

Edward Lorenz was a meteorologist at MIT in Boston. In 1961 he ran some routine experiments with remarkable results. He discovered that when he changed the input data by an infinitely small amount, there were huge differences in the final results. Small Changes led to Huge Differences.

More than ten years later, Lorenz presented a paper at a conference, the title being:

Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set off a Tornado in Texas?

The theory that seemingly small changes or events can lead to hugely different outcomes is called 'The Butterfly Effect.' The Butterfly Effect refers to the idea that a butterfly's wings might create tiny changes in the atmosphere, that in turn may ultimately alter the path of a tornado; delay, accelerate or even prevent the occurrence of a tornado in another location.

Small Changes can lead to Hugely Different Outcomes. Applied to all of life, the Butterfly Effect seemingly inconsequential actions can lead to profound, and life changing outcomes.

This week my parents have been in Goolwa holidaying with some other couples, including their friends of 35 years, the Hogarths – Yvonne and David. Yvonne and David still live in Naracoorte, which was where we met them in September 1978. Our family had just moved to town, and on our first Sunday, we were looking for a church. My dad had been a Presbyterian Elder, and a year before had helped lead our church to unite with the Methodists in the town we then lived in to form one, Uniting Church congregation. It was a hard journey, and my dad was left bruised by it all. He arrived in Naracoorte not sure if he wanted anything more to do with the Uniting Church. On that first Sunday in town he decided we would go to the Uniting Church. I can distinctly remember, as if it was yesterday, pulling up to the church in our Kingswood and dad saying, 'We will give it a week.'

We never left.

That first Sunday we met the Hogarths. They, and other members of this incredibly alive, vital congregation, made us feel at home. More than that, that first Sunday, they invited us into their home. They extended hospitality to us.

From. Day. One.

A year later, through the ministry of that country church, I committed my life to Jesus. Seven years later, my father, who had arrived in Naracoorte ready to turn his back on the Uniting Church, entered Bible College - eventually becoming a Uniting Church minister, serving in that capacity right up to his retirement. Ten years after my father, I made the same decision and entered Bible College.

I look back and think what might have been; how the course of my life might have changed but for one small, profound act of hospitality.

Small Acts –even small acts of seemingly insignificant acts of hospitality - can have profound, life-altering consequences.

Last week I laid down the biblical to take the scriptures seriously and pursue hospitality by inviting someone in this church you don't know, or only know a little, into your home to share a meal together. If you take up this challenge, not just now, but again and again into the future, you may never know the effect of simple acts of biblical might be, as strangers are transformed into friends.

Each week through our Engage series I am going to be laying a specific challenge for us to take up. Last week it was to 'Pursue Hospitality'. This week it is to 'Take Responsibility.'

Fundamental to our Engage journey is the conviction that the with-God life is impossible without each other; that church is not a religious good or service we consume, but the with-God community we participate in.

When you came in today you received this Engage postcard. On the reverse is a scripture that, when I read it recently, it wrecked me. Paul says to the Romans and to us:

In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.
(Romans 12:5)

Our lives are not our own. When you are a Christian, it can never be about 'me, myself and I'. United with Christ – In Christ- we form one body where we belong to one another. On this same card are some words of Eugene Peterson about the church, words that are far more eloquent than I could ever muster:

Being a church member is a vocation, a way of life. It means participation in an intricate web of hospitality, living at the intersection of human need and God's grace, inhabiting a community where men and women who don't fit are welcomed, where neglected children are noticed, where the stories of Jesus are told, and people who have no stories find that they do have stories, stories that are part of the Jesus story. Being a church member places us strategically yet unobtrusively at a heavily trafficked intersection between heaven and earth.

(Eugene Peterson)

Through this Engage series we are exploring just how we live out this vocation, this calling of belonging to Christ and one another as church. To do so, we are digging deep into some words of the Apostle Paul as he offers some practical teaching on what it means to belong to one another. He says:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.

(Romans 12:9-11)

Paul starts:

Love must be sincere

In essence this phrase acts as a heading for the rest of the chapter. From verse nine onwards Paul is giving us his recipe for love, telling us what the essential ingredients are for love to be at the heart of any community. It's not just any love – but agape love – the same self-sacrificial love that Jesus extended to us on the Cross. This agape love we have received we now offer to others. This love must be sincere.

Literally translated, Paul says our love must not be hypocritical. In The Message translation puts it really well:

Don't fake it.

(The Message)

I remember years ago Sue and I were walking through the night markets in Chang Mai, Thailand and this really friendly salesman was badgering us as he tried to sell us one of his 'brand name' watches. As we tried to walk away, he kept on saying, 'Genuine! Genuine!' At one point I stopped, smiled at him and said, 'Genuine? Really?' He grinned back at me with the answer, 'Genuine Fake!'

It's too easy to be a 'Genuine Fake'. We can believe all the right things, have a nice, neat and tidy doctrine and believe that this guarantees our Christian identity. But the bible says that without love, sincere agape love, it's nothing – we are just a genuine fake.

