

Linked by the Spirit - It's a relationship

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 May, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Easter 7A – Reconciliation Sunday and Ascension Sunday

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

This week we focus on reconciliation - and also recognize the Ascension which took place or was commemorated last Wednesday. I'll begin with the Ascension and start with a reading called *Blessing The Distance* that was written by Jan Richardson and can be found in her book *Circle Of Grace*.

It is a mystery to me
how as the distance
between us grows,
the larger this blessing
becomes,
as if the shape of it
depends on absence,
as if it finds its form
not by what
it can cling to
but by the space
that arcs
between us.
As this blessing
makes its way,
first it will cease
to measure itself
by time.
Then it will release
how attached it has become
to this place
where we have lived,
where we have learned
to know one another
in proximity and
presence.

Next this blessing
will abandon
the patterns
in which it moved,
the habits that helped it
recognize itself,
the familiar pathways
it traced.
Finally this blessing
will touch its fingers
to your brow,
your eyes,
your mouth;
it will hold
your beloved face
in both its hands,
and then
it will let you go;
it will loose you
into your life;
it will leave
each hindering thing
until all that breathes
between us
is blessing
and all that beats
between us
is grace.

Apple Books:<https://books.apple.com/au/book/circle-of-grace/id1061729849>

The scripture that promoted this poem is from Luke – a small excerpt from that reading: *while he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven* - from Luke 24:51 - the life of the disciples. After all they had shared together - the living, the learning, the dying and rising - those closest to Jesus now came to the realization that he was leaving them. They would no longer have Jesus in person there at their side. Mixed emotions must have swirled in their heads. Letting go, making way for change is never easy.

We know this too. We are in the middle of adjusting, making changes, developing new skills, drawing on reserves to get through each day. And there will be more. Each day we hear of progress in dealing with the COVID 19 pandemic. And each day we hear of more difficulties and challenges faced by those beginning to experience it for the first time.

Across the world the effects of the pandemic are experienced in stages. Yet until we are all in the same place we cannot move on as a global community sharing this same life, this same world. Boundaries and barriers and blockages will remain and be enforced until it is safe to find our way together again. After the struggle, the closures, the isolation, the deaths, the recoveries, we will begin to slowly take steps to find our way in the world. But there will be more infections, more close downs in some places, more eruptions - and we need to be prepared.

That's something of what was happening for the disciples too. Their world was changing, piece by piece, day by day. What they had experienced with Jesus at their side had changed them. Changed their understanding of the world and how they were to live in it. While Jesus was with them there in person, they had someone to depend on, help them feel sure of what they were doing, secure in the faith that it would all work out. He was there and it had all worked out until now.

You'd think that their reaction to Jesus leaving them would be devastation. but instead, they discovered they were ready to make their own way - not without help, but also not as those dependent on another to do it all for them. Now they're equipped, ready for the task: to carry on with the message of the way - because they had been gifted with the Spirit.

Jesus had not abandoned them. In the past they had depended on Jesus being their connection, their intercessor with God. Sure they could pray to God, but Jesus has introduced them to a new way of understanding and being in touch with God and God's ways. No longer seen as a distant untouchable unreachable God, God was now sensed as close, loving, creative, sustaining. Abba!

They were like family and it is the spirit of life who links them with God and with one another. It's an unbreakable bond. From dependents to participants, the disciples had become followers of the way. They were linked with God and with one another by the very spirit of life. A gift. This was no longer a teaching. It was a relationship. A relationship that we can all claim as we too open ourselves to the presence of the Spirit in our lives and in the world.

Relationship! That is the focus of *In This Together*, the theme of National Reconciliation Week 2020. Australia celebrates National Reconciliation Week from the 27th of May to the 3rd of June every year. These dates commemorate two significant milestones in the reconciliation journey. The 1967 referendum acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the High Court Mabo decision respectively. National Reconciliation Week is preceded by National Sorry Day on the 26th of May. In This Together is the theme for National Reconciliation Week 2020 and I refer to some material prepared by Karen Mundine, CEO of Reconciliation Australia.

In This Together, as the theme for this year, calls on Australia's ability to move forward as a nation, reliant on individuals, organisations and communities coming together in the spirit of reconciliation. It is based on the premise that when people come together with mutual respect and understanding, a better future can be shaped for all Australians. Since the early days of the people's movement for reconciliation there has been a growing acknowledgement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights to land and sea. Of the impact of government policies and frontier conflicts accompanied by an embracing of stories of indigenous success and contribution. Over this time we have learned how to reset relationships based on respect. While much has been achieved there is still more work to be done.

