

# HOW MUCH ARE WE RESPONSIBLE FOR?

1 Timothy 1: 12-17; Philippians 3: 4b-12

It caught me totally by surprise... I was reading a book about genocides and about the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Armenian genocide. Like other genocides, it's not just about the millions killed. It's how systematic and brutal it all was. I had read lots about the holocaust and other more recent genocides like Bosnia, Rwanda and South Sudan. But the Armenian one got me like nothing else, especially when some of the atrocities committed were described. It wasn't just about the tears that came to me. I had a physical reaction. I was shaking. I had to stop. I had to turn away.

Now, some full disclosure. My grandmother on my mother's side was a refugee from that genocide. Those Armenians who did escape Turkey either went east through Syria and Lebanon, or west through Greece and Europe. Once I described this experience to a few others, they seemed to know exactly what it was that happened to me. It was "generational trauma" they said. Even though I wasn't physically there myself, and even though I am several generations removed from those actual events, it's somehow in my genes. Since that time I've read about generational trauma and I'm sure many of you have heard this term yourselves. We hear about it a lot especially with the indigenous peoples of this land.

But here's the thing. Whereas for my people, it happened at a certain time, and it can still have this effect generations later, for indigenous people it happened over hundreds of years and still continues today. As many historians are now claiming, what Canada did to the indigenous peoples through various means – from introducing illness and alcohol, restricting land use, pushing people into reserves, taking the children from their homes and trying to educate the Indian out of them... all of it was genocidal. As Thomas King writes in his book: *The Inconvenient Indian*, public policy in Canada has been to eradicate the Indian either by assimilation or extinction.

But here's the thing. Many raise serious questions around responsibility. How much are we responsible ourselves for what happens to others and how much are they responsible for themselves? How much are we responsible for our own lives even if others have done negative things to us? And how much are we responsible for the fate of others even if it was something our ancestors were responsible for generations ago. I mean, in my case, I'm a first generation immigrant. My family emigrated to Canada in the late 1960s. My ancestors weren't Canadian. How am I responsible for what they would have done even if they were

here. People made choices then. What I do now is my responsibility. Why should I bear the weight of their sins?

Yes, but if we claim citizenship as Canadians, we also carry the responsibility of being Canadian... all of it. We can't just pick and choose what we're responsible for today without claiming the whole history as ours. Ok, fair enough. But, why do so many indigenous people struggle today when a lot of what was done, was done to their ancestors rather than to them directly. Isn't it a new day today? Isn't there more opportunity and more support than ever, even as there is still plenty of racism to go around?

Let me offer two examples: First, this past Tuesday, the Literary Society book club at Armour Heights discussed the book "Out of the Ashes," which is a memoir by an indigenous man named Jessie Thistle. Thistle had an awful life growing up and he suffered terribly. He was abandoned and neglected by his parents. He was homeless, he spent time in prison and he suffered major addiction to alcohol and drugs. In fact, the book itself is based on journal entries he made as part of his healing journey through AA. But that's the thing about Thistle: he made it out. He's on a healing journey. He went back to school and graduated from York university with a PH.D and with the highest grade point average out of 50,000 students. He is now a professor. He's articulate. He's happily married. He's taken responsibility for his life and he's experiencing liberation and fullness.

Here's another story, the story of Orange Shirt Day. The story centres on an indigenous woman named Phyllis Webstad. Phyllis was a happy child living with her grandmother in an indigenous community. But one day, Canadian authorities came to tell her grandmother that Phyllis had to go to a government run residential school. She was 6 years old. Nobody was happy about it but there was no choice. Phyllis' grandmother took Phyllis shopping and bought her a bright orange shirt, something to brighten her first day and something that would remind her of where she belonged. Phyllis loved it. But once Phyllis got to the school they stripped her of all her own clothes and made her wear a school uniform. This was part of educating the Indian out of the child. All connection with her family, community and heritage had to be cut out.

The effect of all this on Phyllis was profound. Her self-esteem, her identity, her ability to build healthy relationships... all of it was shattered. After she graduated with a second rate education and awful memories, Phyllis went from bad to worse, falling into various addictions and abusive relationships. But after many years and with the support of family members who re-connected with her, Phyllis began to heal. She went back to school, got a few degrees, raised a family and is now a counsellor and activist. By wearing orange shirts

on this day we are declaring not only that what was done to Phyllis was wrong. We are also declaring that every child matters and especially those children, like Phyllis, who suffer abuse and neglect, and indigenous children who's parents still suffer the generational trauma that continues to affect the children too.

