

Lenten Sermon: Rev Tim McKenzie & Rev Māmari Stephens, 3rd week of Lent 2019

- 00:00 **Tim:** Kia ora koutou, welcome to St. Michael's. It's great to be able to be in our space to share with you a bit about week three, forgiving grace. My name's Tim.
Māmari: Ko Māmari ahau.
Tim: And we are looking today at forgiveness and grace and how they come out of our stories in our booklet from the forgiving grace materials, transforming grace.
- 00:23 And particularly we're reflecting as we looked at these materials in the booklet, Māmari, about the way that forgiveness includes the one who's been excluded, and unforgiveness keeps people on the outer and excludes. And I think we were really struck in the book that there's a story about the Amish community who had that terrible series of murders in their community and the family reached out to include the widow of the murderer when actually she might have been someone that they would shun.
- 00:59 And through their acts of forgiveness they brought the excluded right back into the circle of belonging and of God's love really.
Māmari: I mean it's an extraordinary story because the people that were killed were children in 2006. And I think that societal response is always to hunt out and exclude and punish and demonise, if you like, not only the perpetrator but the people associated with the perpetrator.
- 01:25 But the Amish in this particular instance went completely countercultural to this and they reached out to them, as you say, to the wife and to the family, not only by words, but by actions. So their grace was known by what they did and not just what they said. And so it was that point of relationship actually, seeking to reach out include, and by that, develop a relationship and then more good things could follow from it. I think it's an extraordinary story.
- 01:54 **Tim:** And it comes through really powerfully in the story of the Prodigal Son which is the main scripture for this week's readings. And we're really lucky to be in the church in the diocese with the best window of the prodigal son...
Māmari: Not to put too fine a point on it!
Tim: I would go further than the best one in the diocese. I would say the best in the world! And it's right up here behind us. It's a wonderful window from the 1960s. And it tells the story of the prodigal son in really just five little vignettes.
- 02:24 But the thing that really stood out to me is as, Māmari, I reflected on what you said about forgiveness including everybody is the way that in that story, the older brother hasn't actually done anything wrong. He's not the perpetrator. He's not the victim particularly so much, it's the father who's the victim and yet he excludes himself by refusing to become part of the narrative of forgiveness; by refusing to
- 02:52 take part in the father's act of radical grace and generosity.
Māmari: And he kind of does so by standing on righteousness too, you know, he's the older brother he's been there the whole time, he's done everything he was supposed to do. And so that kind of justifies his stance but it excludes him at the same time from the joy that comes about from the reconciliation.

- Tim:** And it's really nicely depicted in this window I reckon by the fact that you've got these really detailed images of the father and the son; first the father rushing out to embrace the younger son and then in the second
- 03:28 panel there, of them feasting together over the fatted calf and out there in the fields far away, is the grumpy, grieved, self-righteous, older brother I guess, who's just become a bit of a stick figure in the background. It's almost like he's lost his humanity by refusing to take part in this radical, forgiving, act of God's grace.
- Māmari:** Yeah and he's lost the possibility of reconciliation. Excuse the pun but it's a beautifully framed
- 03:59 piece of the story there because he's cut out in the background and you can't even see any details. As you say, he kind of loses his humanity, there's no detail about him that we can see. So I think it's a very powerful image.
- Tim:** It got me thinking of Ephesians Chapter 2, particularly where Paul kind of theologises on the same idea and he uses the ideas of distance and far away-ness and closeness. And so he talks about how the Gentiles have been excluded from Christ, how they've been separated from the Covenant promises how they've been...
- 04:29 there's a dividing wall between them and the Jewish people. And yet in God's radical generous act in Christ, it's like those who are far off have been brought near, says Paul, and that all happens on the ground that is made possible by the Cross, I guess. It's a new foundation, a new building that goes up on that ground, on what Christ has done and no other basis.
- 04:58 **Māmari:** And another important point there is that Christ is the cornerstone of that new edifice. So we must remember that because as human beings, our tendency is to institutionalise and to create behemoths - edifices to what we believe is right. And so Christ can often get replaced as being that cornerstone, even in the body of the church. And so it's something for us to remember, that it's not actually about the institution, it's about Christ being at the cornerstone of that.
- 05:29 **Tim:** And I would like to come back to that but I think that we might just point you to another window actually over here, and it's a window of the Crucifixion. And again I think it establishes that Ephesians 2 point really clearly that there's Jesus dying for the sins of the world, and on that ground Jews and Gentiles become one people. So you've got the Centurion hailing him as the son of God. We've got the beloved disciple and Mary right next to it.
- 05:57 These are the new people who are forgiven and established as the forgiving community on the grounds of Jesus' sacrifice, I suppose.
- Māmari:** Without any kind of barrier between them. That they are the new body.
- Tim:** They're one people.
- M: yeah, one people. And I think that's an important point or image for us for the next part of our conversation because Jesus is up there on the cross and it's the death of Christ that has enabled that reconciliation to take place.
- 06:29 But then when we think about the second story in our readings for this week which is the story of Tarore, well I'm on the wrong one but the story of Tarore who was a young girl who was killed by a chief by the name of Uita and she was

a young girl of Ngāti Hauā descent, a daughter of a chief by the name of Ngakuku.

