

Our Apology to First Nations Peoples

A Cup of Cold Water

Delivered at St. John's United Church, Halifax on June 29, 2008

By Rev. Linda Yates, M. Div

Scripture Passages: **Genesis 22:1-14**

Matthew 10:40-42

If you are very lucky you know some children. Perhaps you have children or grandchildren. Maybe you have nieces and nephews you are fond of or neighbourhood youngsters that you have watched fondly grow into adults. Take a moment to imagine their smiling faces... Think about the cutest thing they ever said... Ponder the gifts their lives have been to you... Now imagine that the government forcibly removed them for ten months of the year. Sometimes they take them for the entire year. When they come back to you they are disturbed, depressed; not the children they were before. They tell you they are being physically beaten, inadequately cared for, neglected even, to your horror, sexually abused. They reveal they have been told that *you* are stupid, not to be trusted and inferior just because of who you are. They are told everything you have taught them is at best primitive, at worst, evil. Yet you are forced to send them back to that same place year after year. Not only that, but you then have to stand by helplessly as they become adults and are forced to send their children to the same awful places. If this happened to you and your family, could you ever accept an apology given by the people who created the systems, laws and attitudes that made those schools possible? I do not believe I could if it had been my children.

This is what happened to First Nations peoples and we are the people who did it to them. Our church; our country; our laws; us.

This awareness came to me very slowly. It actually became cogent through four stories which I will share with you today.

Story One. An Aboriginal elder comes to one of my very first Maritime Conferences about ten years ago. She is a survivor of the Shubenacadie Residential School here in Nova Scotia. She tells of the shock that she and her siblings felt when they were forced to go there. Mi'kmaq cultural practices did not include corporal punishment of children. She said for the first time, they were beaten for any and all infractions. An example of behaviours that required punitive measures included daring to speak in her own language. The most devastating penalty was when children were forced into the punishment circle. She described children being made to form a circle around the miscreant and then forced to taunt, tease and humiliate their friend. This meant all who took part were damaged equally, she said. It also conferred the most cruel behaviour as the forced responsibility of the children themselves. I cringed. How could this happen, I thought? How did we not know? What kind of people could do such things? Surely they are the epitome of evil. It is a relief to think so because that means it is out of my control and experience and could not involve anyone I know.

Story Two. A couple of years later I went to visit a friend of mine out west. She introduced me to a wonderful man who was very old at that time. I am thinking he must be dead by now. He had been a minister in the United Church and had struck up a great inter-generational friendship with my friend. He had a long and distinguished career, including being principal at one of the Aboriginal Residential Schools. My friend said that he was a man wise and open in every way but the one thing they could not talk about together was the Residential School System. He had seen none of the abuses, he said and he had served honourably. My friend and I talked about those who ran the schools being part of systems that promoted such complete group think that spiritual blindness was

inevitable, even required. He was a good man working within a system built on evil suppositions about ranking levels of “humanness.” Wrapping it all up in “God-ness” guaranteed no one would risk unwrapping it. Meeting the man shocked me to the core. I like him and he was a good and even Godly man. We like to think that evil people did this. Our culture encourages us to think in dualities and dichotomies. That we are evil or good. That we are right or wrong. That we are white or native. Dualities and dichotomy lets us off the hook and allows us to rationalize systemic evil because then we can say, surely the ones who did this were of the “evil” variety and separate therefore from me. Good people did it. We did it. We chose not to question. We even chose not to see.

Story Three. This is a story I heard only two weeks ago. I was with my colleague, The Rev. Dr. Russell Daye of St. Andrews, taking in Bishop Spong for a conference at the Agricultural College in Truro. During lunch on the day of the Apology, June 11, Russ told a small group of us over lunch about one of his experiences as an “accompanier” during the Native Fishery dispute at Burnt Church. The concept of “accompaniment” was used significantly in Latin American countries during some of the worst eras of oppression in the 80’s and 90’s. In places like Guatemala, for example, Canadian young people would accompany civil rights workers on their day to day activities recognizing that their status as Canadians made it unlikely the government armed forces and/or police would assassinate or arrest the Guatemalan activist. This method was used at Burnt Church. Russ related a critical moment came one day when the Native Fishers went out to fish. As they settled in at a distance from shore to fish, RCMP boats came roaring in and actually rammed the Native Fisher boats. The boats sank and then other Native fishers observing this from the shore hurried out in boats to rescue their people. He said that as they approached the men in the water the rescuing native fishers began throwing stones at the RCMP boats to keep them at bay. It was a David and Goliath scene of the most bizarre kind. Stones against gunboats. The Miq’mac were recording this on video. Russ saw first saw the footage in the Band Hall as this person ran directly from the encounter on the water to show those gathered in the hall. It was very clear what had happened and so fishers and accompaniers all breathed a sigh of relief trusting that finally the Canadian people would understand what the government was involved in and doing to the aboriginal fishers. **The tape was then passed onto the CBC.** However, what they saw on the news that night horrified them. The tape had been spliced such that what appeared first was the Native Fishers throwing rocks and then the RCMP ramming the boats. One of the journalists was appalled and sent an apology to the First Nations community. Immediately he was disciplined such that he has not been heard much of since. Russ said that day he began to see his own country in a new way.

