

# Love one another.....

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 31 October, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin, Marjan McKeough, Helen Boerma

Pentecost 23B

Contemporary Reading: *Blessed Are you Who Bear the Light*  
by Jan Richardson; Mark 12: 28-34

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

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DIVINE HUGS IN ALL THAT WE ARE

Josephine Inkpin

*'The Body doesn't lie'*, they say. Well, certainly it can powerfully reveal and prompt us to the truth. Years ago, for example, I remember a yoga teacher asking me to curl up into the foetal position and give myself a hug, expressing my love for myself. But I simply couldn't manage it. I took up position, but my arms just wouldn't do it. Even when I actively exercised my mind to give myself the appearance of a hug, my body would not obey.

For you cannot simply command love. It has to be received, acknowledged, and embodied. Or, to put it another way, love has to be breathed in and breathed out. All of this takes us to the heart of Jesus' teaching about the commandments, and to the core of the Biblical tradition...

Both sides of the commandment are vital. It is easy to focus on the second half, and that is certainly important. Indeed, I once had a supervisor, an Augustinian priest, who used to say to me: *'the problem with people like you and I is that, there are more than seven billion people in the world, and we, as Christians, have been taught to love them all, except one – ourselves.'*

That is bad Christian teaching of course, which lops off the words *'as yourself'* from *'love you neighbour'*. Without fully loving ourselves, as we are, our love for our neighbour is also limited. Indeed, such love can become suffocating, angry, even violent, as some of us know from relationships where others who seek to love us actually hurt us, for they do not really love themselves.

Sadly, we see that so often in some religious people, where others are hurt because of the so-called 'love' of those who have yet to love themselves. For, in my view, for example, in churches, the body dysphoria of transgender people should be no real problem. It is wonderfully transformed, even into gender *euphoria*, by loving affirmation and action. Yet the wider Church, the so-called Body of Christ, often fails to see the widespread dysmorphia it carries. Many Christians, as individuals, and as a Body together, would therefore do well to learn how they/we are loved, just as they/we are, and hug them/ourselves – and all of the body, of the world, accordingly.

This brings us back to the first half of the central twin commandment to love. For what held me back, years ago, from hugging myself were the thoughts and feelings that something in me, a vital part of me - my gender identity - could not be loved, and could not be offered in love. It had to be hidden.

That is the devastating cruelty of spiritually-based transphobia. Even when it is not embodied in other '*conversion therapy*', or orientation change, practices, it is a life-denying, breath-taking lie – sometimes literally. That is so not the Gospel of Jesus! For, shout it from the rooftops everyone – especially any of us who have ever believed that our bodies are in some way unacceptable, unlovable: whether because of our gender, our sexuality, our shape, our abilities.

God, says Jesus, in his teaching on the great commandment – the God of inexhaustible love, wants all of us, just as we are: gender diverse, sexually diverse, bodily diverse, ability diverse, any way we are honestly diverse – and, yes, carrying the remaining shame, and struggle we've taken on, or created for ourselves. God loves us, better than we can ever love ourselves. In this is life, and breath, and the power to hug (ourselves and others). For this is true, pentecostal, life, and breath, and love.

This is a vibrant pathway forward for us all. For it begins, as any good yoga teacher does, with teaching us to breathe properly, by inhaling the life and love of God. I often used to find both parts of that great commandment challenging, as well as beguiling. It can still be, if we see it as an instruction, from outside, rather than an invitation, to the inside: as an invitation to breathe in the love of God, which first breathed us into life - just as we are; and which continues to breathe, through us, infinite compassion, infinite hospitality, and infinite hope in the glorious diversity of creation. Amen.



## VOLUNTEERING

Marjan McKeough

When I was asked if I wanted to share my experiences of volunteer work with my church community, my first reaction was that I really did not have anything new or exciting to say to a community where a lot of members have no doubt been volunteering for many years. But I believe strongly in sharing one's life story, including stories which are not world-shattering or remarkable; and how even those small stories can move and inspire others, so I took a deep breath and said yes.

