

30 June 2019: Hobart Eastern Shore

Combined service: Bellerive, Lindisfarne, Gagebrook

Bible readings: RCL ordinary time 13C ([Vanderbilt](#); [Textweek](#))

[Galatians 5 \(The Message, MSG\)](#)

5 Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.

¹³⁻¹⁵ It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

¹⁹⁻²¹ It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.

²²⁻²³ But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

²³⁻²⁴ Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.

²⁵⁻²⁶ Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.

[Luke 9:51-62 \(NRSVA\)](#)

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'^a ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then^b they went on to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' ⁵⁹ To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' ⁶⁰ But Jesus^c said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' ⁶¹ Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' ⁶² Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

Footnotes:

- a. [Luke 9:54](#) Other ancient authorities add *as Elijah did*
- b. [Luke 9:56](#) Other ancient authorities read *rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what spirit you are of, ⁵⁶ for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.'* Then
- c. [Luke 9:60](#) Gk *he*

Sermon text

Friends in Jesus the Christ...

Self-introduction: role as SLM Tas; previous roles in UCA including CTM LLE and teaching at Bellerive; now live in Carrick with family.

After a year in this role, working with the three Presbytery committees and the other Presbytery leaders including the Presbytery Ministers and staff, and visiting some but not yet all of the churches and faith communities around Tasmania, it is interesting to reflect on what I have noticed and am still noticing. I have certainly seen many people using their gifts for ministry and mission, and I have also noticed a lot of weariness, uncertainty and even confusion. Many people wonder if the Uniting Church has any future at all.

In the past three generations the role of the Church in society has fundamentally changed – at least, that is the perception of those of us who were involved then and still are. Younger generations have insights to share about what is now normal, and we need to hear their voices here. The major shifts in church and society are now big challenges, and now require discipline and focus from the Church in order to grasp anew our responsibilities and opportunities as disciples of Jesus Christ at mission in the world today. The most common inherited forms of the Church no longer resonate as they once did, and fewer people attend most of our Churches, particularly younger people. There are now many additional responsibilities for those fewer people who are now older or busier – or both. It is not clear how to encourage and nurture change in each place, for change is clearly needed in each congregation and in each local community. The world is not as we hope it might be.

As I said, I notice a lot of uncertainty about the future, and a lot of confusion about the Church. Every day the world of social media promotes divisions amongst Christians, and between Christians and the wider world. It would be easy to lose heart in these days of trouble.

Yet I am confident, and hopeful, and curious to see what God may yet call from us, inspire in us, and help us to discover, together.

As disciples of Jesus, as communities of faith, as churches, we turn to Jesus' own examples in the scriptures and translate them for our time and place. In Jesus we see our best example, as if God is living amongst us, as one of us, the divinely human

one. In Jesus, the Uniting Church finds its beginning, its purpose, and its continuing inspiration.

So what is the purpose or mission of the Uniting Church, in our time and place?

I find the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia a very helpful continuing guide to our life together. The Basis of Union helps us to share the common history and foundational structures of the Uniting Church, but more importantly it helps us share – again and again – a **common interpretation** of the purpose and mission and commitments of the Uniting Church, and by doing that it guides us into the future, together.

The Basis of Union isn't complete – it overlooks the very important commitments of the Uniting Church to both the indigenous heart and the cultural diversity that are each so important to the Uniting Church. We have had to re-discover these commitments since the key statements on covenanting and multicultural diversity were approved in 1985.

But I continue to find the Basis of Union very helpful in reminding us of the ways

- that the UCA is a Christian church, but not always in all the same ways as other churches,
- that the UCA is centred on Jesus the Christ, but not always in the same ways as other churches, (Par 3-4)
- that the UCA is a deeply biblical church, but not always in the same ways as other churches, (Par 5)
- that the UCA is a strongly Trinitarian Church, but not only, and not always in the same ways as other churches,
- that the UCA is a missional church, an ecumenical church, an evangelical church, a reformed church, and a uniting church, but not always in the same ways as other churches.

It is this vision of the Uniting Church as a pilgrim people, faithfully on a journey and faithfully at mission in the world, seeking unity and abundant life in the Spirit of Christ – not competing with other Christian churches, but recognising that in our different ways we all serve the one Spirit – that inspires me still.

In the gospels we find the Jesus who inspires the Uniting Church still, and Jesus is the interpretive key to our holy scriptures, the Bible. It is to Jesus' own example we turn, when interpreting the Bible divides us.

The Jesus we meet in the scriptures, again and again and again, calls for freedom and for justice and for healing and for wholeness, for a change of heart in each individual and for the whole world. Jesus message is something like, “turn around, look anew, for God’s loving way is the way that brings abundant life for all”.

In today’s reading from the Gospel according to Luke, we see Jesus encouraging his disciples to start the hard work of living God’s loving way in every situation, every day, and to see it through, even when it gets really hard. Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem, knowing he will face opposition and even death, just as this congregation and each congregation in the Uniting Church turns to face the future.

In today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we hear the reminder that Jesus freely offers to each of us freedom to live in God’s way, which is freedom to serve one another in love, in order to bring abundant life to all. This is God’s kingdom, or God’s rule and reign amongst us, forming new relationships of deep care and love, relationships of solidarity, what is sometimes called a new *kin-dom*.

Jesus challenges both the religious rules and the secular rulers of his day, seeking inclusion and healing for even the most vulnerable and marginal. Jesus interprets the scriptures in ways that bring justice and good news to the poor, and that challenge the powerful. The Gospel according to Matthew shows this through the common phrases “You have heard it said ... but I say to you ...” Again and again Jesus interprets the scriptures in ways that bring people to new life, to renewed community, to a deeper awareness of God’s loving and living presence in all of life. Jesus summarises this in the central commands to love God and to love your neighbour – which Luke today summarises in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. And for the cunning lawyer who asks who is my neighbour, Jesus illustrates this in ways that turn inherited religious and cultural boundaries on their head: the despised Samaritan is the model of faith, a confronting theme repeated again and again in the gospels as tax collectors, prostitutes, and fishermen see God revealed in Jesus in ways that the more obviously religious ones miss.

The Uniting Church has always been committed to this ongoing enquiry: what does God call us to reform and renew, in order to bring the gifts of the people of God into more full expression for the mission of God: to bring abundant life to the world?

This is our challenge, in our context, in our time. There are many inherited expectations that we can no longer uphold, many hopes and dreams that are faded

or outdated. But there are also many glimmers of new possibility, new hopes for sharing this gospel of good news with the world, and particularly those most in need. We have some terrific examples of faithful communities willing to step out in faith, to try something new and to discern anew what God might be calling them to in their place and time.

The challenge for these congregations of the Uniting Church – Bellerive and Lindisfarne and Gagebrook –and for this Presbytery which carries a shared responsibility together for all the Uniting Churches across Tasmania, is to bring those many gifts to life and to use them for the mission of God in the world today: to bring abundant life to the world, and to bring the world to abundant life.

I pray that God will continue to guide and uphold you as you discern that call, and that the Spirit of Jesus will continue to inspire each of you, and all of you together, to share God's love with others, every day. Amen.