- 06:56 So this has become a very famous story because at the time she died, she had a Gospel of Luke around her neck and that was taken by Uita. And what happens after that, and that particular story is incredibly important for the growth of Christianity and Māori in New Zealand. And sometimes I wonder that we don't spend enough time thinking about those consequences - those really, incredibly important consequences and sometimes in our retelling of the story we might focus a little bit too much on Tarore,
- 07:30 and her death, but it's actually what happens next. We need to pay respect to the fact that this girl died. But it was what happens next, actually, that whole story needs to be told. So it's a great opportunity to do that this week.
Tim: And what happens next as you pointed out really clearly is that people, individuals, take on that work of being Christ's ambassadors, of bringing the reconciliation and not relying on the institution. Not saying 'well,
- 08:02 the mission is there; A N Brown and Octavius Hadfield they will do the work, or the church in some kind of disembodied sense, but rather Ripahau, I'll do the work, right?
Māmari: Yeah, so a man by the name of Ripahau Matahau happened to be in Rotorua at the time that Uita returned from this raiding party in which young Tarore died, and Uita asked him... he'd already been baptized,
- 08:30 he was the first person to be baptised in New Zealand by Hadfield, and Ripahau was asked by Uita to 'come and explain this document, this book to me. What does this mean?' And so in doing so, he takes that opportunity to reach out and explain the Gospel, to actually explain this. So I see that as an extension of a person reaching out to another, like the seeking to find bread.
- 08:55 Uita takes that message on board and that enables him in some way to then make the journey back to Matamata to Ngakuku's kāinga, to their home, and to reconcile and eventually, he also becomes baptized. And then that Gospel, the Gospel of Luke, makes its way, by the hand of Ripahau, down to Ōtaki and from there down to the South Island and lots of... under the watch of
- 09:27 Matini Te Whiwhi and Tamihana Te Rauparaha; lots of Māori are proselytised and introduced to the Gospel. This is Māori extending the Gospel to other Māori. And so the story of Tarore is important not only because of what it shows in the instant, but also the consequences of what happens next. And Uita could be brought into the fold. He could be included, where he would have been excluded. He could be included because of the power of forgiving grace.
- 09:57 **Tim:** And again the cost it involves, or the risk that it involves comes home to me. Tamihana Te Rauparaha was going south on that mission that you described, and going to the place where his father had - on two or three occasions - been and pillaged and murdered people in quite large numbers, and he went back into the lion's den and said 'I come in peace. My dad is not coming back. I'm coming on the ground of the Gospel, which is forgiveness.
- 10:27 Will you forgive me? And I, in Christ's name, admit my wrongdoing and accept it.'
Māmari: Yeah, and there's a point that you made before is that there is always a price. You know at the heart of that story is the death of a young girl. It still

happened and there's still part of what goes along with forgiveness and grace is also a judgment, but we have been released from the bonds of having to judge.

10:55 We have been liberated from that. That's God's work and not ours. We are freed, in that sense, which I think you know... there's always a cost and the cost must be borne. But that's up to God to determine.

Tim: I guess where the rubber hits the road for us is in our own need to personalise that: personal agency and being agents of forgiveness and not relying on the institution again,

11:23 and I found myself thinking of several stories from my previous parish – Hi Miramar! - of people who shall remain nameless and who are deceased, actually, was the story I was remembering, but who had really felt upset and aggrieved by things that the church had done in an institutional sense. And I don't think that the perpetrators were deliberately being mean, but they just turned up as representatives of the church and thought that that explained and incarnated the message sufficiently without being human, without being relational, without actually putting love first.

11:59 And it really struck me that actually if we claim to be part of Christ's story, then we have to be the Ripahaus. We have to be the Matini Te Whiwhis. We have to be people who extend grace and forgiveness and love and warmth and not hide behind the institution.

Māmari: Exactly. Exactly. And that point about being relational: because if people are going to bring themselves back from being outside or allow themselves to be brought in and be included again, then there has to be somebody who makes that extension.

12:33 It has to be somebody who extends that hand, there has to be somebody that commits to that relationship. So that's incredibly important I think, that's a lesson for us and what we do in our day to day lives to be relational.

Tim: Yeah. So thanks be to God. The dividing wall has gone. Jesus has kicked it down through the Cross, and that means we've got a job to do, it's a costly job but we've got to get on with it and not think that somehow, the church is going to do it for us because we are the church. We are Christ's body.

13:06 Yeah thanks Māmari, nice to talk.