I will start at the beginning with the fact that I was blessed with a mother who volunteered all her life till the age of 88 when she reluctantly had to give it up. I observed her volunteering in many different roles and organisations - such as prisons, where she visited a particular prisoner for years, aged care work, teaching Dutch to migrants and numerous other roles. She never made a big deal of it and took it for granted that if you were able to give of your time and energy, why would you not?

Growing up with her example also made it, for me, something that is a part of my everyday life. One of my first volunteer jobs was working with students with severe disabilities, at a local school for special education as a volunteer. And where I later became a teacher's aide. I absolutely loved working with the students and staff and have many memories of great joy when for example one of our students at the age of 10 took his first steps – the whole school celebrated.

Because I strongly believe in a diverse and integrated society, my children came along numerous times to the school and were able to meet and play with some of the students.

Teaching English and about everyday life in Australia to non-English speaking women in their homes was also very enjoyable and enabled me to bring my toddler daughter along and for her to play with the children of the women I spoke English with.

Reading with my children and grandchildren's classmates is something I have done for many years at numerous different schools – always such fun and who knows, I might even be doing this with my great grandchildren.

The volunteer work I do at present inspires me for many different reasons - and I love doing it every week. It covers issues around environmental action through food security and sustainability, financial insecurity, education and community.

It was started by Ronni Kahn, who wanted to do something useful after she retired, and noticed that a lot of good food was going to waste when she ran her event management business. Ronni built up OzHarvest from 2004 in Sydney and it is now in every Australian capital city and many regional towns, as well as being an international organisation.

It feeds thousands of people every day with food that, in the past, finished up on the tip and contributed to damaging our environment. With my volunteer colleagues and manager, we connect with about 300 people a day at the OzHarvest Waterloo markets, and these numbers have greatly increased since Covid started last year.

Unfortunately, because of Covid, we can only give out hampers of food - and at the moment can't chat and connect with our customers. But hopefully, from next year, we will go back to the way we usually work – bonding with people through conversations, smiles and giving them choices of fresh produce and staples.

Working together with community members and big organisations such as Woolworths as well as many charities to rescue good food and recycle plastics and green waste is very inspirational as well. OzHarvest is a great organisation which encourages creative input and ideas from everyone, and supports both customers as well as volunteers and staff.

In non-lockdown days volunteers visit schools to teach students how to use fresh produce sustainably and others teach people with disabilities to cook. Many new services are planned for the future.

What has motivated me over the years has been giving and sharing, particularly with those who, because of circumstances beyond their control, have a lack of finances, education, time or opportunity. When you have sufficient of all of those because of where you were born, I have always believed that sharing with my neighbours is the right and Christian thing to do. Wasn't Jesus a volunteer for a large part of his life?

All my volunteer work has given me more than I have contributed, and I plan to keep doing this for at least as long as my mother inspired me to do.

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## LOVE IN THE PANDEMIC

Helen Boerma

Michael Leunig wrote: *“Love one another and you will be happy. It's as simple and as difficult as that.”*

But here is our challenge. We are left to figure out how to apply this one simple rule in an infinite number of circumstances. And sometimes when faced with unfamiliar circumstances, we struggle to know what is the best or most helpful thing to do.

Currently we all witness the effects of a pandemic and lockdown. What happens when a whole range of community structures are removed for a while? When we lose the opportunities to go to places where we connect with one another, with the arts or a sport, or an interest or with nature? We have been without our village.

I work as a school counsellor in some primary schools in Western Sydney. I share with you what I have seen in these communities. Others in our church community also work in schools. All of us helped children adjust to learning from home, and now we are helping them transition to being at school again.

Covid-19 has interrupted classroom learning for students across the world. It will be some time before we know the full impact on learning, but early indications from global studies suggest that it will be students from disadvantaged backgrounds who suffer disproportionately.

Last year, a large survey of teachers and school leaders in Australia and New Zealand found that most believed students would need extra help with their learning once back to school. However, their greatest concerns were about social isolation and the impact on student wellbeing.

