
Truth and Reconciliation
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Matthew 28:16-20

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 working title for this sermon is “the truth will set you free, but first it will make you very angry.”

Thanks so much Carolyn for sharing that very long reading from Genesis with us. I think it’s good to read the entire story from time to time. Tradition dictates that our reading from Genesis is called a creation story. But on the surface the story sort of lacks life. Nothing is dirty or messy. God somehow separates land from water without ever having to deal with mud. God creates by speaking, not by shovelling. The story - even though we say it is about creation - seems somehow sterile. Of course, the story is a rewrite of the much older story called the “Enuma Elish” from Babylon so perhaps the Hebrew writers are not to blame. But why is it that the creation story seems to be so lacking in the chaos that always comes with life?

Actually, if you browse online you will see that many people have issues with this creation story. For example, people criticize the story because it violates the second law of thermodynamics - but I’m sure you all knew that. Personally I always wonder if we would have been better off - overall - if God had stopped after day 5. Or if perhaps God had put in 1 day of overtime and made things just a little better.

When I hear the story, the words that I trip on are these, “God saw everything that was made, and indeed, it was very good.” I struggle with those words. I struggle with those words because I just cannot wrap my head around the idea that creation is - or ever was - or ever could be - only good. Because I believe that creation is a mix of good and evil. How do I know that creation is a mix of good and evil? Simple. I myself am part of this creation. And I just need to look in my own heart to realize that I myself am a mix of

good and evil. Creation cannot be only good, or else I do not belong here. And I'm pretty sure that I belong here.

Do you remember the TV show Star Trek - I mean the original Star Trek with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock? Now I know that most episodes involved meeting "aliens" made of plastic and ended with a fist fight where Kirk got his shirt ripped open. Oh - and there was always a crew member in a red shirt who beamed down to a planet and never returned. The show was somewhat formulaic. But some of the episodes were very thought-provoking.

In the episode called "The Enemy Within", Captain Kirk beams up from a planet. And moments later - when nobody is in the transporter room to see it - the transporter beams up a second Captain Kirk. It takes very little time for us to realize that the transporter has created two Kirks - one is Kirk's good side and the other is Kirk's evil side.

The evil Kirk is very easy to spot. He is irrational. He drinks from a bottle while he staggers down a hallway. He tries to assault Yeoman Rand. He is rude. It does not take long for Spock to lock him in the brig.

But it takes practically the entire episode for us to understand the good Kirk. The good Kirk is pleasant, he is rational, he is not aggressive. He is not rude. The good Kirk seems to be better than the original Kirk. Until near the very end of the episode - when a crisis with the Klingons that had been building all along comes to a head. It turns out that the good Kirk is indecisive. He cannot make difficult decisions. The good Kirk cannot weight up pros and cons. The good Kirk is docile and useless as a commander.

And so in the final minutes of the episode we come to realize that the good Kirk is not actually better than the original Kirk. Kirk's ability to command came from the balance of good and evil within him, and from the way that Kirk managed that balance. The actual creation called "James T Kirk" was a mix of good and evil. And it was only in that mix that he was truly himself. Creation is a mix of good and evil. And therefore, as humans we are all a mix of good and evil too. Thanks be to God.

June 21 is the celebration called the "National Indigenous Peoples Day". So it seemed to me this was a good day to talk about Truth and Reconciliation.

As you might know, the United Church - proving itself to be a mix of good and evil - co-created the TRC - the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” to sit and listen. The TRC spent 6 years listening to any and all stories from victims, perpetrators, and survivors of the indigenous residential schools that operated in Canada from the 1840’s to 1996. Most indigenous students in Canada attended day schools. But 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. The TRC was committed to listening to those stories and has 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 individual workers and teachers. These abuses including physical assault, sexual assault, rape, and what can only be called torture. At it’s peak, there were 80 residential schools operating in Canada, funded by the Canadian Government, and operated by churches. The federal government provided 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 residential schools were a mix of good and evil. Some teachers in residential schools were psychotic and wanted to satisfy their own perversions at the expense of children. But most of the teachers were simply trying to build a better future for the children under their care. Those teachers realized that a “new Canada” was being built, and that this “new Canada” would be inaccessible to illiterate and uneducated people. These teachers worked so that indigenous children could be included in that new Canada. The TRC heard stories about the care and love some students received at residential schools as well as stories of abuse.

