

LOVING WITHOUT LIMITS

One Another

As you know my name is Ian and I'm the minister of Crawley Baptist Church. I haven't always been the minister at CBC. How I came to be the minister of CBC and why I one day won't be the minister of CBC, is the story of my life. But it's not the whole story.

I am Ian and I'm the son of a Vicar, well the son of a Curate, and almost a Vicar. Why I was the son of a Vicar, and why I'm not anymore, is the story of my life. But its not the whole story.

I am Ian and I am trained as a PE Teacher. How I got a place at St. Luke's Exeter University on a course I'm the only person ever to have done, is the story of my life. But its not the whole story.

I am Ian and I almost quit teaching before I'd finished my training. How I came to believe I had completely failed at the thing I'd set my heart on, how I got persuaded to carry on and keep going, and how I first taught at the Royal Grammar School in Worcester, is the story of my life. But it's not the whole story.

I am Ian and how I ended up on a beach mission in a little town called Nefyn when I had no desire to ever do that, how I ended up becoming the leader of the team, is the story of my life. But its not the whole story.

I am Ian and how I met a lovely young lady called Lisa on a beach mission, and how that meeting changed my life, is the story of my life. But it's not the whole story.

I am Ian and when I am at my best, I have some great qualities. When I am at my best I am loyal and faithful. When I am at my best, I am committed and conscientious. When I am at my best, I am kind and thoughtful. When I am at my best I am diligent.

I am Ian, and when I craft a sermon I spend hours, days, sometimes weeks, reading, thinking, reflecting, wrestling and writing. When I craft a sermon, I am utterly committed, and extremely careful with every word I write. When I craft

a sermon, I seek only to speak the truth and I angst over what the listeners will hear, might hear, and what they will choose to hear. When I craft a sermon, I only want to teach people what God is truly like and nothing else. When I craft a sermon, some of my best qualities help me and hold me.

I am Ian and in my best moments, I am a loving husband and a great dad. I am Ian and my best moments are the story of my life. But they are not the whole story.

I am Ian and I am not always at my best. I am Ian and a few weeks ago I was asked to host a funeral here at CBC. The funeral was not for anyone in the church, or for anyone I knew. I was simply asked to host the service in the building. But hosting a funeral involves quite a lot of work and finding others who are able and willing to help me. And, as so often happens, I was asked to host a funeral on a Friday – which is meant to be my day off!

I am Ian and I'm not always at my best and I was grumpy. Even when I arranged to meet the family in the church to talk about the service, I was grumpy. I knew they would see the screens and ask if they could show pictures, and that would mean a whole lot more angst and work for me. It is not as simple as it sounds to put pictures or videos or tributes on the screen when you can't operate the system without the help of others.

When I met the mum, standing here in the Sanctuary, I asked her how her son, whose funeral we were arranging, had died. I was not ready for her response: "Had he been ill?" I asked. "No, he was stabbed."

I was not at my best in my heart. I had been grumpy. And, in that moment, I was confronted with the deep truth that I am not always at my best. When I am not at my best I can be grumpy, unkind, unloving, uncaring and inconsiderate. When I am not at my best I can think only of myself and get caught up in my world and think nothing of someone else's world.

How I can be so insensitive when someone else is suffering, is the story of my life. But it's not the whole story.

I am Ian, and I'm a follower of Jesus Christ, saved by the abundant and immense grace of God. I have some really good qualities and I have some bad ones, but I am loved by God. Being loved by God is the story of my life and only God knows the whole story.

My good qualities and my bad qualities are not the whole story. They are not the whole story of my life because my story is caught up in the far bigger and far better story of God's magnificent love. And that is the far more important story.

In God's bigger, better and far more important story, God loves me in my best moments and he loves me in my worst moments. And only God knows the whole story.

Truth is friends, my best moments and my worst moments are quite incongruous.

In my best moments I willingly choose the way of love. In my worst moments I willingly choose the way of evil. And only God knows the whole story. My best moments and my worst moments are all the story of my life. And only God knows the whole story.

And the deep and profound truth is God knows my whole story, and loves me anyway.

My best moments do not make him love me more, and my worst moments do not make him love me less. God loves me anyway.

Friends, there are two things that are true about all of us. The first is that, although you might not like the way I say it, you are just like me. We all have our best moments, and we all have our worst moments. We are all flawed. We can be great, wonderful, lovely people, but we are not always great, wonderful, lovely people.

Some of it's because of the way we're made, the way we're wired up. All of us are set up, through our genes, for certain weaknesses. We are too, the product of life, our circumstances and experiences. People let us down and fail us, sometimes extremely badly. We've all been knocked and bashed. We all have scars but we all too, make our own deposits into our raggedness. We choose to deceive when we could speak the truth. We choose to grumble when generous praise is called for. None of us are always at our best.

The second truth is that, whether we are at our best or at our worst, God loves us anyway. God knows the whole story about me, and about you, and he loves us anyway. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom 5:6) Truth about God's love is that (while we are still sinners) his love is beyond reason. God loves us because he loves us because he loves us because he loves us.