One response to these concerns where I work was for the principal and me to host some zoom sessions for parents, to help maintain connection with the community. We called one session, *“Parenting in a Pandemic”* and a later session, *“Returning to school after lockdown- What will they need from us?”*

Parents responded favourably. They seemed to appreciate a chance to share their experiences and concerns. The principal acknowledged the demands upon them. We affirmed that we are community. We are not alone. We don't have to present ourselves as doing well. We are all simply doing our best. He urged parents to adjust their expectations of themselves and their children, and to care for themselves to enable them to continue caring well for their children.

Here are some of the things we heard from parents:

- a) Unequal burden. We heard it's been harder for some folks than for others. E.g. for people who lost their livelihoods; for those with physical or mental health issues; for those caring for others with high needs, for households with only one adult; for those in small apartments with no outside space and of course, harder for people in those areas deemed LGAs of concern, where they had tighter restrictions.

There is a poem recently circulating in social media. The author is unknown. This is a bit of it:

I heard that we are in the same boat.  
But it's not like that.  
We are in the same storm,  
but not in the same boat.  
.....each one will emerge, in his or her own way,  
from that storm.

- b) Families missed things that keep them healthy. Like: sport, extracurricular activities, visits with family and friends, being part of a school community, places of worship, theatre, enjoyment of the arts, trips to connect with nature....
- c) Unprecedented demands of parenthood. It's often said that it takes a village to raise a child. E.g. People have become aware of the importance of schools, in providing community, structure. It can be hard providing education to children at home, on top of the other demands on people. One parent asked: *What can I do? I try to focus my attention on helping my youngest with her work. Then the older two start arguing and fighting with one another.*"
- d) Pressure on family relationships. Spending so much time together with extra demands and fewer outlets can bring tensions into relationships between parents and children, between siblings, between parents. One mother said: *"I get tired and irritable. It's hard being cooped up together all day.*
- e) At the same time, many people seemed able to hold onto positivity. E.g. some would say that during the lockdown, there were times when they valued the opportunities for more time together. Parents reported some good things like: *gratitude for what they had, compared with others-e.g. a safe place to call home, enough food, good health, having each other.*

Upon returning to school, we anticipated and have seen children express a whole tangle of emotions:

1. Many are glad to be back at school again. Excited to see their friends, teachers. The teachers greeted everyone coming back, with an archway of balloons over the school gateway, and welcome back banners. Some kids were glad to be back because they had struggled with home learning. As one 10 year old put it, *"Home learning sucks."* He told me that his mum had been at home, doing work on the phone, but her the demands of job meant she was generally unavailable to her kids. Others kids also felt relieved. School gives them space away from adult concerns at home. Glad to have a place of their own in the world again.
2. For some, home learning = an opportunity. Some kids have said things like,  
*"Mum or dad were always there to help me."  
"I could work as fast or slow as I liked, until I got my work finished."  
"I could take a break or get something to eat, whenever I wanted to."  
"If I got my work finished by lunch time, I could play for the rest of the day."*

These children are now transitioning back to school, where they are adjusting to work within school time-frames, and to share the adult attention with their peers.

3. After a period of relative isolation, some kids found returning to school and all the interactions to be unfamiliar and over-stimulating.

One 9 year old explained: *“I get overexcited with everything going on. When my teacher sees me starting to rev up, he tells me to go and get a drink of water. I also take some deep breaths.”*

4. Some children have worried feelings. Some are sensitive to the world being more uncertain. Life doesn't seem as predictable. Some felt apprehensive at the prospect of separating from their parents, reconnecting with school routines, with school learning or about their relationships with their peers. Some have disrupted sleep.
5. Some experience sadness, because of things they have missed, special experiences that they had looked forward to, e.g. milestone experiences of Year 6, or a large part of their Kindergarten year. Some are touched by losses or stresses affecting their families.

Sir Ken Robinson said the aims of education are to understand the world around us and the world within us.

I have the privilege of working with teachers who are committed to listening. I am deeply impressed when I see teachers who juggle many demands on them, and wonder at how they remain calm in the face of children's strong emotions. They are supporting children to untangle their feelings, to regain their sense of belonging back at school.

We are interested in what makes life go well, how people flourish and function at their best. We have seen clearly that one important foundation for well-being (for children and for all of us) is to find a place in the world, to enjoy a connection with others.

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