The TRC formally finished its work in May of 2015, and I went to Ottawa to be a witness to the closing ceremonies. I wanted to be part of that historic occasion. You might be surprised I was so keen to be there. I went for a number of reasons actually. I had some interesting connections with indigenous people during 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 using truth as a step towards reconciliation in a prison setting. 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. The event began with a reconciliation walk from Gatineau to the Ottawa City Hall. Then at City Hall there were ceremonies, speeches, dancing, drumming, and singing. The speeches were very inspiring. Murray Sinclair - the Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - spoke, and he referred to the then recent revelation that the whole residential schools activity was a cultural genocide. And when he said that, 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 had known the reality of residential schools for a long time. But I was happy to be complicit with the masses and pretend that yes, this really was a new and helpful way of understanding the history of residential schools in Canada.

Similarly, when survivors of residential schools spoke - and a few did - they always ended their talk by saying that they were sharing their story so that these sorts of things would never happen again. 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, never stopped at any point in our past either. Yes, the residential schools are closed, but that does not mean that Canadian society accepts indigenous people as ... people. The history of Canada and of the United Church of Canada is a mix of good and evil.

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.

For me, it was well worth the trip to Ottawa.

Now I need to ask you a personal question. And please feel free to give me an answer during coffee time during the week ahead. How did you feel listening to the gospel reading today? How do we hear these words, often known as the “great commission”, in light of the cultural genocide inflicted on indigenous Canadians? Matthew’s Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”

Isn’t that exactly what we as Canadians and as the church are apologizing for right now? Imposing our cultures and religions on other people? I find great comfort in the fact that modern biblical scholars agree that the great commission never came from Jesus. It was an addition to the Bible added in by the early church. The great commission was not something that Jesus ever endorsed.

Our history is a mix of good and evil. Being part of creation, what else would we expect? In Genesis - but only in Genesis - water and dirt can be separated without dealing with mud. In the real world, we live with a lot of mud. Good and evil cannot be cleanly separated.

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 indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians, this is a real barrier to reconciliation.

For some of the victims, there is an obvious partner for potential reconciliation - the person who abused them. But for many of the victims it is not so obvious. Often, the conversation becomes more theoretical and political. For example by trying to create

reconciliation with the churches, or the Canadian government. And for those of us here who are not indigenous ... what might reconciliation look like? How are we to interact with the history of residential schools?

One popular way to deal with history is to ignore that history. 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. He called me to get some information about David Hornell who had been a member at the the church I was serving at that time. 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. Ignorance is an easy option.

Another way to deal with history is to take it seriously, and to try to learn from it. The essential sin of residential schools was to see indigenous people as sub-human, and therefore their family structures, rituals, spiritualities, 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 indigenous people - but to protect the "rights" of the occupying forces. 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 like Canada where people freely deny historical reality. From the residential schools to the internment of Japanese Canadians during world war 2. In a country that even today still actively supports colonization against the people of Palestine. And we all know of other examples.

Canadians are not very good at dealing with racism. The Canadian Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg is itself mired in "pervasive and systemic racism and a toxic culture". The Museum to human rights does not support human rights for its own employees. "Dozens of people came forward with allegations of racism, discrimination, homophobia and sexual harassment and assault shortly after a peaceful protest in support

of Black Lives Matter on June 5, 2020.”¹

We live with a lot of mud. All of this muddiness makes reconciliation harder - but also more important. As a community of faith we need to accept that reconciliation is not an event. It must be a lifestyle decision that we make. And even our attempts to find healing will be a mix of good and evil. But that is not an excuse to not keep trying.

The truth will set us free. Perhaps, some day, we will be able to say, the truth has set us free!

Amen.

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/pervasive-and-systemic-racism-at-canadian-museum-for-human-rights-report-says-1.5674468>