History does not tell a good story of relationships between first and second peoples all around the world. Australia is no exception. There has been much hurt, pain and death. Loss of identity, culture and place. There have been some good stories, but they were often personal, local and not in a sense, official. As one to one, people knew each other and cared for one another as human beings together.

We can't change history but we can learn from it. The whole world has to learn this lesson and so does Australia. So do we. Slowly we have begun to make change. Over the years we have looked to legislation to make changes to try to right wrongs of the past and this is important! We have committed to covenant and this is important. But any amount of legislation and decoration of a covenant mean nothing if there is no relationship.

Just as the learning, leaning disciples became empowered apostles declaring the way, we need to give up our leaning ways and claim the power we have to make change - not because we have a law or a decoration to wave, but because we have a relationship to nurture. A relationship with one another between second and first peoples together.

So it's no surprise that In This Together is the theme of National Reconciliation Week 2020 and it is based on us being in relationship. And, like all with whom we're in relationship, recognition, respect and love needs to be its foundation as we seek to nurture for life - in all its fullness for and between us. This is the very purpose of life. The very purpose of living the way. This is love.

What follows are some stories from people committing themselves to nurturing relationships and helping others find their way too.

In This Together has deep resonance as Australians both on the coast and inland deal with a barrage of challenges, which have included droughts, bush fires, floods, a global pandemic and economic instability. Just as Australia's ability to survive and move forward as a nation relies on all of us – individuals, Organizations and communities - so too do we need to come together in the spirit of reconciliation.

Frontier Services spoke to some of its members about the meaning of In This Together. While they have different life experiences, their approach to reconciliation and their suggestions on how we can start our own journeys of tolerance and understanding are remarkably similar. Benjamin Quillian is Frontier Services bush chaplain in its Centralian Remote Area. His region includes Alice Springs and surrounds, as well as the APY lands – Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara - which is home to around 2,300 First Nation people. The APY lands is large, sparsely populated and located in the remote northwest of South Australia. The people speak the Pitjantjatjara language, making English a second or third language for many.

According to a report tabled with the South Australian Government in September last year, the APY lands are home to some of the highest levels of intergenerational disadvantage in Australia. Benjamin has lived in Alice Springs for four and a half years and been bush chaplain for three. When you speak with Benjamin about what In This Together means for him and his community, the overwhelming message is about confronting hidden biases and learning the facts.

There are still a lot of cultural and language barriers in this area as well as many inequalities he says. Even so there are many things to be learned from our First Nations people. It begins with sitting down and listening to them. Learning about their culture their language and their beliefs. It's all about getting to know them. I provide advocacy whenever in individual or their entire community has a need. One of the things I'm most proud of, he says, is that together we were able to attain a mobile dialysis unit for people in the APY lands.

Dianne Torrens is a Widjabal woman and Githabul woman of the Bundjalung Nation from the Northern Rivers. She's a member of the Board of Frontier Services, Chairperson of the New South Wales Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and one of the elders at her local church. Under the heading of Reconciliation - Seeing the Progress, Aunty Di is heartened by all the positive changes she has witnessed along our country's reconciliation journey. Here's what she has to say: *my grandchildren have many more choices, friends and options than I did when I was their age. That's what I call reconciliation in action. Their friends come from a variety of cultures so they can all learn from each other. I never want to see the things I went through. Ever! It's lovely to see there is less prejudice and more inclusion. It really brings joy to my heart.*

Aunty Di also talks about her work with the New South Wales Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. She's often asked to visit churches to speak about National Reconciliation Week and other issues. It is at these gatherings that Aunty Di will sometimes see people who hesitate to speak with her. *Sometimes it's not easy for people to accept me when I visit their church. For some, it can take longer than others to reach out, she says. I need to show them respect. They may not be sure how to reach out to me, but I just need to give them some time. hopefully that's the start of us breaking down barriers.*

Aunty Di believes in In This Together and the pathway for reconciliation requires truth, justice, forgiveness - and simply sitting down together to share a conversation over a cuppa. It is being open with each other, saying hello and focusing on our similarities rather than our differences. This year the Reconciliation Week theme highlights the need for all of us to come together to create a better Australia for everyone.

We've been invited, in the coming weeks, to watch out for more stories on reconciliation on Uniting's website and Facebook page.