

Whom Shall I Send ?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 29 October 2023

A Reflection by Pastor Susan Russell

Pentecost 22A

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12; Matthew 22: 34-46

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

Greetings in the name of the Lord. What a joy to be here with you today.

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"
And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah 6:8*

I brought my very battered Presbyterian hymn book to remind me of my faith beginnings. In 1990, I lost all my belongings in a flood. But the next day this hymn book turned up in a pile of mud, wedged up against my letter box.

Still in pencil in the back, from 1966, is my name and number - and a note from the Sunday School Superintendent to "ring Susan to play the piano - if there is no one else".

I have always had that feeling of *not being good enough*.

Not the real pianist, not the real mother, not the real Minister's wife and not the Pastor myself. That people always have expectations that are so high, and I cannot meet them. Recently at a retreat I shared a reflection on "being real" through my life and faith journey.

I shared my commitment to be my real self! To show up! To do my best, and to believe that I am. But ...

Through many traumatic, but faith filled, life experiences I have come to know that God's hold on my life is not second best. And it is stronger than my own reservations, though living with anxiety, and many self-incriminating imperfections. Good enough for all who God calls me to be.

For me, in answering the *who shall I send* call, it has to be part of being real and realising the value of the original, warts and all. Not a forgery or a copy.

I want to be true to who God forged me to be.

In my Ministry of Pastor role in Uniting, through my formation with Hats for Homeless, as a member of Mustard Seed Uniting Church and in my role as Deputy Chair of the Pastoral Relations Committee of Sydney Presbytery, my commitment is:

To show up,

To do my best, and mostly:

To create a place where we care for each other; pray for each other, encourage each other, hold each other accountable and tell the truth.

We are then able to approach our work with God's blessing in a place of confidence to provide the love, care and compassion we know people are longing for.

This is my 50 years of working full time as a teacher, teacher of deaf and in special education, a literacy teacher a TAFE College Manager, an Executive Director of a private hospital and aged care and now as Chaplaincy Convenor for Uniting Mission in Sydney Central Region.

In my spare time I am an official visitor in Corrective Services ensuring the rights and care of Aboriginal inmates is managed and all inmates are heard.

If there is no one else, send me. I'll do my best.

Slide 3 Who am I?

I'd like to share Martha's Story with you now as it is entwined in my story.

When my paternal grandmother died in 1976 my cousin and I found a sealed letter inside the family bible to be opened upon her death.

The letter told the story of her own mother Martha Louisa Burton who had died in 1941 - with a secret. She had been told that Martha was the not the biological daughter of her mother, Louisa Burton, but of her father's mistress, an Aboriginal woman who lived on a camp on the river of my great grandfather's property in Dunkeld on the Orange Road. near Bathurst.

This is Wiradjuri country and Martha was taken by George Burton for safe keeping when government officials rounded up what were called 'half caste' children from their mothers. Martha's birth mother, whose name I do not know, had died and was being cared for by Elders.

George had sent to Scotland for a young bride, Louisa McIntyre, who arrived in Australia aged 18 to marry George, and to raise Martha then aged 3 as her own child and go on to have 11 children to George.

Martha belongs to the stolen generation, as she was raised white with no knowledge until her own mother Louisa told her on her death bed. Martha's birth certificate was forged, showing George and Louisa as her parents and making her 3 years younger than she really was.

Martha knew nothing of her heritage! Her language, her stories, her kinship.

My grandmother, my father, and myself were denied our Aboriginal heritage because of the shame each generation felt of the truth of Martha's birth.

In each of my areas of work I have worked with Aboriginal children, adults and especially inmates in Corrections. They called me Aunt. They ask me who is my mob. They accept me as part of their mob without any DNA or Lands council certification.

But whilst I treasure this acceptance I am left with a feeling of unease and un-belonging.

Who am I? Not really Wiradjuri, as I didn't grow up in their culture and I carry the family deep rooted prejudice and shame.

Is it ok to tell this story? Am I allowed? It is Martha's it is mine and now I share it for those who want to listen, to learn the impact the practice of children being removed and raised white has on their descendants.

But I know to whom I belong, accepted, beloved and forgiven and I know whom to follow and obey.

Today's reading from Matthew, the great commandment undergirds my acceptance of who I am and encourages me to not doubt my abilities and gifts for I am here to follow these two powerful commandments

Slide 4 the great commandment!

34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Matthew 22: 36-39

In 2019, I co-founded a charity to support those sleeping rough on Sydney streets. My mother had a stash of unused wool, and I began looming beanies. And so began Hats for Homeless. The first year we made 350 beanies. Now with 800 Facebook group members our total in 5 years is 13,500 beanies across Sydney, NSW and the ACT spreading the warmth of beanies, blankets, mittens and scarves.

Love your neighbour as yourself? How? When? Why?

At a street kitchen at Wollongong railway station, on a freezing night I was handing out beanies to a growing queue. I offered a selection of beanies to a frail Aboriginal man. He looked up at my beanie, one I had made that morning in Indigenous colours.

And he said: *I want that one!* Truly, I only hesitated for the time to think: *I really like this beanie.* Then I took it from my head and asked if I could place it on his. *Yes!* he said. And then, the moment I love my neighbour as myself, he said: *I can feel the warmth of your head on mine.* Why, how and when? Answered then and there, so simply, so profoundly.

As well as the commission of Isaiah as one that steers us to answer the call, I have come to accept the following passage from Micah as my personal mantra to keep me centred and not listen to the voices of doubt and imperfection in my calling, to follow to serve and to love.

Slide 5 to act justly to love mercy. Micah 6

He has showed you, O woman, what is good. And what does your God the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God

Jesus said that the greatest among us must be the servant of all (Mark 10:43-45). Serving others is a way of following Jesus' example and showing His love to the world. It also helps you develop a humble attitude and a generous heart, as you put others' needs before your own.

Slide 6 to walk humbly with your God.

To walk humbly with God is a way of living that reflects God's character and will. It means acknowledging that God is the source of all wisdom, power, and love, and that we depend on Him for everything. It also means being grateful for His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, and showing the same to others.

For me walking humbly with God is not something that I could achieve on my own. I need God's grace and help every day.

To be an advocate, a voice against injustice, to have the confidence to lead a team of 25 Chaplains and Pastoral carers, to conduct funerals, weddings, to be at the bedside of a dying person and to follow God's calling to a role as a Commissioned Pastor in the Uniting Church.

In response to the great commission, the two powerful commandments in Matthew and in following Micah's call of what is required of me, it's finally not just *if there is no one else?*

*Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord,
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.*

Amen