laws to help people know how to live the big rule. But by the time of Jesus' teaching – imagine how confusing all of this history of lawmaking had become. Which rules were important? Which ones had gone out of date?

What a tangly mess!

In the reading from Matthew's Gospel today, Jesus helps people straighten things out.

Applying a traditional rabbinic method: "You have heard it said...but I say...", Jesus takes examples from the law – about murder, conflict, adultery, divorce, breaking oaths – and takes them to another level to make his point.

From murder to anger with another

From unresolved conflict to being thrown in prison

From adultery to looking at a woman with lust

He goes to extremes, using hyperbole, extravagant exaggeration, to get their attention.

It's not about doing exactly as the Law teaches – it's about understanding why the Law was given to Israel's people. Not so that they would be a people who were good at keeping rules and regulations, but so they would be a people of justice and mercy.

Jesus was asking them to look deeply inside their hearts, to what was really in the Law. What is important...

Let's see if we can follow the thread of *how* Jesus gives us a clear path to follow, even today.

Jesus takes the old rules that people know – he doesn't throw them out, but he acknowledges how tangled and tricky life is. Jesus knows that our lives are tangled and messy too. But he helps us straighten things out.

Jesus says 'Anger comes straight back at you – it will burn you up if you let it.'

Jesus says 'Get things straightened out with one another, make peace – that's even more important than worshipping!'

Jesus says 'Men and women shouldn't look at one another as objects' but have the kinds of relationships where we look one another straight in the eye and see one another as humans.

Jesus says 'Decisions that impact other people need to be straight and serious' don't let your difficulties make life difficult for others.

Jesus says 'Speak plain and straight truth to one another' just say what you mean and mean what you say.

Jesus' teaching helps us think about straightening out our tangled relationships with others, and our own tangled feelings.

Jesus' teachings help us to examine what is happening deep in our hearts. What is happening deep within us, can't help but reveal itself outside of us – through our behaviours and attitudes towards others.



Having heard Jesus' words about anger, peace, objectification – and how we look at others, justice and truth, we are going to spend some time in prayer. Imagine walking a labyrinth inwards to your own heart.

What do you see there?

- When you think of your relationships, with yourself, with others, - family, work colleagues, friends, neighbours, sports team members..
- Are you holding on to anger
- Do you need peace
- Are you having trouble with how others see you,
  - or how you look at others
- Do you long for justice
  - or do you need help with truth being told?

As we pray trust that God is here waiting, ready to hear and help – even in those dark hidden places..

In the next few minutes, we'll have a time of silence, when you are invited to think about Jesus' invitation to straighten out our tangles and pray for situations of anger, where peace is needed, where people are objectified, where justice should be strengthened, and where truth needs to be told.

### *Time of silence*

The reality is that we do get angry about all kinds of situations. Things that not fair, things that frustrate or annoy us, things that are done the wrong way.



So, we are going to pray an Angry Prayer, acknowledging that each one of us gets angry some time! I invite you to stand if you are able...

Plant your feet firmly on the ground. (If you are still seated, you can do this too.)

God we do get angry.

Now make tight fists with your hands.

Sometimes we get so angry that our fists ball up and we want to hit and hurt.  
Can you stomp your feet? *Stomp!*

So angry we want to stomp our feet and kick.

Now see if you can make your whole body tight and tense.

We feel so angry our arms and face and whole body feels tight.

Can you mime yourself yelling?

God, there are times we want to scream and yell.

PAUSE

Now, reach out your fists, palms up

Be with us when we get that angry.

Gently uncurl your fists, loosen your arms, and relax your face.

PAUSE

Now point to the side of your head with one finger

Help us think of ways to fix what is wrong.

Open your hands out, palms up and look up

Be with us as we try to make things better.

Fold your hands in prayer

We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Friends,

God IS with us when we are angry.

God understands.

Sometimes God is even angry along with us.

Always God helps us uncurl, loosen up, relax, untangle and find new ways to solve hard problems and get along with all people.

We have God's promise on that. Thanks be to God.<sup>3</sup>



This image, our holding image for this morning, reminds me of how we can open our tight fists, and build connection with others

with courage, openness, honesty, grace, and forgiveness,

ready to give and receive love. Amen

### **Sources:**

Elizabeth Waldron Anstice: *Year A Epiphany 6 Bible and Prayer Resources for Intergenerational Worship*. (intergen.org.au)

Sharonne Price: *Soulstice*

Seasons of the Spirit, Fusions *resource 12 WR Feb 12 18 2023*

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<sup>3</sup> From <<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2014/01/year-sixth-sunday-after-epiphany-sixth.html>>