

Covenant of Care: Restoring Hearts, Serving All

**Sermon/Kauwhau given at Service of Worship
on Sunday 19 October 2025, led by Bruce Howat,
at Knox Church Ōtepoti Dunedin New Zealand**

Texts: Jeremiah 31:27-34, 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" Psalm 19:14

We unite, pledging ourselves to serve compassionately and tirelessly as healers, responders, and guardians of every heart within our community. As we gather, we commit to seeing each person with empathy, restoring spirits and rebuilding bonds with kindness. We promise to respond swiftly when called, to comfort gently those who suffer, and to encourage others in moments of fear and vulnerability.

Together, we vow to listen deeply, to speak courageously for justice, and to act faithfully for peace. We shall actively protect the dignity of all, striving to repair wounds and strengthen hope wherever it falters. Guided by the principles of service, mercy, and love, we will intentionally reach out, generously uplift, and continually nurture trust among us.

Let us cultivate unity and resilience, working collectively to restore wholeness in hearts and families. As we journey side by side, may we honour each story, restore every spirit, and celebrate the humanity we share, dedicated always to serving all.

Jeremiah speaks to us

Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant centres on communal restoration and divine faithfulness during profound crisis and societal trauma. A covenant in Christianity is a sacred, binding agreement or relationship between God and humans, characterized by promises, commitments, and obligations made by both parties. This passage's emphasis on "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" is a strong metaphor for Jenetta's comments in our first focus. The promise of full inclusion—"from the least to the greatest"—counters patriarchal hierarchies, affirming the value and voice of those historically marginalized, including women who, in ancient Judah, would have felt the double trauma of violence and social invisibility.

Putting this in perspective from an emergency services viewpoint. They have the rare and incredibly privileged opportunity to make a difference in others' lives, when their patients, victims, sufferers, as well as whanau, families world feels is at its darkest point. Many of the people they encounter are at the lowest point, where their world, safety, security, personal space is being invaded without warning.

The use of nurturing and birthing imagery across Jeremiah, framing God's covenant and care as maternal and life-giving. In other words, resilience for the emergency services does not mean detached and/or heartless. Resilience allows these amazing people who we are celebrating today to face what they see, to carry the array of experiences they develop, and yet come back to serve again for another day. This requires a compassionate heart, strong dedicated technical skills, living and, action-based values, and the ability to go home at the end of a shift knowing they are making a difference.

Timothy

Timothy is urged to remain steadfast in the wisdom inherited from previous generations, especially through his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois, one of the few explicit New Testament recognitions of women as transmitters of faith and spiritual authority.

The reading from Timothy is an affirmation of the indispensable service, teaching, and resilience of women in building spiritual and communal foundations.

Further, the call to "proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with utmost patience in teaching" (4:2) resonates with the experience of those in emergency services: persistent, tireless work for the public good, often in the face of disregard or adversity.

Within a service context that celebrates emergency service workers, these verses can honour not just visible heroics but also the hidden labour of care, advocacy, teaching, and endurance—often shouldered by women and others at the margins. They can inspire communities to value all gifts, promote justice, and support those who persist in service.

Let us affirm the direct agency and spiritual authority of all, honouring especially those who have transmitted faith and wisdom across generations—named and unnamed women in scripture and in contemporary emergency services.

I believe in the concept that our language shapes our reality. Framing our metaphors as enactments of God's covenant promises and as models of restorative, inclusive ministry for church and society, shifts our thinking and behaviours.

I know when I attend the retired old coppers club functions, we have our own in house language. For me, and I can only speak for myself, I feel like I am back with my old family. There is no judgment, unless your past includes dog handling, as they are a sub-culture within the Police. We are family, because to survive on the streets, you always had each other's backs. We looked out for each other, no matter what. We always stood strong in one blue line, with the law as our backbone.

And nowadays as a Hato Hone St John Chaplain, I have the amazing privilege of listening to their stories, and their watching each other's backs takes on a deeper meaning. They are so professional, all they want to do is care for their community in a unique way. The learning culture is remarkable. The desire to improve mind-blowing. Their call is saving strangers, while often faced with tragedy, their training holds the key.

I haven't got to know the fire people as well as I would like, but I listened to their District Commander recently, and when he put up a chart about the huge variety of work they do nowadays, it was mind-boggling. I do know that they never shirk their duty, protecting one and all.

One word I am finding regularly, with the emergency services is calling. I was more than impressed with the Police Remembrance service, not just with the magnificent liturgy, nor with, Grace and Jesse singing Pie Jesu – Requiem – but with the number of speakers in blue who referred to Police work as a calling. As clergy we refer to our calling, which comes in array of methods. What a powerful connection between the church and those we are celebrating this morning.

Each emergency service has their own metaphors, that they use amongst themselves. And today they are encountering the church metaphors, as we too have our own language.

High quality literature emphasizes important key messages. One such piece of literature is Anton Chekhov's short story "The lady with Lapdog". The themes in the extraordinary story are the transformative power of love; society and morality; ambiguity and uncertainty; symbols and self-awareness. The story is only seventeen pages long, with so much packed in it. A bit like the Bible we read at home and church. I just want to focus on the transformative power of love.

The epistemology of the word "love" explores how love can be known, understood, and meaningfully described—yet philosophical inquiry finds love to be an elusive, sometimes irreducible concept whose full understanding resists simple analysis.

Some philosophers and traditions hold love to be so subjective and emotional that it cannot be rationally examined or externally verified—it is considered a private phenomenon only accessible via language, which itself may be an imperfect indicator of inner states.

In some traditions, such as St. Paul's in Christianity, love is epistemologically understood as involving "being known by," "having knowledge of," and "being together with" others and God.

Living in a world, where chaos is appearing as the norm, love has the power to transform, recreate a world that is about watching out for each other. This is the baseline for our emergency services, caring for the vulnerable of our society. They, with our support, can wrap a korowai, cloak of wellbeing around those in need. This is covenantal love, not romantic love, but long-lasting transformative love.

So, we in covenantal love, celebrate your work, give thanks to you at an organizational level, and at a personal and family level today. It is a genuine privilege to have you here; please know that you are upheld in our daily prayers.

Kia kaha! Kia māia! Kia manawanui!
(be strong) (be brave) (be steadfast)

God bless you all. Amen.

Knox Presbyterian Church, Ōtepoti Dunedin

Our vision is to see the reign of God, made known in Jesus, have a transformative effect on people's lives and on the world in which we live.



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