

THE COLOUR ORANGE

Romans 3: 21-26; Mark 1: 1-15

Today is Presbyterians Sharing Sunday. Presbyterians in Canada share in mission and ministry work here in Canada and throughout the world. We are one of 935 congregations across the country contributing to Presbyterians Sharing. This year, we guaranteed \$29,500 through our envelopes toward the overall budget of Presbyterians Sharing which is \$8.7 Million.

One of the primary mandates of the Presbyterian church right now is financial support for collaborative work with indigenous people as part of our ongoing healing and reconciliation journey with them. The Presbyterian Church in Canada, along with other denominations and in partnership with the government of Canada, ran a number of residential schools across Canada till fairly recently in our history. The Presbyterian Church ran two of them. By now, we have all heard stories of indigenous survivors of these residential schools, and also stories of many who died in our residential schools like Chanie Wenjack who went to one of our Presbyterian run schools. His story and tragic death were made famous recently by Gord Downie of the Tragically Hip.

Maybe some of us are sick and tired of hearing such stories because they make us feel bad. The burden of responsibility is difficult to bear, especially when it feels like there is no positive way out. How do we move forward in a way that is positive, but positive without white washing or downplaying the negative experiences of victims and survivors who have to live with the trauma for the rest of their lives?

Well, today, September 30, also happens to be designated “Orange Shirt Day.” The intent of this day is to help promote healing and reconciliation between Canadians and Indigenous peoples. But to promote healing and reconciliation in a genuine way, we need to listen to the stories. What’s the story behind Orange Shirt Day? It’s a story told by a survivor named Phyllis Webstad.

“I went to the Mission for one school year in 1973/1974. I had just turned 6 years old. I lived with my grandmother on the Dog Creek reserve. We never had very much money, but somehow my granny managed to buy me a new outfit to go to the Mission school. I remember going to Robinson’s store and picking out a shiny orange shirt. It had string laced up in front, and was so bright and exciting – just like I felt to be going to school!

When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! I never wore it again. I didn’t understand why they wouldn’t give it back to

me, it was mine! The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying and no one cared.

I was 13.8 years old and in grade 8 when my son Jeremy was born. Because my grandmother and mother both attended residential school for 10 years each, I never knew what a parent was supposed to be like. With the help of my aunt, Agness Jack, I was able to raise my son and have him know me as his mother.

I went to a treatment centre for healing when I was 27 and have been on this healing journey since then. I finally get it, that the feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years. Even now, when I know nothing could be further than the truth, I still sometimes feel that I don't matter. Even with all the work I've done!

I am honored to be able to tell my story so that others may benefit and understand, and maybe other survivors will feel comfortable enough to share their stories."

Today, Phyllis is an activist and organizer promoting healing and reconciliation. She is a wife, mother and grandmother, and a post secondary graduate with several degrees. While we can rejoice that she has found positive ways to redeem her terrible experiences growing up, her story confronts us as Canadians with our own complicity in her pain. So, how does her story make us feel – sad, mad, ashamed? How do we face injustice when we are being accused of it, whether we intended it or not, whether we were ignorant of what was happening or not? How do we take on responsibility and claim accountability in a way that leads to change that is positive for us and for the victims of the injustice?

Let us delve into our scripture readings for a way through. And let's begin with our gospel reading. It begins by telling us that it's all about the "good news of Jesus Christ." That's what gospel means: good news. But then it starts with John the Baptist preaching. And what does John preach: Repent, for the forgiveness of your sins. What feelings are evoked in you when you hear the word: "repent"? Do you get defensive: "Why do I need to repent? What have I done wrong?" Does the word repent evoke fear in you, especially if there's something about which you may feel responsible or liable?

The "me too" movement is a great example in our popular culture of how people react in fear. What's the fear about? There is fear of being shamed and blamed publicly. There is fear of losing a job, of being legally liable which also means financially liable. People get defensive unless they're caught, and once they're caught, the apology that comes is like a last ditch attempt at avoiding heavy liability. There's defensiveness, there's fear and there's shame. When we're ashamed, we're so focussed on the shame, we can't see past it to how

we can engage what we have done in a constructive way. How do we bring about positive change in ourselves and our relationships with those making an accusation against us. Repentance cannot be sincere and heartfelt when there is defensiveness, fear and shame in the way.

