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The truth will set you free, but first it will make you very angry

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Martin Grove United Church

by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 12:9-21 and Mark 4:35-41

I should never have put in the bulletin that the title for this sermon would be “truth and reconciliation”. “Truth” by itself would be tough enough. But adding “reconciliation” makes the whole project ... well, let’s see where we get to. But in the meantime, the new title is “the truth will set you free, but first it will make you very angry.” So if - in the end - you are angry, then I guess we are on the right path. Or I should say, we *might* be on a meaningful path towards imagining reconciliation.

If you - like many Canadians - have never heard of the TRC - the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, it was a project of intentional listening. The TRC spent 6 years listening to any and all stories from victims, perpetrators, and survivors of the Residential Schools that Canada setup and our churches managed from the 1840’s to 1996. While most aboriginal students in Canada attended day schools, approximately 150,000 students went through the residential school system, which meant removing children from their families - often forcibly - and preventing them from following their own traditions and using their own languages. The stories shared by people who had been harmed by the residential school system are numerous and painful. But the TRC was committed to listening to those stories and is has now made those stories publicly accessible at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg, as well as through other channels.

The stories of the damage caused by the residential schools included two types of abuses. The existence of the system itself constituted a systemic abuse that amounted to an attempted cultural genocide. Additionally, many individual students suffered specific abuses from particular workers and teachers, including physical assault, sexual assault, rape, and what can only be called torture.

At it’s peak, there were 80 operating residential schools in Canada, funded by the Canadian Government, but operated by churches. The federal government provided

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facilities and maintenance, and the churches provided teachers and education. The United Church of Canada opened 1 school in Saskatchewan in 1928, but inherited other residential schools from both the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Churches at the time of Church Union in 1925.

The official closing event of the TRC was held in Ottawa May/June of last year, and I made the trip myself to be part of that historic occasion.

Why did I want to participate in the closing ceremonies in Ottawa? For many reasons, actually. I have had some interesting connections with aboriginal people from my days as an environmental scientist, working with people in northern Ontario as well as people of The Innu Nation in Labrador. Also, I have spent a lot of time applying the principles of helping share truth as a step towards reconciliation in prison. It is fascinating work to help people find, or at least imagine, reconciliation when the “other party” is not present in the room. I helped one inmate find reconciliation with his father in spite of that fact that the inmate had in fact murdered him. Truth is that powerful.

And so, for many different reasons, I wanted to participate in the closing ceremonies of the TRC. But of course, the experience in Ottawa was a real mixed bag. In fact, all of my interactions with aboriginal people have been mixed bags. But perhaps that’s why I find those experiences so real. My interactions with non-aboriginals are just as mixed, we just know how to cover it up better.

The reconciliation walk took us from Gatineau to the Ottawa City Hall. And at City Hall there were ceremonies, speeches, dancing, drumming, and singing. The speeches were very inspirational. Murray Sinclair - the Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission spoke too. And he referred to the then recent revelation that the whole residential schools activity was a cultural genocide. And everybody cheered, and we all nodded ascent. Even me. Mind you, inside, I was reminding myself that that was not news at all. Being from Saskatchewan I have known the reality of residential schools for decades. But I was happy to be complicit with the masses and pretend that yes, this really was a new way of understanding the history of residential schools in Canada.

Similarly, when survivors of residential schools spoke - and a few did - they

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always ended their talk by saying that they were sharing their story so that these sorts of things would never happen again. And again, I cheered along with everybody else, knowing full well not only that these things will happen in the future, they are already happening in the present, and in truth, had never stopped at any point in our past either.

The last event on the Sunday evening was a “circle of prayer” held at the monument for human rights. It was a quiet, contemplative, and tearful time for most people. Few words were spoken but emotions flowed freely. In spite of the curious ways that we both embrace and ignore our own history, there was a sense of moving forward, because people were actually voicing their stories and their thoughts. And people were listening. And praying. And crying. And hugging.

The “truth” part of the TRC was about telling stories and listening. What about the reconciliation part? What do we do when there is no “other party” to be reconciled with. When there is no “other” with whom you once had a friendly relationship. When it is not exactly obvious who you need to be reconciled with. For many aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians, this is the type of reconciliation that the TRC leads to.

For many of the victims, there is no particular person with whom to seek reconciliation - so, often, the conversation becomes more theoretical and political, for example trying to create reconciliation with the churches, or the Canadian government. And for those of us here who are not aboriginal ... what might reconciliation look like? Personally, I don't believe I have any blood relations to either victims or perpetrators of the residential schools. And I have never found guilt to be a helpful emotion. How are we to interact with the history of the residential schools?

One popular way it to ignore it. The morning after I returned from Ottawa I received a call from a person who was trying to get information about Canada's victoria cross recipients, so he had called me to get some information about David Hornell who had been a member at the United Church in Mimico. After awhile, we started chatting, and I mentioned I'd just come back from the TRC in Ottawa. And without hesitation, this war veteran told me that the stories were all exaggerated.

Another way to process our history is to take it seriously, and to try to understand it. The essential crime was to see aboriginal people as sub-human, and therefore their

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family structures, rituals, faiths, and languages were not important. The essence of colonization is the dehumanization of the “other”. When European settlers came to North America, they were simply following the laws and principles of their own countries. “Terra Nullius” is the principle that lands not controlled by powerful nations (e.g. us), are vacant and therefore “up for grabs”. And the so called “Doctrine of Discovery” was in place - not to protect aboriginal people - but to protect the “rights” of the occupying forces. The residential schools were just a physical manifestation of the inherent racism found in European cultures. And so, another response to the history of residential schools is to get active and push back on racism wherever we find it. No simple task in a country where people freely deny historical reality - from the residential schools to the internment of Japanese Canadians during world war 2. In a country that actively supports colonization against the people of Palestine, and we all know of other examples.

The blogger “Aspect Sign”, commenting on the difference between racism in the US and in Canada says, “To be honest, I think the biggest difference between Canada and the states is that Canada tries harder to pretend [racism] doesn’t exist in some ways, whereas [in the states] more racists and anti-racists wear it on their sleeve as a badge of honour. Why do we put up with corporate evil and systemic racism in our society when we would never put up with it in our own homes?”

And how then do we move forward? Perhaps the advice in Romans is helpful. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. Bless those who persecute you. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Overcome evil with good. Sounds great, right? Sounds a bit crazy too, right? Perhaps, like the disciples, we are afraid. Afraid that we are not able to calm the storms of racism that are all around us. And so, we don’t even try. But when Jesus calmed the storm, he also responded to the disciple saying - essentially - you could have done that yourselves you know. Don’t fear. Act! The storm can be overcome and peace can reign again. But - just maybe - we have to work for it. The truth will set you free. Perhaps, some day, we will say, the truth has set us free!

*Amen.*