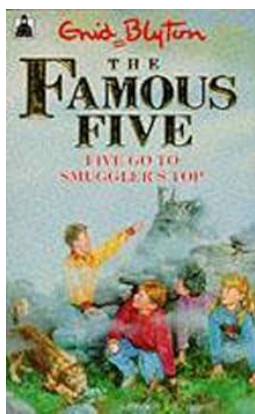


Every time I step up to deliver a message in Church, I am overly conscious that I am not much of an expert on the bible. I have early memories of my grandmother trying to teach me to recite the names of the books in the bible – something she could do with ease to her dying day. It was a futile effort - I think I may have mastered book names up to Number 4 (coincidentally the book of Numbers).

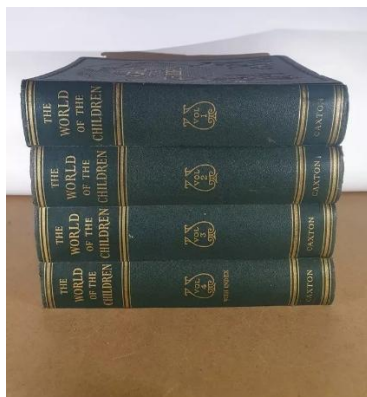
For most of my childhood, we lived in the country with only bicycles for transportation, however, we did make it to Sunday School often enough. Each week, we were encouraged to memorize a bible verse. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son” is burned into the very centre of my brain to this very day. – I suspect it was some time later I discovered what “begotten” meant.

But, despite my early challenges with the bible, I was a prolific reader, I loved the Famous Five books by Enid Blyton which took me on flights of adventure and fancy – I quite possibly read all 21 of them.



The famous five were Julian, George (actually Georgina but no-one dared call her by that), Dick, Anne and Timmy the dog. My favourite character was Anne, she was a little shyer than the rest of the five – much like me at the time, I think. I imagined her to be quite pretty and would probably be friendly with me if we ever met.

Another one of my favourite reading sources were the four encyclopedia-style books called The World of the Children. Sold to my parents by a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman (remember them?), those books made a huge contribution to my early education.



As you can see, they were large volumes packed with information and stories about science and the world in general. I consumed those books. The Bible? Not so much.

But I also maintained a mutual connection with Church through most of my life, and it was much later that I came across some Bible passages that I would try to incorporate into the patterns of my life. For many years I have loved the passage in Acts 2 starting at verse 43 describing how the early Christians lived in community and shared their wealth and belongings. But today's reading resonates even more with me as Paul encourages us to be compassionate gentle, humble, kind, and patient, - acting in peace with love.



In past years, when asked to prepare a message for Worship, I would usually turn to Google for inspiration and some ideas. This year I have the advantage of "Artificial Intelligence". Believe it or not, you can ask Chat GPT for a sermon on Colossians 3 verses 12 to 17 and, in five seconds, it will deliver a detailed outline to you. And here it is (hold it up). But that would be cheating, wouldn't it? and you would never have learned about my childhood crush on the fictional Anne.

But this passage, I believe, outlines a perfect model or pattern of life for us, and for the rest of our world. Why on earth can we not, as a species, embrace compassion, gentleness, humility, kindness and patience as responsibilities of life on this remote, isolated and seriously broken planet. Why must greed, power, violence and oppression prevail?

Most of you know that I have been a board member of the Summerland Food Bank and Resource Centre Society pretty much continually since 2011. I want to believe that a food bank such as ours embodies those attributes that Paul encourages us to embrace. And for the most part it does. But it seems, this year has been particularly challenging - due to just a few people who not only don't embrace the same ideals, but instead, actively oppose our efforts.

This summer for example we received significant vitriol from a former generous donor who withdrew her donations because she discovered that we provide food and services to transient orchard workers. When she used the word "pickers" she spat it out like a curse. Our experiences with such workers, who in regular growing seasons provide a vital service to our major industry, has been almost universally positive. They are mostly young people trying to find their way, working and exploring our country for a summer or two. Some of their employers on the other hand provide little to nothing in the way of comfort, sanitation and shelter. We help to make up for some of those shortcomings.

Another recent example occurred during a presentation to apply for grant funding to finish our planned new food bank. This time it was our support of the homeless, and more specifically our support of the street homeless. We were told by one attendee that we should not support homeless people because it only encourages more of them to come to our community. We deduce therefore,

that, if we want financial support from this attendee, we are being asked to make life for the homeless as miserable as possible so they will take their “presumably undesirable” bodies elsewhere.

These are only two examples of how far away parts of our own community are from “God’s Kingdom” and Paul’s principles. Homeless people (in my opinion anyway) above all need a home. We spend our political energies on giving them what we think they need: items like food, shelter, detoxification, wrap-around services, and so on. What happened to a home? what about love?, what about people who sincerely care about them?, what about compassion gentleness, humility, kindness patience? What about acting in peace with love? It’s up to us, Christians in Summerland, to both defend and promote these principles and act in these ways. If we can’t even make Summerland a loving place, a loving home, what hope is there for the rest of the world?

But, I also have to say that despite the few vocal and sometimes influential opponents, our Food Bank & Resource Centre could not survive but for the hundreds of compassionate donors who do support our care for those in need in our community. As treasurer this year, I became extremely nervous as our cash flow diminished toward the end of the year, reaching rock bottom toward the end of October. Then, around November 15, the Christmas spirit kicked in with hundreds of donations, large and small, so that today, every one of our clients has received some Christmas bounty, and we are restocked for the next few months. I try to focus on that rather than on our few detractors.

Jesus said: For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we you a stranger and welcomed you, or needing clothes and gave you clothing? Or when did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

We are at the start of a New Year – a new opportunity to look within ourselves and ask “Are we really following in God’s way” and, if not “how can we change the way we and our fellow citizens live in this community and in this world. God is not going to do the work for us, we must be his advocate and example.

I am sure the apostle Paul and my Fictional Anne would agree.