

Reflection on the second Sunday after Pentecost

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Bible reading (read this first): Matthew 9:35 – 10:23

I have recently been reading a book by the Reverend Walter Wangerin, an American pastor and author, about marriage. I had seen it cited in a commentary, and I thought it might be worth a read. With Robyn and I making preparations for being married, *hopefully* before the end of the year, I wanted to be able to reflect on my own baggage and personality and blind-spots as part of us building some good foundations together. And it's been good. It's a 1990 edition book, and I'd frame some of the gender references a bit differently, but overall it's prompted good reflection.

In this last week, though, I found one side-story on the book to be pretty emotionally intense, very pertinent to current events, and a reflection of Jesus' words to his disciples where he says,

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves;
so be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves..."
and 'trust the Holy Spirit to speak through you.'

Wangerin starts the chapter like this:

"For years I've supervised the annual tours of the choir of our congregation: forty people in a speeding bus, forty good voices from a small parish in inner-city Evansville, Indiana, children and adults together – a ranging family. Except for the salting of a few white Wangerins, we were altogether black in the early days, and we were *all* together faithful. We perceived it our ministry to breach the racial barriers within the broader Christian church, and we accomplished that ministry by singing in the deep South, by singing in white congregations, and by accepting the hospitality of white families who offered us their homes, their food, and their beds. For many of these families we were the first blacks to sleep beneath their roofs."

He goes on to talk about one particular trip, on which he wept.

They were booked to sing their 75 minute program at a particular church in Dallas. As they toured, and got closer to that church, several people commented "You're going to sing *there*?" "Do you *know* the minister there?" "Has he *seen* you, your choir?" To which his reply was that it had just been a really short contact, one of those right opportunities, fitting in with the church's schedule, and it had been arranged without a lot of discussion.

He became more and more nervous as they approached.

When they arrived, that minister did not speak to him. They were informed, though, that there were 'other things happening', so the choir could have a maximum of 20 minutes,

and Walter could not speak. It became clear that the choir's performance hadn't been advertised and was an embarrassment, barely to be tolerated. And the choir were told they could only sit on the balcony, like it was the back of the bus. Walter ended up being furious, and in a quiet room turned his fury to the preparation of a powerful, corrective speech for during their performance.

And then, one of the members of the choir came in to him in tears – while they had been rehearsing, the church's minister had come in only to tell someone off for touching the altar.

The choir was shattered.

Walter wept.

His wife simply hugged him (which was why this was recounted in the marriage book). And then he knew why God had called them to sing there.

They had to show that congregation *love*. They had to teach that congregation the love of Jesus. They had to sing, and *be* that love. With some brief, interwoven words from Walter they had to centre all of their singing, on God's love for the world, God's *love* for these people.

And they did. Deeply, respectfully, beautifully. They didn't clap or sway or do anything 'disturbing', but gently, earnestly and innocently they sang God's love. And transformation happened.

And by the end, the congregation – with tears, and with clapping - fell in step with the choir as they sang the way out, and hugged, and loved; the congregation followed them to their rooms where, to quote again, "they wept and hugged black shoulders and begged us to understand, to believe, "how much we needed you"."

This story illustrates the depths of prejudice; it confirms Meyne Wyatt's speech on Q&A about the standard required when you're not the privileged; it also illustrates what it means to be as wise and serpents and innocent as doves – eyes open, but with a simple message of love – and what it is to trust the Holy Spirit and proclaim the gospel of Jesus in the love of God.

With current events in the world, this is not a story from which to move quickly on.

In the gospel today, Jesus has compassion for the community; and he sends out his disciples to proclaim God's love in word and deed.

We are still being cautious in this covid-19 environment. In some ways, it's all we can do to go out in ones and twos to visit others. High Street Uniting Church has a vision of strengthening community by the Holy Spirit, embracing all people with Christ's compassion, and connecting younger generations with God's love. In some ways I'd like that vision statement to say more about *why* we seek to build community, and reflect more clearly

that our embrace is compassionate but not condescending – that might be a discussion another time – but regardless, at the moment there is relatively little we can do *as a whole group* together, and we're committed to making sure that we take the most vulnerable into account in any decisions we make towards physically opening up. And that may mean that we focus on getting outreach work going *before* we are able to get worship in the church building going. But if that's what we need to do to proclaim God's love in word and deed, that's what we'll do.

And in the meantime, we pray and listen for God's word together, even like this. Because the message in the gospel is not just for us as a collective, but for us as individuals. Jesus sent named individuals out on mission. So we can pray that in the interactions that any one of us are led to with another person, that each one of us will be ready to reflect God's love for the world, in us.

As we talked about last week, we are commissioned by God to be people of reconciliation, people of hope; people through whom God's love flows. May you find surprise blessings when you are listening for the Holy Spirit's lead, and sharing with others with grace and love.

To the glory of God.