

“The Reconciliation Journey”

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A reflection about the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools

Matthew 5.21-26

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I struggle with many things in the Bible. Some things I don't understand. Some things, I don't like. But sometimes, I struggle because I know what it means, and I agree with what it says. But living it, doing it, following it? That's tough!

. . . if you bring your gift to the altar . . . (That's about your relationship with God) . . . and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift.¹

So says Jesus. I cannot focus on my relationship with God, if that means neglecting my relationships with people. Especially when I have harmed those relationships. That's hard! Reconciling with others. . . . Facing wrongs that we have done. . . . Thanks be to God, because we need God's help to do it. And God helps!

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“It can start with a knock on the door one morning. It is the local Indian agent, or the parish priest, or, perhaps, a Mounted Police officer. The bus for residential school leaves that morning. It is a day the parents have long been dreading. Even if the children have been warned in advance, the morning's events are still a shock. The officials have arrived and the children must go.”²

This is part of our United Church of Canada's story.

The video was shown at the United Church's 42nd General Council in August 2015. To watch it, click on this link.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdVz9lh2620

This is a recording of the Council's work that morning. The particular video beings at the 1 hour 35 minutes mark. It's 7 minutes long.

I've been reading some of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report that just came

¹ Matthew 5.23-24 (Common English Bible)

² *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Ottawa: TRC, 2015), 41. The report and other documents can be downloaded from www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=893.

out.³ A few things are striking me.

This was not an accident. Even by the standards of their own time, these children were treated terribly. Upon arrival, they were stripped of anything that reminded them of their home, their culture.⁴ Siblings were separated.⁵ They were punished for speaking their language. They were warehoused in buildings which were usually poorly built, poorly maintained, unhealthy, unsanitary, and dangerous.⁶ They were fed inadequate diets.⁷ They were forced to work, to cover the school expenses.⁸ They lived in fear.⁹ They were harshly disciplined.¹⁰ Many were sexually abused, and little was done to protect them. Many became sick.¹¹ At least 6,000 died, probably more. Most were buried in long-forgotten graves, far from home.¹² Often, their families were not even told where they were laid to rest.

Here is a quick summary. As places of learning, the schools failed.¹³ At best, they were “*institutionalized child neglect*.”¹⁴ Too often, they were worse.

III

It was not a problem of some bad apples, here and there. The whole system was wrong. The schools had one purpose: to annihilate Aboriginal culture. We thought that the best thing for Indians was to kill what made them Indian.

Imagine, a town stripped of all its children. While they are away — maybe for the school year, maybe years at a time — their language is suppressed. Their culture is demeaned. Their history, mocked. Their ancestry, belittled. They are told their parents are ignorant savages.

One school principal said this was all designed to “*counteract the evil tendencies of the Indian nature*.”¹⁵

A cabinet minister said that

. . . if you wish to educate these children you must separate them from their parents . . . If you leave them in the family . . . they still remain savages, whereas by separating

³ The TRC came from an agreement between survivors of the schools, the federal government that set up the system, and church denominations like ours which ran the schools.

⁴ *Ibid*, 43.

⁵ *Ibid*, 44.

⁶ *Ibid*, 46.

⁷ *Ibid*, 47 and 88-92.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 103-107.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 92-101.

¹² *Ibid*, 92-103.

¹³ *Ibid*, 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Executive Summary, 76 and, more generally, 74-80 and 83-87.

*them . . . they acquire the habits and tastes . . . of civilized people.*¹⁶

One survivor remembers “*being taught that the only good people on earth were non-Indians and, specifically, white Christians.*”¹⁷ He was not white. He was not Christian. So what did that make him?

I’m struck that the people doing this were the brightest, social justice-oriented people of their time. They wanted to help. They believed they were doing the right thing. And children, families, communities, Aboriginal cultures, and our country suffer for it.

IV

I was born the year the last United Church-run residential school closed.¹⁸ Few of us have personal guilt. Yet our United Church does. We inherit blessings from those who have gone before us. We also inherit the ugly stuff they did too. That’s why we’ve apologized, twice. (You have them in your bulletin. If you want a larger-print copy, I have those too). Other churches have apologized too. Prime Minister Harper apologized on our behalf.

Reconciliation begins when we see and understand that we did wrong. But that is only the start. Survivors and their descendants and communities . . . and, I think, God! . . . are waiting to see what we do now. Apology and reconciliation includes doing what we can to make things right, to heal the wrong done.

I need to learn more, about what was done and what we can do now. If you want to join with me in that learning, I’d love it! Please let me know.

I don’t have personal guilt. But I do have that responsibility, as a Canadian, a United Church person, and as a follower of Jesus.

If your brother or sister has something against you, first go and make things right.

Thanks be to God. We need God’s help to do it. And God helps! Amen.

¹⁶ Ibid, 61.

¹⁷ Ibid 85, quoting John Snow.

¹⁸ Maggie McLeod, Stan McKay, Bill Phipps & Carolyn Pogue, *Sorry. Why Our Church Apologized* (Kelowna, BC: Wood Lake, 2015), 9.