

‘As I have loved you, so you must love one another’.

Last week I asked you how things were going for you!

Not just in a general way, but quite specifically.

How it going in your calling as a shepherd of those whom God has placed in your care.

Today my question for you may be a little more confronting!

‘How is it with your heart?’

How is it really? Are you taking good care of your heart?

I would expect that you are all very well aware that heart disease is the single leading cause of death in Australia. More than just a few of you seated here before me today have had your own personal journey with heart related issues, haven't you?

Some of you have had heart bypass surgery. Others have had heart valve surgery. Still others have had stents inserted. Some of you have had pacemakers implanted to keep your heart ticking along as it should.

Without this intervention, you may not be with us today. You certainly would not be enjoying the quality of life you do at the moment.

Now the physical well-being of our heart is one thing.

But the spiritual well-being of our heart is another thing altogether.

So how is your heart before God? How do you think God sees your heart?

I cannot be the judge of that. But in your heart of hearts, I would expect that each of you has a fair idea.

Jesus could not be clearer as he says: *‘you must love one another, ... as I have loved you’.*

So, are you doing that? Is your heart motivated by love for others, in the same way Jesus loves you?

The apostle Paul also emphasizes this command of Jesus for us to love others. *‘Let no debt remain outstanding’*, he says, *‘except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law’.* (Romans 13:8) Our call to love is not a once off command. It is our continuing and ongoing duty. It's not a box you tick one day, and that's it. It is a box we are called on to be ticking every moment and every day of our life, ... while we still have life.

So are you loving others, in just the same way as God is loving you?

Now you know that many parents bring their children here to be baptized, so that they may live in a relationship of love for God and others. They promise to model and nurture their children in that relationship of love. To remind them that while we may not always love God, he unconditionally loves us and all people! Sometimes parents do these things, sometimes they don't.

Young people have been prepared for and accepted to receive Holy Communion at the Lord's Table in this church and in other churches. They promise to diligently come to receive the blessings that are offered here. Sometimes they keep that promise, sometimes they don't.

Couples have publicly pledged their love for each other in marriage before God, their families and their circle of friends. Here they promise to remain faithful to each other for as long as God blesses them with life. Sometimes they are true to those promises, sometimes they are not.

Sunday after Sunday we gather as one to hear God's Word in this place.

We are reminded of God's undying love for us in Jesus. We are called on and promise to be faithful to him. We are challenged to live in forgiving relationships with each other, as God in Christ freely forgives us. We are directed to support others in their weaknesses; and to lean on them when we have our own moments of weakness. We are invited to serve God and others in different ways, using the time and the passions that God gives to each of us. We are encouraged and promise to be faithful in the reading of God's Word and in our life of prayer. We are called on to give of our resources to support God's work here and beyond.

Sometimes we are true to all these promises we make, but sometimes we are not!

You know how easy it can be for us to see the faults in others, don't you?

Yet all the while we may be blind to our own inadequacies. Sometimes those very things which we most harshly criticize in others, may just happen to be our own personal weaknesses! The wisdom of Jesus is both confronting and personal: *'How dare you say to your brother, "Please, let me take that speck out of your eye," when you have a log in your own eye?'* (Matthew 7:4)

At the foot of the cross we all stand as one!

Just as evil and lost and broken as the next bloke. But like him or her, totally forgiven through the blood of Jesus. I know full well that I am a sinner, and I fall short of the glory of God. I know there are things about me that irritate and frustrate others. God knows my shortcomings far better than I do! That is why the rhythm of worship is so important in my life. I need to confess before God and others. I ache for God's forgiving grace. I need his words of forgiveness pronounced over my life just as much as anyone else.

So, it's not just about the heart of others. It's about my heart! It's about your heart!

Here we are! We stand as one. Lost in our self-seeking and sin, yet found by God's grace. Broken through our wrongdoing, yet forgiven and healed in the blood of Jesus. Perhaps weighed down and confused about the way forward, but renewed and strengthened in the power of God's love.

Only the touch of God's mercy in the love of Jesus can renew our hearts!

Are you hearing and embracing God's love for you in Jesus? His love which is so great that the prophet Zephaniah reminds us: *'The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing'*. (Zeph. 3:17) Do you really know that there is nothing you could do that would make God love you more? Nor is there anything you could do that would make God love you less! God's love for you is the same yesterday, today and forever!

The heart that truly knows the love of God simply cannot remain unchanged!

It will be overcome with awe and wonder. It will be bursting with thankfulness and praise. It will be filled with joy. It will be overflowing with kindness and love for others.

So how is your heart of love for God ... and for others?

You know that Jesus sets a pretty high standard. He even says: *'I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. ... Why should God reward you if you only love people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that!'* (Matthew 5:44,46) Now you and I don't have too many enemies, do we? Sure, there may be some people who would prefer that I were dead, but I have never looked down the barrel of a gun. So what about the difficult people in our lives? What about the people you find really prickly? They will be the ones you will be rubbing shoulders with in heaven!

How is your heart of love for this person?

I want to challenge you to think how you might love this person. I know it will be hard. If nothing else, you can at least begin by praying for that person. Not once, not twice; but regularly. You may not change him or her, but your attitude toward that person will change. Your heart will soften toward them. You may even be surprised at the doors of opportunity God may open for you to love them.

What about an act of love for a neighbour in need? An offer to do some work around their house or in the garden. Or just a visit or an invitation for a cuppa, a meal, or a game of cards and a chat.

What about a relationship that may have drifted or simply been neglected. How might you renew that connection, so that through you God's love may once again be a living reality in that relationship? Don't put it off or wait for them to take the first step. You be the one to reach out in love to them.

Nurture your heart of love for others.

As followers of Jesus, the goal of our life is to become more like Jesus in loving others.

So may the love of Jesus live in us, blessing us to love others like we are loved by him!