



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 21st January, 2024

"Listening, hearing, responding..."

A reflection as part of the 'National Day of Mourning', held each year on the Sunday before January 26th by the Uniting Church in Australia and Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. It listens and responds to the Reading of Grace by Alison Overeem, a proud Palawa woman from the 'Leprena' community in Lutrawita/Tasmania

1 John 4:7-13, 21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from GOD; everyone who loves is born of GOD and knows GOD. Whoever does not love does not know GOD, for GOD is love. GOD's love was revealed among us in this way: GOD sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved GOD but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since GOD loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen GOD; if we love one another, GOD abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

The commandment we have from him is this: those who love GOD must love their brothers and sisters also.

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Contemporary Reading of Grace: *"Truth-telling and Invitation"* (Alison Overeem)

-reminding us that grace is complicated!

Interwoven in the threads of mourning of the past, present and future; the cries of stolen lands at the coloniser's hands.

Mother Earth weeping in mourning: dispossession, forced removals and broken promises abounded.

Taken from the compass of land and lore, declared unfounded.

We mourn for our people; we mourn for our loss and grief too.

We mourn for the cries echoing from the land, sea and sky, Creator Spirit we hear you.

A day of mourning is to hear those cries of the weeping land and First Peoples of this Land.

It's to hear the stories of our ancestors and elders in the now. It's to hear and feel the cries with us as First Peoples. It's to know the resilience of our people and in the mourning of loss, to immerse in and engage with, the healing.

The celebration of not just a culture that's survived but thrived; within all the cries we see the hope.

The gift that First Peoples culture, history, struggle and resilience is to the wider church, in all its fullness, richness, and truth-telling.

Mourn with us in the loss, but walk beside us in the celebration and gift of healing the loss through honouring our stories, our song lines, our "being and knowing".

Mourn with us. Hear the cries. But hear the justice and healing.

*"Mourn with us, Hear the cries. But hear the justice and healing"*

There's the invitation. Offered us in Alison's words:

*"Mourn with us, Hear the cries. But hear the justice and healing".*

Hearing can be hard work. Grace is complicated and demanding.

Alison's invitation recognizes that. In the story she tells, hearing involves mourning – grieving.

It involves not simply reading the words, but entering into the stories of the storytellers: believing them, honouring them, and recognizing that their truth is not simply 'theirs', but ours too.

For me today, part of hearing is silence. So I don't want to say very much at all, because that feels like I'd be talking over the top of the voices I want to hear.

That's part of the challenge in doing what we're doing in worship today, together with other people of faith and goodwill all around the Uniting Church in Australia: the challenge of letting indigenous voices speak for themselves, even when it's in ways and with stories that I find strange and uncomfortable.

Another challenge that some of us might feel as we do this is the sense that we're being reminded over and over again of terrible things, and being asked to say sorry repeatedly, for things we personally didn't do. There's some truth in that, and it's confronting.

But I think back to Cathryn and I trying to instill in our young children that saying sorry isn't the whole story. "*What does sorry mean?*" "*It means, don't do it again*". It was, we hoped, a way of avoiding the idea that you could just shout "*sorry*" as you ran off up the hall, and that would fix everything – no need for any sort of change in behaviour or relationship. "Sorry" wasn't only about what had just happened, but about what could happen in the future.

As I see it, our nation has said sorry from time to time to our Indigenous sisters and brothers, but it's not really changed anything. My sense is that, as a nation, we're still trying to shout an apology over our shoulder, and keep walking up the hall. Many of the things for which there has been apology, are still happening.

That's obviously not true for all Australians, and there are many people of good will working for real change. But the politicization we saw in the recent referendum suggests to me that we've a long way to go as a country.

So, how do we hear? What do we hear, when we listen? And what might we do about it, as followers of Jesus' way in Australia?

It might seem overwhelming, and we can't 'fix' everything. But, there we stand in good company! Jesus couldn't fix everything either. And what's more, he didn't try. He started where he was, and did what he could. He listened. And he heard. Maybe our discipline is to keep listening, or listen afresh.

It's often hard to listen, and to hear, when we don't seem to be directly impacted by the stories. But then again, the stories about Trump and the Iowa caucus have no immediate bearing on my life, and I listen to them easily enough...

I said I didn't want to talk over other voices. I hope I haven't. But so that my words aren't the last we hear, please listen with me again to the last part of Alison's invitation, inviting us into a deep, complex, faithful conversation of grace.

*The celebration of not just a culture that's survived but thrived; within all the cries we see the hope.*

*The gift that First Peoples culture, history, struggle and resilience is to the wider church, in all its fullness, richness, and truth-telling.*

*Mourn with us in the loss, but walk beside us in the celebration and gift of healing the loss through honouring our stories, our song lines, our "being and knowing".*

*Mourn with us, Hear the cries. But hear the justice and healing.*

**Grow 4 your life!**  
Listen. Remember. Share. Act.