The world does not need any more 'Genuine Fake' Christians; it desperately needs the real deal.

In Paul's say a hypocrite was a stage actor who would use masks to play different characters in the same play. Sincere love wears no masks. It doesn't – it cannot – fake it.

Let's look the ingredients of Paul's recipe for sincere love. He goes on to say:

Hate what is evil; cling to what is good (verse 9b)

The first ingredient of sincere love is **Purity**

The Message translation puts it this way:

Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. (The Message)

Literally translated, we are to loathe anything that is sinful and to cling to good like a husband and wife cling to one another during sexual intercourse. That's how strong the language is here.

Recently I heard a pastor share a story of doing the family washing. As instructed, he carefully sorted the coloured clothes from the whites, washing the whites first. At least he thought he had sorted the coloured from the whites. When the wash cycle was finished and he opened the washing machine door, instead of gleaming white, clean clothes – he was confronted with soft, pink everything. He frantically pulled all the clothes from the machine until he found one, little, pink sock that belonged to his four-year-old daughter.

When we tolerate evil in our life, when we rationalise our sin – 'It's not that bad really – I'm not really hurting anyone' – when we do this, our whole life is coloured by that one, little accommodation – like a pink sock in a washing machine full of whites.

Sincere love doesn't rationalise our sin, nor does it tolerate it; it runs from it!

The nature of repentance is to recognise that we are heading down some dark alleys, to stop, and to start to run the other way. Far more than simply rejecting what is not of God, sincere love clings passionately, like two loves cling together, to what is good. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says this:

Brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.
(Philippians 4:8)

I want to linger here just a moment. Some of us here this morning have been tolerating evil in our life; rationalising sin. But we are run from evil – to hate it, loathe it – especially when it seeks to colour our life like a pink sock in a washing machine full of whites.

Some of us have been looking online for way too long at way too much stuff that is exploitative, pornographic and dark. It's time to run.

Some of us have been cutting corners at business or work. It may not be illegal, but it certainly is unethical, and we know it. It's time to run.

Some of us have been dipping our toes in the possibility of a relationship that we know – we know is wrong. It's time to run.

There is more I could say, but my prayer is that right now, even as I speak, the Holy Spirit might be whispering to others of us – 'It's time to run.'

Ingredient number one of Sincere Love is Purity. Ingredient number two is **Devotion**.

Paul says:

Be devoted to one another in love.

Literally translated, be devoted to one another in sisterly and brotherly love.

Have you ever sat around a table where your extended family has gathered – like Christmas – and wondered how it is possible that you could be related to them? Have you ever wondered whether you were secretly adopted, and no one every told you?

You will have heard the phrase, often said with some resignation, 'You can't choose your family.'

As much as it's true of our biological families, it is just as true for our spiritual families. If you are in Christ, you aren't simply sitting next to strangers who happen to be in the same room, but sisters and brothers in Christ – fellow sons and daughters of the king. We are not united by our blood, but by his blood. You didn't choose your sisters and brothers in Christ; God chose them, just as he chose you!

Sincere sisterly and brotherly love is devoted; it does not give up. Paul famously described love this way:

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.
(1 Corinthians 13:7-8a)

Love is devoted; it does not give up. Thanks God he never gave up on us, but instead through Jesus gave himself up for us on the cross!

One of my favourite stories in the Bible is in Mark's gospel when four friends do whatever it takes to get their paralysed friend to Jesus in the hope he will heal him. The house where Jesus is is full to overflowing. It seems impossible. But they were devoted – crazy even. So they climb on to the roof and with uncommon devotion – sincere love - start digging a hole in the thatch and manure until dust and sticks and crap are literally falling on Jesus' head. With a hole big enough, they lower their friend to the feet of Jesus. They weren't going to take no for an answer. And they and their friend got more than they bargained for – healing AND forgiveness of sins.

This is devoted, sisterly brotherly, never giving up, love – love that is sincere.

There may be someone in your life that needs your devoted, I'm not giving upon you love. You're tempted to walk away because loving that person is costly – there's effort and even pain involved. The easy thing would be protect your own heart and walk away. But the sincere love God calls us to doesn't walk away from mess in other people's lives; it's prepared, in God's power and strength, to wade right into it, just as Jesus waded into the mess of our lives.

Sincere, devoted, sisterly brotherly love dares to pray this dangerous prayer:

Help me not to be okay just because everything is okay with me.
(Laura Ortberg Turner)

The ingredients of Sincere Love include purity, devotion and also **humility**.

Paul says:

Honour one another above yourselves.

We lose something of just how shocking this statement would have been in Paul's day. The first century was very much an honour-shame society. Your family's honour was a finite, jealously guarded asset. You could gain honour from others; you could lose honour to others. If you lost it, you would do anything to win it back.

We get a window into this world in the practice of so-called 'honour killings', where a woman is killed by members of her own family, usually brothers, for shaming the family – by losing the family's honour in some way.

In Paul's day and culture you accumulate honour; you don't give it away to other people outside your blood kin.

