

THE COST & PROMISE OF RECONCILIATION

Matthew 5: 21-26; Romans 5: 6-11

Tomorrow, September 30, is “Orange Shirt Day.” The intent of this day is to help promote healing and reconciliation between us Canadians and Indigenous peoples of this land. 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 Phyllis Webstad – a survivor.

“I went to the Mission school in 1973. 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 14 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 feelings 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!”

Isn’t this a sad story? Thankfully, in Phyllis’ case, she has found positive ways to move forward. She has become an activist and organizer promoting healing and reconciliation. She is a wife, mother and grandmother, and a post secondary graduate with several degrees. But even though we can rejoice that Phyllis has found positive ways to redeem her terrible experiences, her story confronts us as Canadians with our own complicity in her pain. How did all this come to be? How did we get it in our heads as Canadians that residential schools were a good idea? What were we trying to achieve?

Residential schools were part of a larger program of assimilation. We colonial settlers had come to these shores, and even though this land was harsh and the climate was brutal, we fell in love with it. We wanted this land. It seemed ripe for claiming as our own. There was only one problem. There were other people here, people who were different than us. Negotiating with them proved to be complicated. How could we make it work for us in a way where we got what we wanted? Elimination or assimilation became the answer. Either you get out of the way or you fall into line behind us. Either you become like us or we get rid of you. I know it sounds harsh putting it this way, but that's in essence the way it went. And creating residential schools was a way to achieve assimilation by taking the children. The only problem was that assimilation became elimination for all too many children.

How so? Let me tell another story, a story of two men, two men who lived 100 years ago, two men who were both Presbyterians. One was Duncan Campbell Scott. Scott was a well known poet and musician, but his biggest claim to fame happened when he was hired by the Canadian government to head the department of Indian affairs. Scott was the architect of the residential school system. His vision, and I quote: "is to get rid of the Indian problem." His goal was to eliminate Indigenous people by turning them into good Canadians. Scott was honoured for his work, received honorary doctorates from several Canadian universities and was celebrated a national hero.

But everyone wasn't a fan. There was another Presbyterian by the name of Peter Henderson Bryce. Bryce was a medical doctor and he was hired by the federal government to check on the health of indigenous children in residential schools. Dr. Bryce was horrified by what he discovered. Children in residential schools were dying from malnutrition and disease at the rate of 25-70 percent. That's besides other abuse they suffered. He reported these findings to the government. He wrote a book about it titled: "The story of a national Crime: Being a Record of the Health Conditions of the Indians of Canada from 1904-1921." Scott dismissed Bryce's reports. Bryce was fired from his job. He was dishonoured, isolated and he lost the recognition of the medical community. He died and was buried in a non-descript grave at Beechwood cemetery in Ottawa. Eventually Scott also died, and was buried in the very same cemetery. The difference, though was that Scott was celebrated a visionary hero. His grave is marked with a large monument containing a large plaque with flourishing praise for his accomplishments. Wow!

So, how do these stories make us feel – sad, mad, ashamed? How do we face injustice when we as Canadians are being accused of it, whether we intended it or not, whether it was our Canadian ancestors rather than us who did these things, whether we were ignorant of what was happening or not? How do we take responsibility now and claim accountability now in a way that leads to change that is positive for us and for the victims of the injustice?

Let us seek some revelatory guidance from our scriptures. Both readings are about reconciliation. In our gospel reading, Jesus is teaching about righteousness. The conventional view of righteousness taught by other religious teachers is that it's all about actions. What you feel inside is secondary. It's what you do that counts. So, you can hate someone in your heart, but if you do not murder them then you have fulfilled the commandment "you shall not murder." But the righteousness Jesus is teaching is about more than that. It's about the heart. It's hypocritical to say you're observing the commandment not to murder if your heart is full of hate. And so, he says, if you want to be right with God, you have to take the responsibility of getting right with your neighbour where you can, heart and actions. It's not enough not to murder them. You need to actively and creatively love them. Instead of looking for every way to sue your neighbour and put them in their place, seek out creative ways to be reconciled where possible. At least do your part. Fill your heart with openness and love. Don't get poisoned by hate, resentment and a hunger to be on top by putting others down. The consequences will be costly for you inside and out.

And isn't this true in life? We live in a world where we threaten each other all the time and the courtroom is our go to as the way we settle disputes. But think about what would have happened if we chose the way of reconciliation with indigenous people of this land many years ago. Think about what would have happened if we opened our hearts to listen, try to understand and build friendship instead of trying to dominate and eliminate those who are different than us. Now we are fighting it out in the courts and paying massive amounts of money in settlement after settlement. Jesus is saying that if you want to be right with God by bringing your gift of thanksgiving to the altar, first get right with your fellow siblings in the world. God will not accept your gift until you have done your part and love is in your heart again.

And this brings us to our second reading, to the words of the apostle Paul who is a close follower of Jesus. He interprets Jesus' death as the result of hate turned into murder. "Jesus, you are a problem" the leaders say. "Either assimilate and follow our way or you will be eliminated." And this is what happens. Jesus is crucified. The God in Jesus is crucified. But the gospel story is a story of doors opening, doors of forgiveness and reconciliation. To walk through those doors you need to appreciate the cost of forgiveness. To open the door to reconciliation we have to come to terms with all those innocent children abused and killed, just like Jesus. The death of God in the crucified Jesus is God carrying the weight of all our sin and all those dead children. The good news is that the hand of reconciliation is being offered us. Healing must involve listening to the stories, finding creative ways to express our regret and remorse, then take responsibility to provide reparation and an open hand for reconciliation. Our prayer is for healing for both the victims and the perpetrators. Reconciliation is the promise.

Let me paraphrase the apostle's words: rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves God's love for us in that we were still sinners, still enemies, Christ died for us... And now we will be saved... having been reconciled to God at the cost of God's own life in Jesus... God puts God's self in the middle with Jesus. God takes the hit and put's God's self in the way... and now, in every child crucified God is also crucified. Do you get the theology here? The miracle is that even though such crucifixion is horrific and unforgivable, a hand of reconciliation is offered to us. Reconciliation is healing when we choose to undergo the journey of repentance, responsibility and reparation. Reconciliation is the promise, but it has to cost something for it to mean something. And not just our actions but our hearts need to be made right.

If you visit Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa today, you will still find the graves of Peter Henderson Bryce and Duncan Campbell Scott. Only now, something has changed. Scott's plaque of praise is still there, but something more was added recently: "he is also notorious for his 52-year career in the department of Indian Affairs. As deputy superintendent, Scott oversaw the assimilationist Indian residential school system for Aboriginal children, stating his goal was 'to get rid of the Indian problem.'" Walking over to Bryce's grave, something has also changed. Now there is a monument over his grave recognizing his commitment to the health, safety and well-being of Indigenous children. Indigenous people praise him now as an ally and tell his story.

Whether we need repentance and forgiveness for the actions of people like Scott or healing and reconciliation for the victimization of people like Webstad, Bryce and the many thousand dead children on our record and conscience as a nation, we open our hearts to receive love and give love, to recognize that there is a cost but also the promise of reconciliation.

Jesus taught this cost and promise when he demanded not just actions but hearts ready to love. He embodied such love when he was crucified with all the victims stretching out his hands to embrace all sinners past their sin when their hearts are open to forgiveness. That's you and me too.

Let us pray: It's not just our ancestors, O God, but we who need healing too... You know our hearts... You know our pain but also our sin... You reach out to us, bearing the cost of forgiving us because the promise of healing and reconciliation is the experience we are reaching for... draw us in and keep filling us with your love deep inside. Make us ambassadors of healing and reconciliation... Amen.