Russ has shared story number three with his congregation. St. Andrew’s called him to be their minister, appreciative of his background in social justice. He wrote his doctoral thesis on the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa. He knows a thing or two about truth, reconciliation and forgiveness. (Read his book *Political Forgiveness*, Orbis Books, 2004). I give thanks to God that he is involved on the United Church’s behalf in our own Canadian truth and reconciliation process which is about to begin. Both his knowledge and his witness at Burnt Church will be important in that process.

Story Four. This story too unfolded only a couple of weeks ago. We were having a lobster feast with friends of ours in a small fishing village in Nova Scotia. They were telling us of their buddies who are fishers. Apparently many of the local fishers are disgusted with the Native Fishery because some aboriginals “just” own the boats and hire people to work on them. When my friend pointed out that this is what many of the white fishers do as well, they were met with dismay. Why, I wondered? What is the difference? Racism, we decided, is the difference. It must be unacceptable for white people to work for Aboriginal people.

Racism is woven through the Christianity we inherited from western Europe. Through word, image and concept we have constantly reinforced that what is “white” is good and what is “black” or “dark” is bad or at the very least, inferior. We see it still today in the little blond Jesus’ on Christmas cards we receive every year. Observe the blond blue eyed adult Jesus immortalized in stained glass in most of our churches. We all know that the actual Jesus was a native of the Middle East and would have looked a lot more like Tiger Woods than the blond, blue eyed, long haired Caucasian man we see looking down at us in most churches.

We also have misused biblical stories like the one we heard today to create systems of terrible pain. In our passage today Abraham trudges up a mountain with his beloved son Isaac, preparing himself to kill him in sacrifice to God who appears to demand it as a test of faith. (God sends an angel at the last minute to prevent Abraham from killing Isaac). This passage has been used throughout history to justify the sacrifice of children, especially other people’s children. We have rationalized that if God requires it, it must be okay for a “God fearing” people to require it. The tension in this passage is that we know, as ancient readers would have known, that Abraham becomes the father of many peoples, many religions, in fact. How is this possible if his son, his beloved only son is to be killed? Many scholars believe that the story is actually an antidote to child sacrifice. Ancient Israel was surrounded by cultures that regularly offered child sacrifice. The question must have come up, “Why don’t we do that? Is our God a lightweight God?” In response religious leaders could say, “No, and here is a story from our past that illustrates that...”

How sad then, that we, as “Christian” Canadians were only too willing to offer up First Nations children for sacrifice. It was written into government records that as an act of kindness, the elected Canadian government on our behalf would attempt “to kill the Indian in the child.”

The Apology, delivered by Prime Minister Stephen Harper on all our behalf, began by saying “The treatment of aboriginal children is a sad chapter in our history.” Since the 1870’s the Canadian government in partnership with churches began to take children from communities. In fact, the government was so thorough that there were entire communities devoid of children. The purpose was to “isolate children from their families, from their tradition, from their culture and from their social supports; to assimilate them into the dominant culture; to remove the Indian in the child.” This is all bad enough. What Prime Minister Harper did not say, (because it is not his job to say it- it is mine and it is yours as Christians), is that what made the forced sacrifice of these children that much more horrific was doing it in the name of the one we know as Jesus, love incarnate. It was done in the name of the one who would confer status on children in an ancient society that considered them status-less and unworthy of attention. It was done in the name of the Prince of Peace whom we sing about as holding children on his knee. In the name of he who said love your neighbour, or your neighbour’s children, as you have loved yourself, or your own children.

In the apology the Prime Minister acknowledged many children died in these schools. Parents were told their children had died but not how and not where they were buried. For such parents there can therefore be no closure. They are only left with awful thoughts, “what ifs” and terrible nightmares. There was a horrific mortality rate at these schools, one school in northern Alberta having a fifty percent mortality rate. What would Jesus say? Probably something like, “Do unto other’s children as you would have done unto your own.”