Honour one another above yourselves. The Message puts it this way:

Practice playing second fiddle. (The Message)

If in the first century it was true that:

You accumulate honour; you don't give it away.
You strive to win, not to come second.

What's true in sport, in business, in career – that winners are grinders – spills over into the way we live our relationships.

In December 2012 a Spanish long-distance runner named Ivan Fernandez Anaya was competing in a cross-country race in Spain. He was running in second-place, well behind the race leader, a Kenyan runner who was an Olympic medalist. Nearing the finish line, the Kenyan, who was a certain winner, suddenly stopped running thinking he he had already crossed the finish line.

Fernández Anaya quickly caught up with him, but instead of exploiting the Kenyan's mistake and run past him and win, instead he stayed behind and, using hand gestures, guided the Kenyan to the line and let him cross first. Here's a picture.

Anaya made the decision that his Kenyan opponent was the rightful winner, and he wasn't going to steal victory from him. He was prepared to play second fiddle.

Anaya's coach was disappointed:

He has wasted an occasion. Winning always makes you more of an athlete. You have to go out to win.
(Martin Fiz)

The world says that winning makes us more of a person. But Jesus says different. Jesus says to gain our life, first we must lose it. Paul says that sincere love is prepared to play second fiddle.

Humility – the active honoring of others before and above our self – is a key ingredient of Sincere Love. Humility is not weakness; humility is a demonstration of real strength. CS Lewis puts it beautifully, as always:

Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less.
(CS Lewis)

So, Paul tells us that ingredients of Sincere Love include purity, devotion and humility. The last ingredient for today is **passion**.

In the last phrase in today's reading, Paul says:

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.

Literally, Paul is saying be 'set on fire'.

Here's how The Amplified bible helpfully puts it:

Be aglow and burning with the Spirit.
(Amplified)

Sincere Love flows from a life on fire with God. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell with power – dunamis – dynamite – with the roar of a rushing wind and as tongues of fire resting on disciple's heads. Energised and empowered by the Holy Spirit with the Agape Love of God, the disciples spilled out into the streets where they their lives lit up all those they encountered. With Holy Spirit fire, they were passionate, enthusiastic and consumed with glorifying Jesus. A.W. Tozer puts it this way:

Those first disciples burned with a steady, inward fire. They were enthusiastic to the point of complete abandon.
(A.W. Tozer)

So here's my question - how is your spiritual passion this morning? What's your spiritual temperature?

Is it warm? Hot? Cool? Cold?

The Holy Spirit is likened to an unquenchable fire. The Holy Spirit is unquenchable, but not uncontrolled. You know the Holy Spirit is aflame in your life when your life burns with increasing love for Jesus, the desire to serve him, the goal to be like him and to tell others about him.

Here's one way to get a measure of your spiritual temperature.

A businessman was sitting alongside a young guy on a crowded aeroplane. As they fastened their seatbelts, the businessman asked whether the young man was travelling for business or pleasure.

'Pleasure', he replied, 'I'm actually on my honeymoon,'

'Your honeymoon', the businessman replied, 'Where's your wife?'

'She's a few rows back. The plane was full and we couldn't get seats together.'

The businessman thought for a moment and then said to the newly married man, 'I'd be happy to swap seats with her so you two can sit together if you like.'

The young man replied, 'That's ok. I've been talking to her all week.'

That's what I call romance. That's what I call passion.

For some of us, when it comes to our relationship with God, it feels like the honeymoon is well and truly over.

The red-hot passion and joy of our first love, our first encounter with Jesus has died down to a flicker.

A measure of your spiritual passion will be how close your walk with God feels. Does your walk with Jesus feel close and intimate – like he is sitting in the seat beside you? Or are you rows apart, on the same plane, but distant?

If you know Jesus but feel distant from him, if you rate your spiritual passion as anything less than warm – Paul would say 'Take responsibly.' Do something. God's desire is that you might be aglow and burning with the Spirit.

Another analogy.

The first house that Sue and I bought had a mains gas hot water system. It worked like this; you would turn on a hot water tap – like when I stepped into the shower on one of those cold Adelaide mornings - and a pilot light would ignite rows of gas burners that in turn would instantaneously heat water that flowed through the pipes as hot water to my shower. Fantastic when it worked.

There were a few terrible occasions where I would turn on the tap, get a few fleeting moments of hot water before nothing but cold flowed. I would hop out of the shower, wrap a towel around, go to the hot water system to discover the pilot light had gone out – and relight it. Bliss would return.

If you've confessed Jesus as Lord and invited him to lead your life, the light of his love burns in you. That can never be taken away from you – this flame can never be put out. The fact that you have made this step confirms that the Holy Spirit is at work in your life.

But for some of us at least, the light is flickering; but there's no heat. There's no passion, no fervour, no power – the pilot light is on, but the full burners haven't, or no longer kick in.

Again, if that's you, Paul would say, 'Take responsibility.' Do something.

One act of surrender can change the course of your life.