**Learning Together - People Matter**

*“A person’s a person, no matter how small.” – Dr Seuss [[1]](#endnote-1)*

*“Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Genesis 2:7.*

*“To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” – Nelson Mandela*

Whether we like it or not we live in a world where people are devalued.

As a parent, I am watching my children grow up in a world where children ages 2-11 see more than 25,000 advertisements a year on TV alone[[2]](#endnote-2). My 3 year old can recognise countless business logos, long before he can read, and my 5 year old enquires regularly as she looks over my shoulder at the newspaper, pointing to an advertisement, “What are they trying to sell us, Mum?” Already they are experiencing reductionism, the process of being reduced to being nothing but a consumer, a processor of information and /or a unit of production.

The history of our own country is filled with moments where land and resources have been valued more highly than people. Here in Poatina, as Rabbi Irving Greenburg[[3]](#endnote-3) noted, “We have a unique opportunity to reverse the pattern we see around us as we seek to value people. We face the urgent call to eliminate every stereotype, discrimination that reduces- and denies – [the image of God] in the other.”

As I reflect on my experience of living with others, I can think of countless moments when I’ve been well intentioned, and yet others have not experienced my behaviour as valuing them. My lack of awareness and sensitivity, alongside my need to be right, in control and/or significant has left others bewildered, hurt, isolated and disillusioned. If I’m honest, particularly when I feel under pressure or overwhelmed, it’s easy to see another person as the answer to fill a gap, to support me with my own dilemmas, to help my family in an area where I feel lacking or to relieve me of my loneliness. Not surprisingly, none of this leads to others feeling valued.

With this in mind, it is one thing to say we want people to matter, but how do we live in such a way that others are experience being valued? The true measure of whether others are valued is measured by what others experience, rather than by my intentions.

Added to this is the challenge, Stephen Covey [[4]](#endnote-4)outlines “We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behaviour.” The dilemma is that we can explain to ourselves why we did something, but when it comes to others, we don’t know the reasons behind their actions. Not surprisingly, our judgement can be harsh as a result. As I drove to Longford last week, one of my kids noted that they could hear the speed alarm in our car going off, and enquired as to why I was going so fast! I knew that I was on a straight, familiar road, there were no other cars in sight, and I also knew that if I didn’t hurry, I wouldn’t be at school to meet my daughter at the end of her first day back at school for the term! However, just days later, a car overtook me at what felt like breakneck speed and sped off into the distance. I quickly had critical thoughts, wondering what kind of a person could justify travelling at such a speed!

In her book Rising Strong, Brene Brown[[5]](#endnote-5) explores our tendency toward self-righteousness and asks the question “”Do you think, in general, that people are doing the best they can?”

It’s so easy to live assuming that when you are seeing another person’s behaviour that you are seeing them; to make assumptions about another that can often be largely inaccurate. Brown suggests, in contrast, we can assume the best about people and assume that, at any given moment they’re doing the best they can. To do so requires a vulnerability and humility that stretches me, beyond my attitudes and patterns of thought, feeling and action. It requires me to actually get to know people, to let them in and hear them out, to sit under the weight of their story, or simply to get out from underneath the weight of my own. Interestingly she noted that those who answered yes, to the above question, were more likely to be wholehearted, vulnerable and believe in their own self-worth!

I can recall an early experience of life in community. A young lady moved in to the community I was living, and we were to share a house. Locked away in her room, all I knew of her for those first three days was the music that blared through the paper thin walls that separated us, and an odour that gradually pervaded the house. When I first glimpsed her face to face, my welcome was met with a grunt, her eyes diverted as her large frame and face covered with piercings in places I’d never imagined, quickly disappeared into the safety of her room. I recall how quickly my hopes and interest in my new housemate developed into resentment; particularly as the loud music continued, dishes were left mounting on the sink and my interactions with her continued to be received with brusque responses.

I’m grateful for others in the community, more mature than I, who made, as Brene Brown outlines, “a generous assumption” about my housemate. They had clear boundaries about what was okay and what was not, but they also assumed that she was a person with value, and that she was doing the best she could. In the months that followed, surrounded by this “generous assumption” she softened, and I can recall a moment when for the first time I felt I saw something beyond her behaviour, when she disclosed one small detail about her family. That small detail gave me a window into her world, beyond her behaviour, and at last I realised there was so much more to her than what I had first seen or assumed. It was a confronting and yet illuminating moment; a gift that pulled me from my self-righteousness, to a place of empathy.

It reminds of Jesus and His encounters with Zacchaeus in Luke 19v1-10. Despite Zacchaeus’ behaviour that had clearly hurt others and damaged relationships, Jesus made a generous assumption and saw beyond Zacchaeus’ behaviour. Zacchaeus responded and in turn was able to bring a gift to others, beyond their expectations.

Brown suggests that the reason we see the worst in others is because we are consistently aware of the things we dislike about ourselves; I’m not generous with others because I don’t have the grace or the patience to first be generous with myself. What an opportunity, to live in the reality that each of us are of value, as well as those around us!

I feel challenged as I read the words of Joan Chittister and consider the invitation that is before me and us… ‘It is in community that we come to see God in the other. It is community that we see our own emptiness filled up. It is community that calls me beyond the pinched horizons of my own life, my own country, my own race and gives me the gift I do not have within me.” [[6]](#endnote-6)

**Questions for reflection**

1. Can you think of a time that you are aware of, when despite your best intentions, you perceived or became aware that another person did not feel valued as a result of your behaviour?

2. Can you think of a moment when you have judged others based on their behaviour rather than what they may have intended?

3. How would you behave if you assumed others were doing the best they could?

4. Who in your life or community needs you to assume the best about them?

5. What would happen if you were generous to yourself? If you were able to say, “I did my best today. Today that was enough.”

6. In “Learning Together: Hospitality” it was pointed out that “hospitality” actually means “lover of strangers or aliens” (those who are different to us!). How might this understand ing help you to make “generous assumptions”?

7. How might making “generous assumptions” affect the way you practice hospitality?

1. Dr Seuss. Horton Hears a Who. 1954. Penguin, Random House. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Federal Trade Commission Bureau of Economics Staff Report. (2007, June 1). Children’s Exposure to TV Advertising in 1977 and 2004. Holt, D.J, Ippolito, P.M., Desrochers, D.M. & Kelley, C.R. p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://rabbiirvinggreenberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Cloud-of-Smoke-red.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The speed of trust: the one thing that changes everything / Stephen M.R. Covey with Rebecca R. Merrill. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Brene Brown; Rising Strong. Penguin, Random House, UK. 2015. P110, P122 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Joan Chittister; How Shall we Live? (Eric, PA: Benetvisite). This quote is from a 2006 pamphlet (page unknown) and was also part of several speeches Joan Chittister delivered.) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)