

***What to do with these problems - Sermon by Rev Martin Stewart***  
**Sunday 14 November 2021**  
**Hebrews 10:23-25**

In my role in the Presbytery (Alpine Presbytery Executive Officer) I keep a watch on the moods, trends, and patterns of behaviour among the community and the Presbytery members – especially the ministers. This keeping an eye out isn't written up clearly in my job description. If I didn't do it, I guess it wouldn't be ticked off as poor performance, but I would say that if I neglected the lie of the land then I wouldn't really be able to do the job properly. After a bit of looking and listening or intuiting, I have to make a choice about testing whether I have the scent of something. Depending on the personalities involved, I might pop an email to someone and set up a coffee meeting, or I might phone direct, or I might check in with someone close to the person of concern and gently enquire.

Part of my being a bit cautious is that I don't always know if I am on the right track. If I head into a situation too directly I might get a vigorous pushback and a defensive reaction that closes the door to ongoing connection. Some of the people involved can be a bit delicate. Often it turns out that I am not the only one sensing something, but even then I have to tread carefully as the sensitivity to something that could be taken as criticism can be quite acute with some of the people I work for.

Of course, I learned a lot of the skills of carefulness, sensitivity, what happens when you run around like a bull at a gate without listening and checking from my 30 years as a parish minister. In the wider Presbytery circle, if I rub someone up the wrong way we can manage to dance around each other for however long it takes to find a way to manage as best as we can. But in a parish someone who is offended or feels you have got them all wrong can murmur dissent among the others, or stop coming along to things, or move away to a church where the minister isn't such a pain. The minister is not always the pain in these situations, but at least there are options.

Hebrews 10:23-25 stirred something in me. Let me remind you of it:

*'Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we might spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up on meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.'*

One of the tricks to spurring people on in love and good deeds is having a good look at yourself. What are your motivations? How are you checking that you are seeing clearly? How do you test your insights? Have you any idea of your blind-spots? I'm heading in this direction because with all the pressure people are under at the moment, there seems to be a lot of reacting going on and not necessarily all that much reflection.

I'll let you in on a wee secret, I am deeply aware of all the problems of others – every single one of them! I have the gift of clarity. Are any of you the same? Aren't we blessed? Sometimes, I am absolutely certain that not only can I see someone's problem, but I know exactly the right way to approach that person to help her, or him, find the road to sorting things out. I should be one of those ministers who runs the life of the parishioners. The micromanager of a megachurch and paid handsomely for it because in a church like that I would also get to manage the finances! I

could not only help all the lost people find the road, I could choose the road and give them a jolly good push down it so they can all get on with sorting to themselves out... in my image.

Of course, as you should know, this is, in fact, a lie. I'm playing with you. I might think I have some clarity from time to time, and behave as if I do, but the basis for thinking that way is always something to be cautious of. I do not live in the shoes of the people I'm passing judgement on. I do not fully understand their stories and might never understand. I do not even have enough of a handle on my own story in order to be able to attend to all of my blind-spots and prejudices, let alone attend to someone else's story wisely. And I have plenty of poor performances haunting my memory to prove that I do not have very many of the answers to everyone else's problems at all.

I learned many of the dimensions of my shortcomings in parish ministry, but I especially learned this in my closer familial relationships. I can't change anyone. Not my mother, not my wife, not even my children, and especially not their partners! I like to think I can have influence and lead by example, but the only person I can try to change is me, and that's no picnic!

I can point out, encourage and cajole others, but when I advise without being asked for advice (and I do!), it rarely goes well. I can't see clearly. I have two eyes but they do not always see. I might not have *heard*. I might not have *paused*. I might not have checked in on why this particular something is bothering me. Is what I am seeing so bad? What has gone on that this person is struggling? Has someone listened in and taken the time to care? Have I listened carefully to the backstory? Have I built trust and earned the right for my opinion to be offered? Have I checked my motivations? Am I trying to attend to something in someone else because I really can't stand that same trait in myself. It is so much easier to pick on someone else than attend to myself!

This struggle is why I think Jesus talked about the speck and the log in the eye. Before you try to take the speck out of the eye of someone else because they can't see clearly and they are being a twit (I added that last part for effect!), take the log out of your own eye. The log Martin! You have blind-spots mate. You are dangerous. Stop trying to run other people's lives. Stop grandstanding as if you know exactly what to do. Stop pondering the faults of others which all seem so clear, and attend to the many things that trip you up – your blind-spots, your prejudices, your unresolved issues, your deflections from your own pains and inadequacies, your ideologies, your carefully constructed ways of framing your life that always seem to leave you as the hero. Stop it you log-jammed lumberjack, stop it!