Like Thistle, though, Phyllis Webstad has also experienced healing and success in building a positive life out of the ashes of abuse, neglect and the oppression of Canadian policy on indigenous people for generations. They have taken responsibility for their lives and made something good out of them. How come so many others don't experience the same success? Are we responsible as Canadians for those who have not made it, those who have failed to heal and those who have died by neglect, sickness, murder or suicide?

In order to engage such questions lets dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory insight and inspiration.

Our first reading is a personal confession from the apostle Paul to a young co-worker named Timothy. Paul points to his early life when he did some terrible things in the name of religion. He attributes part of it to ignorance, but he also takes full responsibility as having been, as he says: "a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence." But here's the thing. Paul also tells of how he experienced mercy. The word he uses to describe this mercy is: grace. "The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." In other words: Jesus' faithfulness in the way of love, being executed on a cross for it, and choosing forgiving love rather than hate, is the gift he gave to all who embrace him. Paul claims responsibility for the persecution and death of Jesus. Every time persecution and abuse is perpetrated against someone it is also done to Jesus. And yet, Paul also embraces the gift of forgiveness through Jesus too. The forgiveness-love through Jesus, in fact, is so all-powerful, that it overflows the banks of all the guilt, the shame, the pain, the hurt, the trauma and the abuse that could keep Paul chained in a destructive and self-destructive life. Nothing can stop this Christ-love flooding through when a heart is made open to it.

For Thistle and Webstad, divine love through healing presence of others and the mysterious inner strength that flooded into their hearts led to some powerful healing which continues to be their journey. For those of us who claim citizenship of the nation responsible for the generational abuse and violence, the invitation of Christ crucified is the invitation to experience mercy, grace and the overflowing forgiveness of Christ, healing us into a journey of reparation toward meaningful reconciliation.

But this also requires some deep inner work. We need the courage to look inward and face those flaws within that contribute to the oppression of others. In our second reading, Paul zeros in on where those flaws were in him which led to sinful violence and abuse committed against others. He was so blind to himself he believed true religion was about zealously defending his brand of faith, even with violence when necessary. Paul would have been the perfect recruit for a religious or racist terrorist organization today. He would have totally supported the vision of residential schools.

He says that he was so proud of his race and heritage, he saw it as superior to others. His people were specially chosen by God, better than others, and his call was to purify himself and help purge his people of all morally degenerate and racially contaminated elements.

But what he experienced through Christ was a whole new identity. It wasn't about throwing away his identity as a good Jew. It was about gaining the true value of his Jewishness – the covenant love of a creator God who was revealed and embodied in Jesus. To be a Jew faithful to God was to embrace an intimate solidarity with Jesus, crucified with all the victims of hate and violence, but also raised to newness of life as one who loves as he has been loved. Paul's goal is to experience the fullness of resurrection, but he knows that can only happen if he also undergoes the suffering crucifixion of purging himself of the hate and contempt that has lived in him for so long and was wrapped up with his identity.

Wow. This is deep stuff; powerful stuff. Paul is alive in a whole new way, even as he must come to terms with his past and the ugliness in his soul. Paul is full of love even as he must suffer the sin of how his Jewish pride was the cause of persecution and abuse of other fellow Jews and contempt for non-Jews. Paul's healing journey is about serving the Christ he crucified who now inhabits his soul. Beautiful.

So what about you and me, as Canadians and as Christians, as we carry the burden of sin in our relationship with indigenous people? We are responsible, collectively. But we are also being offered forgiveness. Forgiveness is an empty word unless it fills us with a positive passion and desire to give, serve and love in tangible ways... We need to support and engage in truth and reconciliation opportunities. Tangibly and materially it's about land and land rights versus our constant need to claim land that we can mine for minerals, oil, gas, golf courses and recreation. There's no avoiding or short-circuiting that. It's also about funding for children and communities stuck in third-world conditions. That's for all of us taxpayers to feel responsibility to fix. And finally, it's about police brutality and neglect for all the murdered and missing. Police are simply a reflection of our Canadian society... of us.

We're all responsible. But there is also an invitation from Christ crucified, offering us mercy, grace and forgiveness, an opportunity not only to engage outwardly, but to face our demons inwardly, demons of hate, fear, false superiority or inferiority, all of which distort our relationships and attitudes towards others and towards ourselves. We need to be crucified of toxic and distorted elements in our souls in order to rise up to ever greater fullness in Christ – Christ who is God with us and God within us as Spirit-energy.

Let us pray: We need your love, O God, to cleanse us, forgive us, and empower us to claim responsibility for our indigenous neighbours. Energize us to die to all that is false and distorted in us in order to rise up to newness and to all you have made us to be; Amen.