The apology was an amazing, holy, God filled moment for a variety of reasons. First, let’s talk about the elements of a *real* apology. An apology says “I am sorry” expressing regret and remorse. It says “I was wrong” articulating some way of accepting responsibility. It contains the words, “I am aware of how I hurt you” describing an awareness of realizing the impact. It includes, “What can I do to make it right” which is about making restitution and reparation. It says “I will try not to do that again” which means genuinely repenting and committing to changing behaviour. Finally it asks

“Will you please forgive me?” which is a requesting of forgiveness and an indication that you want to see relationship restored. The Apology also took a step further. Not only did the government pledge to make sure it would never happen again; it recognized the courage of survivors who came forward to talk about the abuse and fight for the rights of their people. The Prime Minister said that it was a credit to the strength of a people and their culture that survivors could even come through the generational experience let alone come through fighting for the dignity and rights of others.

It was amazing. There is something about doing the right thing that makes other right things possible. The Apology began by the Prime Minister thanking and acknowledging the head of the NDP, Jack Layton for his work, his persistence and assistance to him on this matter. I wondered if I was still in Canada. In this Holy moment Stephan Dion also stepped up and acknowledged that the Liberals had been in power for 70 years of the last one hundred years and therefore bore major responsibility. Jack Layton – told of testimony he had listened to, of horrific statistics and he graciously acknowledged Stephen Harper’s efforts in this task. The Bloc reminded us that Canada is only one of very few countries who refused to sign the UN declaration of the rights of Aboriginal Peoples thus holding us accountable for future commitment to the Apology. It was all holiness.

The most holy moment, came when it was time for the gathered Aboriginal peoples to speak. Aboriginal leaders were gathered at the centre of the House of Commons. I held my breath. What would they say? They had every right, *every right* to be bitter, angry, to say, we shall accept the apology when you deliver on it. I don’t think I could accept it. Could you? Phil Fontaine – Chief of the Assembly of First nations rose to speak. He had revealed some years ago the depth of sexual and physical abuse he had suffered as a child at Residential Schools. He of all people knows first hand the destruction that this torture wreaks upon an individual and a community. In his work as leader, he knows the stonewalling of governments on treaty rights. He knows the hatred, not too far from the surface of many white Canadians, particularly when the resolution of Treaty rights **costs us** something as individuals. What would he say about the sacrifice of his people’s children, generation after generation?

Our gospel passage today is Luke – 10: 40-42. We usually think that passage is about giving a cup of cold water to a little one – that this is what is required of *us*. It is a misreading of the text. The passage finishes off a point in the story of Luke in which Jesus is giving instructions to the disciples about how they are to be in the world. The disciples, he says, are to be on the receiving end of hospitality – they are to accept cups of cold water, meals of food and the odd room to sleep in as they travel. This is always very uncomfortable – receiving hospitality. It is often more comfortable to offer it than to receive it. To be dependent on other people’s hospitality is hard, not to mention precarious. Being the guest in other people’s homes is awkward. In this passage, Jesus is saying it is a Christian responsibility to receive hospitality. It is a form of grace – undeserved love.

That is what we received as Canadians from Phil Fontaine – the cool cup of water of friendship, outstretched in the Spirit of hospitality. Chief Fontaine declared that June 11th testified to the achievement of the impossible. He said that the survival of First Nations peoples has now been affirmed by the declaration within the House, “Our collective great house” and that we will never consider them again, “The Indian ‘problem’ for just being who they are.” He said “Finally we have heard Canada say ‘we are sorry.’ The survivors have stripped white supremacy of its legitimacy... We have always been an indispensable part of Canadian Identity and the attempts to erase our identity hurt us deeply but it also hurt ALL Canadians and impoverished the character of this nation.”

Chief Phil Fontaine, his voice breaking just a little bit, declared, “It is possible to end our collective nightmare together...the memories of residential schools cut like knives at our souls but together we will heal them...Now we can have a respectful and liberating relationship and we can be a great nation together.” He then offered us the ultimate in hospitality. Chief Fontaine offered us

hope, saying, “The ties that bind us are closer and stronger than those that separate us. The common road of hope can bring us to reconciliation. More than any laws, more than any claims and more than any settlements ever could. We reach out now to all Canadians in the spirit of reconciliation.”

My God. Can we bear it in our collective guilt, this offering of Grace, this Hope? It is a cup of water held out to us. What will we do with it, I wonder? What will YOU do with it?

Sources Used:

Craddock, Fred, B. Preaching Through the Christian Year A, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994.

Hare, Douglas R. A., Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.

Metzger, Bruce and Roland E. Murphy, ed., The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

[Toward Truth and Reconciliation Worship Service | Resources ...](#)

... Survey 2008. ... Resources for Congregations. **Toward Truth** and **Reconciliation** Worship Service. ...

www.united-church.ca/aboriginal/schools/resources/trservice - 20k

[PDF] www.united-church.ca/files/aboriginal/schools/resources/trservice

[Resources for Congregations | Indian Residential Schools](#)

... prepares us for beginning honest cross-cultural relationships. **Toward Truth** and **Reconciliation** Worship Service A worship service marking the 10th anniversary ...

www.united-church.ca/aboriginal/schools/resources -