Actually, I am not really here today to confess to you all my sins and shortcomings, there isn't enough time! It was simply easier to circle around the delicate subject of passing judgement and missing blind-spots by talking about myself rather than trying to point the finger at any or all of you. I have no business doing that! And maybe you have all your stuff together anyway just like all the Presbytery ministers!!!

Why I am heading down this track today is because of the enormous pressure the whole human community of the planet is under at the moment. We have some very big problems before us. They are really testing us. And if we are not careful we will find ourselves wallowing in the swamp of our own self-interest and self-righteousness, offering this opinion and that opinion, and passing judgement on people who aren't like us. There's a whole lot of that going on already, and I think our faith and the church community has a whole lot more to offer people than simply joining in on the chorus of condemnation.

I want to identify just three of these enormous pressures... three is quite enough for one day!

#1 climate change and the fast-rising temperature of our planet and the effect that is having and going to have if we are careless in attending to the impact of human activity on the climate. World leaders and experts have been meeting in Glasgow and trying to settle on actions that make a difference. It's a real challenge and politically charged. I wonder what the prayer of Jesus, who intercedes to the Father for the world, is like on this one. How might the Spirit be inviting us to tap into and participate in that prayer? What might it lead to? That's a meta-problem that is crossing from generation to generation – the kind of burden that Jesus invites us to take to him, that he might help us bear the weight of it. It feels so overwhelming that we might think we can do anything, but that is not so. No problem is too big.

#2 and a bit closer in and rather huge in the minds of every single one of us is the Covid-19 pandemic and all its variants. So far, we have been cushioned from the worst of it by some strong collective leadership in the team of five million. And there are measures that have been introduced to mitigate the power of it to destroy life. They are amazing. Advanced medical analysis, health protocols, community testing, modelling, lockdowns to stop community spread, vaccinations, and so on. But the pressure is mounting as the containment of the spread is breaking down and people want to be able to have less restriction.

One thing that has become very clear lately is that not everyone is on the same page. While the vast majority has submitted to vaccinating as a way of mitigating the risk to our lives and especially the lives of the vulnerable among us, a small but vocal minority are resisting. The mounting pressure has been highlighting and clarifying the nature of the divisions among us. Within our families, churches, friendship circles, clubs, workplaces and neighbourhoods all kinds of positions and ideological stances have become known, whether we care to know or not, and these have crept into our daily conversations and are causing heartache and division. It is really hard to know how to attend to this well and maintain relationship.

#3 And that is the third pressure - what is happening to our relationships. I wonder if another more prevalent virus has been spreading within the human community for some time and the full extent of it is finally being exposed because of these other pressures. These days, everyone has access to information (not necessarily accurate) and it seems as if everyone thinks they are expert enough to take a stand and make comment. It is the armchair referee no longer confined to the agitated man in the corner who really believes he knows the game inside and out.

Truth seems to now be contestable and dismissible without sound reason. Fake News, is how one prominent individual labelled anything not in line with his take on things. Bleach anyone? Everyone seems to have an 'I reckon,' and their reckons spill out in seemingly instant communication tools of the likes the human community has never had before. We are in trouble.

I suspect this is the rampant individualism of the modern era graduating and revealing its true underbelly. Descartes was the first to claim the ground: I think therefore I am. Now it is I think therefore I know, and I don't mind telling you about it!

Three great pressures, and quite a lot of division.

I've heard of a man in tears because of how surprised and shocked he has been with the strident opinions of his father on vaccination, workplace mandates, and a whole host of other things. I've heard of families where people can no longer bear to talk with each other. Some churches are

experiencing splits over the divergent ways people are interpreting the signs of the times. I have close friends whose political leanings have never been made known to me until this year and with force and venom – climate change denial, anti-government, anti-water reform, anti-vax, anti-mandates, anti-lockdowns... herd immunity...these friends... we are poles apart.

How do we handle the pressure? It is huge!

I don't want to be another bod telling you what to think. But I want to offer a thought about our posture – as a church, and as individuals.

How about we consider becoming like our Lord who is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.' [Ex 34:6]

How about we fasten on leaning in, relating, being caring, minding our blind-spots, being distrustful of our urges to pass judgement, and being generous in our love even if we differ on some of the big issues that are pummelling us.

What do we do with a problem? One of the great dynamics of the church communities I have been part of over the years has been the wideness of the welcome, the care to embrace difference, to give the shirts off their backs, and walk the extra mile. I have grown and thrived in the richness of the call of Jesus to serve the community rather than to stand in judgement of it. We follow the man who lived for others. We practice self-denial and the disciplines of loving service. We offer the community a model of unconditional love (well, we try), and we commit ourselves to living with and for one another. We are called to 'hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.' And we are called to 'consider how we might spur one another on toward love and good deeds...' Can we do that? Can we relate warmly, widely, and patiently and practice goodness? Surely we can. Surely! Amen.