

## Reflection Notes – 16/7/17

- Geoff Stevenson

### **The Lavishly Generous Reckless Grace and God!**

A few years ago I was sitting in the church office working away. I was the only one there when the phone rang and I answered it. The male voice asked if I was Geoff Stevenson. I said I was and he asked a bit about my background – did I come from such and such a church... I was surprised and said, 'Yes, that's me. Who is this?' He gave his name and asked if I remembered him. I'll call him Tom.

When he said his name, my mind immediately went back about 10 years to a youth group I helped lead. We were in the church when a group of street kids – all boys – came and started yelling out. A couple of us went out to see what was happening and discovered they were yelling to one of their mates who was inside. He didn't want to go with them because he liked one of the girls, so they kept yelling out funny and less nice comments. So we started talking to them. Over several weeks they kept dropping by and seemed to enjoy, even want to talk with us. We often invited them in but there was no way they were coming into a church.

After a couple of months we began to spend more and more time with them, talking, walking the streets trying to keep them out of trouble. As we journeyed with them we heard many stories – some far-fetched, some shocking and some terribly sad. One of the young fellows, for example, shared that he walked the streets late so that he wouldn't be home when his stepfather came home drunk because he would be beaten up, even if he was in bed. Sometimes he would even sleep in the shed with his dog to avoid the stepfather. I didn't know what to do with such stories because they were so far from my own experience of a loving family and caring home. We just listened and continued to reach out as we could.

Eventually the youth group changed and moved to one of the other churches and these teenagers joined in. It was more than an interesting experience holding together the nice and quiet church kids with the slightly more boisterous church kids and their friends and then add these really wild and worldly wise teenagers. They created a degree of havoc but at other times joined in and participated. It was exciting, challenging, difficult, time-consuming and we often wondered what we were doing. The young blokes kept drinking in the park sometimes. They told stories of stirring, teasing and annoying local shopkeepers and worse. What were we doing? Surely we could put our time, energy and money into better things and more fruitful work! Surely!!!

Time moved on and kids grew and moved on. The teenagers eventually moved on into other things and we lost track as some moved away. There was some contact with a few and Tom was one of them. I moved on but he contacted me about doing his wedding. He was living with his fiancé in a pretty difficult area and were quite impoverished. I talked to them a few times and tried some marriage preparation. They were all over the place and I struggled with what to do because I know that this marriage was not one that would work. They were too immature, too wounded, and had no real support. I wondered how I might proceed but they just as suddenly said they weren't going ahead with the wedding and we lost contact

So out of the blue, Tom rang me in the church office. He didn't sound like Tom. He was more mature, gentle, laughing and more together. He told me about himself – he had tracked me down because he wanted me to know what he was doing. He had become a Christian and was part of a great church. He was married to a lovely young woman and they were going to have a family. He had a solid job and they were buying a house. He had moved across the country and living in another state. Life had turned around and he was really happy. He was grateful for what we had done in the youth group and realised he had been difficult. I was staggered, shocked and really pleasantly surprised. It was a wonderful phone call and I was really pleased for Tom.

I thought of this story when I read this week's passage from Matthew 13. It is often called the Parable of the Sower and is a story of a farmer who sows seed in his field. Unlike the typical farmer of his day who was incredibly careful with their seed in order not to waste it, this farmer throws seed everywhere. Seed falls on the hard paths and rocky ground where soil will not easily allow seeds to grow or birds come and eat it. Other seed falls amongst weeds and thorns where young plants may be choked and some seed falls on good soil where it will germinate and grow well.

It is a story that is generous and extravagant – or recklessly irresponsible and wasteful. We often consider how we use resources in our society. Currently on ABC radio, there is an interview with a lawyer who represents Aboriginal people in courts. He is suggesting that the resources available are insufficient and there needs to be far more for this community. Others advocate more resources for impoverished communities, people who struggle in life in so many ways. Some voices are crying out for more welfare support for people who aren't making it. Other voices (often led by radio shock jocks!) say that we are wasting money on lazy, good for nothing people who don't deserve anything. The Uniting Church, along with other churches advocates for more compassion and support for refugees but, as a nation, we continue to take a hard line. We really have a problem with what appears reckless generosity.

I wonder where Tom might be today if we or others hadn't been recklessly generous and stupidly wasteful with our time and energy. I somehow hate to think and as I do, wonder what became of the others in that youth group. I have had many experiences of seeing extravagant love and grace have a positive impact on people's lives. If I was looking at things from an economic or resource efficiency perspective, I would call much of what I have done into question. I look back and wonder how much time and effort I may have wasted in situations where there is no guarantee of a positive outcome. I look at things we have done as a church and wonder why? Some churches are far more efficient and don't do anything without counting the cost and ensuring that there be a significant outcome (usually bums on seats and increased financial resources) for any effort. I suppose that this is a corporate model and usually works well in that realm but is it the way of God?

I have been the recipient of much generous and loving care, guidance and support from many people – starting with my family and extending to friends, strangers, members of the churches and other groups and organisations I've been involved in. Sports coaches, music teachers... God's generous grace is abundantly given and there for all. Are we willing to share it in the manner and spirit in which we have received – lavishly!??