

ANISHINAABE JESUS, COSMIC CHRIST

2 Corinthians 5: 14-20

Orange Shirt Day is on September 30 (next Saturday). A few years ago the government of Canada also designated Orange Shirt Day as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. The day is intended to highlight the destructive impacts of residential schools on indigenous peoples by what was done to families and communities when children were taken away, stripped of their culture, language and traditions. Residential schools were part of a larger campaign to eradicate indigenous identity and assimilate indigenous people into Canadian culture.

But why the name Orange shirt day? The story of Orange shirt day is the story of Phyllis Webstad. In 1973, Phyllis turned 6 years old. Like many indigenous children she was forced to attend a residential school. Living with her grandmother at the time, she and her grandmother went to shop for some clothes. Her grandmother encouraged her to buy clothes that would help her remember who she was and where she was from, anticipating the challenges of being taken away. Phyllis chose a bright orange shirt for her first day of school. Even though she was feeling scared inside, the brightness of the shirt would remind her how much she was cherished and loved by her family.

But what happened when she got to the school? Phyllis, like other children, was stripped of all her clothes and forced to wear the drab coloured uniform of the school. She was separated from siblings, cousins and friends from her community. All that connected her to where she came from and made her who she was, was taken away. Even though Phyllis was not a student in the school for many years like other children, and even though Phyllis did not experience the kind of physical or sexual abuse many other children suffered, a number of whom died as we now know, still, what happened to Phyllis spiritually and psychologically is something very deep and widespread within indigenous communities as a whole. Phyllis was made to feel worthless, like she was nothing. She was stripped and emptied of everything that made her who she was so she could be filled with what the church and settler Canadian culture would put in.

“Every Child Matters” is a recognition that children are not empty vessels. Whether they have died or have been emotionally and spiritually stripped of their identity, they will not be forgotten. Justice will be pursued on their behalf and reconciliation cannot even be a remote possibility until full justice is achieved. “Every Child Matters” means all of that. We who belong to the settler side of the relationship as Canadians are now called to join a movement toward healing and it is indigenous peoples who must have the power to decide when and how

reconciliation will be achieved. That is very much central to how healing must happen. The victims must be given the power to direct the process.

In a recent book put together by Phyllis Webstad, she frames her personal story within a collection of stories of her family over six generations. The purpose is to demonstrate the disruptive and damaging effects of residential schools and the larger intention of the church and government over many generations. Her great grandmother never attended residential school. But she was drawn into the Catholic faith. Her grandmother and mother attended residential schools. Eventually, as families were torn apart with children taken away, and as children were stripped of their language, culture and ways, as land was taken by the government and people were relocated onto reserves, as men and women were humiliated and stripped of purpose and freedom to make choices for themselves and their children, this further led to violent and self-destructive behaviours. How do you cope when you are pushed down and disconnected from everyone you love? You take it out in all kinds of terrible ways. - six generations of Phyllis' family all lived this out.

And yet, Phyllis and her family keep rising up to re-claim their traditions however they can, learn and relearn their language, and heal by re-learning and participating in their ceremonies and cultural ways. Phyllis herself was stripped of her identity and her sense of worth. She became pregnant at 13 years of age, had a son at 14, fell into substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviours. But after many years of healing work, she has reclaimed her family. She is a grandmother, has been educated, and by establishing Orange Shirt Day has born witness that resurrection is truly possible after terrible forms of trauma have killed the human spirit.

Ok, but how is the way forward to be found for us? If Orange shirt day is not only about learning and facing the truth, but also about reconciliation, how is that to be achieved?

Another book I read this summer was loaned to me by Mary Lynn Dodson - an elder here at Armour Heights. Mary Lynn's former neighbour is a person with whom she shares some indigenous ancestry. This neighbour has a cousin who is a devout Christian, part of a Roman Catholic religious order, and one who is also indigenous. Her name is Eva Solomon. Eva's book is entitled: "Come Dance With Me" and it's purpose is to describe a healing and reconciliation process she invited people to be a part of. What people? On the one side were church officials. On the other side were indigenous people who were themselves students of residential schools or children and grandchildren of students.