God loves you because he loves you because he loves you because he loves you.

In the light of God's love, that he knows the whole story about you, about me and loves us anyway, the question becomes: How do we respond to that love? The answer to that question comes in the form of two commands that cannot be separated: 'Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

One of the unique features of biblical faith, is that there is no genuine relation with God that is not at the same time a relation with a brother or sister.

The way we say that here at CBC is in our value One Another: we will be real as we care for one another and work together. Another way of saying that might be to say that we will be 'for' one another.

To love another, to demonstrate love is being 'for' the one who is loved. One way we can be for one another is to encourage one another.

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up.
(1Thessalonians 5 v 11)

Encouragement is verbal sunshine – it is about who we are becoming. Encouragement reinforces community life. Encouragement builds people up in their journey of faith. Encouragement strengthens, refreshes and brings unity.

23 When David was told, "Look, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are looting the threshing floors," ² he inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?"

The LORD answered him, "Go, attack the Philistines and save Keilah."

³ But David's men said to him, "Here in Judah we are afraid. How much more, then, if we go to Keilah against the Philistine forces!"

⁴ Once again David inquired of the LORD, and the LORD answered him, "Go down to Keilah, for I am going to give the Philistines into your hand." ⁵ So David and his men went to Keilah, fought the Philistines and carried off their livestock. He inflicted heavy losses on the Philistines and saved the people of Keilah. ⁶ (Now Abiathar son of Ahimelek had brought the ephod down with him when he fled to David at Keilah.)

⁷ Saul was told that David had gone to Keilah, and he said, “God has delivered him into my hands, for David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars.” ⁸ And Saul called up all his forces for battle, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men.

⁹ When David learned that Saul was plotting against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, “Bring the ephod.” ¹⁰ David said, “LORD, God of Israel, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Keilah and destroy the town on account of me. ¹¹ Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me to him? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? LORD, God of Israel, tell your servant.”

And the LORD said, “He will.”

¹² Again David asked, “Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul?”

And the LORD said, “They will.”

¹³ So David and his men, about six hundred in number, left Keilah and kept moving from place to place. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he did not go there.

¹⁴ David stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands.

¹⁵ While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. ¹⁶ And Saul’s son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. ¹⁷ “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this.” ¹⁸ The two of them made a covenant before the LORD. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh. (1 Samuel 23 v 1-18)

This is a story of encouragement. Saul is Israel’s king, but David has already been anointed the next king by Samuel. David is far more popular than Saul after his defeat of Goliath. He’s had to escape Saul’s jealousy which is now so great he is trying to find David and kill him. In fact, Saul and his men are relentlessly pursuing David.

Many of the Psalms written by David were written in this period of David's life. If anyone needed encouragement it's David at this moment and, extraordinarily, David's encouragement comes from Jonathan. That is extraordinary because, in earthly terms, Jonathan is heir to the throne. He should be king after Saul.

Jonathan has a great deal to lose if David becomes king, and yet it is Jonathan who goes to David to encourage him and help him find strength in the Lord: "David – you will be king."

Not only does he protect David from his father's rage, he encourages him in his faith by reminding him he will be king. 'Don't be afraid – you shall be king over Israel.' Perhaps because of Jonathan's encouragement, David is later able to spare Saul's life when he has the opportunity to take it!

The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master...for he is the anointed of the Lord. (1Sam. 24 v 6)

Encouragement is essential for the life-giving power of community. "We will be real as we care for one another and work together."

Being 'for' someone means I celebrate their victories and mourn their setbacks. It means I sincerely want to see them grow and flourish. Being 'for' someone isn't necessarily easy – it certainly wasn't for Jonathan.

When I am at my best, I am 'for' others. But I am not always at my best and I don't always want others to succeed, whether my friends or my enemies. Truth is, I sometimes struggle with competition, envy or comparison. They cause me to diminish others and be opposed to them, rather than be for them.

Paul, despite himself, was able to write this.

If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

This truth staggered Paul, who said of himself, he was the worst of sinners. But the truth for Paul is the truth for us: God knows the whole story and he loves us anyway. Knowing the whole story, God is for us! Knowing the whole story, God is for you! He wants you to grow and flourish. He wants you to reach your full redemptive potential. He celebrates with you when you are at your best, he mourns over you when you are at your worst. He is on your side and in your corner. He is always watching, cheering you on.

My name is Ian and I have some really good qualities and some really bad qualities, but they are not the whole story. I'm Ian and my story is caught up in the far bigger and far better story, that God is for me and loves me anyway, and only God knows the whole story. As I live in that magnificent truth, the best response I can make is to love God and love others. And because God is for me, I can be for others, and so can we.

So, as we choose to live in God's story, we can live our value of 'One another' that: "we will be real as we care for one another and work together." We can be for one another.

Preached and Live Streamed by Rev. Ian Phillips, from Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 21st May 2023.