Unfortunately, the church has often been accused of using repentance in the very same way as our popular culture – evoking defensiveness, fear and shame in people. Is it any wonder that so many want nothing to do with the church? Using fear and shame to get people on their knees may be effective. But it can never generate heart-felt repentance. To get heart-felt repentance that is sincere, we have to change the way we hear and think about the word “repentance.” How do we do that?

Well, John also points to one who will come after him, one who will baptize not just with the water of repentance, but with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not just about outward change. Much more so, the Holy Spirit is about inner transformation. You can repent all you want and make a show of it on the outside. But unless there is inner change that goes with it, it means little. The Holy Spirit is about inner change.

And once Jesus comes onto the scene, what does he preach? “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The good news is that God’s kingdom of the fellowship of love is here. You get love first and then you are called to repent. Repentance is not a threat. Repentance is not about: do it, or else! No. Repentance comes from the heart because you have experienced love even when you haven’t deserved or earned such love.

Love rather than fear is the way to get people to change from the heart. Jesus’ message is different than John’s. John starts with a call to repentance, and only when you get repentance do you get forgiveness. And there is truth to this. What does forgiveness mean if there is no repentance? But demanding repentance first can throw us into defensiveness and generate fear which then blocks repentance from the heart. If we offer a hand to someone first, though, the chance of heart-felt repentance is greater because the fear of a bad outcome is gone. When we are loved we more easily trust the journey and the hope of healing and reconciliation. It’s like parental love at its best. We sometimes use threats as parents. But we also know that the best results for changed behaviour in our children is when they know they’re loved and they trust repentance as positive change.

And this important distinction between the message of John and the message of Jesus is what Paul is writing about in his letter to the Christians of Rome. First he talks about the righteousness of God based on the law. The law is the 10 commandments and the 613 other commandments in the Older Testament that regulate right behaviour for faithful people. It’s ultimately about loving God and your neighbour. But what happens when you fail as you

invariably will? What happens when for all our better intentions of trying to love indigenous people by civilizing the savage out of them we have wounded them profoundly with our twisted thinking leading to twisted behaviour?

Paul refers to another kind of righteousness, a righteousness that trusts not in religious law but in the kind of love Christ has revealed and embodied. Paul writes: “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.” In other words, as Jesus was dying on the cross he spoke words of forgiveness, forgiveness for those who had abandoned him and forgiveness even for his enemies. According to Paul, God accepts this sacrifice of Jesus as God’s own action, as a gift given to any of us whenever we personalize this action of Jesus on the cross as God’s action for us. I am forgiven because I am loved, even before I have come face to face with how I have wounded God by wounding my neighbour. I am loved and forgiven. Do I believe this? If I do, how does it change me?

Jesus welcomed people into his kingdom fellowship no matter what they had done, and out of his gracious, undeserved and unearned love, he empowered them to repent and rise higher in their love of God and neighbour. That’s how real heart-felt change happens and that’s how genuine healing and reconciliation can happen. We experience love and then we are energized to reach out in repentance to those we have wounded. We are also energized to reach out with a hand of forgiveness to those who have wounded us. Love opens doors and builds bridges. Fear and bitterness shut us down and cut us off.

And such healing and reconciling love is exactly what our indigenous brothers and sisters are offering to us. That’s what Orange Shirt day is about – an opportunity to reflect and to repent within a larger relationship of healing and reconciling love. We do not have to be afraid. We do not have to carry the kind of shame that paralyzes us and makes us defensive. We can name it and claim it and trust the journey toward positive change in our relationship going forward. We can join the kingdom of God movement in Jesus because Jesus is welcoming us to join him even now, 2000 years later. Will you take Jesus’ hand in the hand of indigenous brothers and sisters?

The Presbyterian Church has already begun to do so. What about you and me? We can embrace our church’s action with our ongoing support of what the church is doing. We can talk to those around us and be citizens who support a changed relationship with indigenous peoples. We can help people around us understand our collective responsibility for the injustice and be committed to government policies that will support indigenous self-determination and land rights. It’s not easy or straightforward. Healing and reconciliation never are. But it is a journey we are called to pursue as citizens of the kingdom of God. The door is open and it’s good news. Do you believe in the good news? Amen.