This is a beautiful book on many levels. Eva herself carries the challenge of being a devout Christian, a sister in the Roman Catholic Faith, and an Anishinaabe woman fully embracing her ancestral traditions and the suffering of her people. The experiment she initiated involved

bringing together people in and around the Thunder Bay area of Ontario. As many of you will know, Thunder Bay has had a notorious history both with the church and the police force in terms of accusations of systemic racism and abuse. Just a few years ago there were a whole series of indigenous teen suicides happening in the city and accusations that police and social services were neglecting to take it all seriously. The suicides, of course, reflect the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma being lived into the next generations...

Anyhow, Eva describes how initially, the religious officials were open to coming together to listen and learn from the indigenous community and victims of all ages, but they also wanted to control the process. They wanted to frame things according to their religious understanding and their church-based systems. But the real opening and learning, writes Eva, happened when everyone came to understand that this process of listening and dialogue had to be an “intercultural one.”

So what is “intercultural”? Intercultural means that we come together as equals. Both of us bring our traditions and values equally precious and equally blessed and inspired by God. Phyllis Webstad’s Great grandmother just had her traditions. When Christianity was first introduced, earlier generations combined Christianity with their own ceremonies and traditions. They didn’t see any conflict practicing both. It was only with more involvement from church and government with the intent of changing indigenous people and assimilating them, that they condemned all indigenous ceremonies as demonic and idolatrous. They banned indigenous people from practicing them, speaking their language and engaging any of their traditional ways.

But what if God speaks directly to indigenous peoples through their traditions as much as God may speak to us through our traditions as Western Christians? And, what if Christ is as much a Christ for indigenous peoples as Christ is our saviour and lord as Western Christians? Part of what religious officials had to come to is the recognition that all the sacred stories of indigenous people from their creation stories onwards and all their traditions are a kind of “First Testament” just like we have our Old Testament. And both the First Testament of indigenous peoples and our Older Testament as settler Christians point us to Jesus the Christ encountered through indigenous understandings as much as Western European ones.

And to help all participants really get inside this understanding that Christ is for all people and through all people, an indigenous artist was commissioned to create a painting of Christ (which is our bulletin cover). The painting – by Gelineau Fisher – is simply entitled: Anishinaabe Jesus. All participants were asked to take time to reflect on this painting and what was spoken into their hearts and spirits as they did so. What happened?

People saw things and felt things. Christ spoke to them. For indigenous people they recognized a Christ that was truly one of them. They saw a Christ who was trans-gendered in the sense that woman or man he/she/they were one of them. The drum, the feathers, the colours, the skin, the hair... Christ is them and they are in Christ.

Let me quote some of what the participants expressed: "I see the Trinity talking in the rays around Jesus' head. I also see that he is to die. I believe that the drum is Jesus and Jesus is the drum. The many colours of his robe are like Joseph's coat in the Old Testament. The aura is the Father. And all these feathers represent the Spirit... This Jesus is the Trinity, the way nobody else could be. It is Jesus dancing on the drum, the heartbeat of the earth, and the heartbeat of God, the God of love. There is a great connection between the earth and Jesus and the Trinity... The waving yellow lines behind his head reveal the life-giving breath shared by all beings..."

Isn't this amazing?! And the church officials who were all there were so moved, they fell to their knees (so to speak) in recognition that Jesus as the Christ is as much Anishinaabe, as he is Western European, as he is Jesus the Jew from ancient Galilee...

So, with this new understanding, let's listen again to our scripture reading this morning and let me pose some questions at the end of each section of the reading, to help us listen to what it may be speaking to us personally:

2 Corinthians 5: 14-20

"For the love of Christ urges us on, (Paul says), because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." (How do we die to ourselves and our old understandings, prejudices and broken relationships, and how do we rise up in Christ to new ways of relating, engaging and loving?)

"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (What new ways are you and I being called to in how we see and relate and engage our world and each other?)

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to God's self through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God's self, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (What trespasses is God willing not to count against us and what pathways to reconciliation is God opening up for us to embrace and walk through?)

“So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making God’s appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (Are you ready and willing to be reconciled to God? Are you ready and willing to be an ambassador for the Christ who is as much Anishinaabe as he is your own? Are you ready and willing to take the hand of the Christ who was crucified because of our sins as much as the sins of anyone else, and yet, is willing through the people we have wronged to become reconciled with us?)

May we walk a new road each and everyone of us. May we become part of a new creation. May we live inside Christ in a whole new way and reclaim our baptism into his body. And may we become in a whole new way his ambassadors by becoming his hands, feet, voice and heart, for each other and in our world. Amen.