

## HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

Romans 5: 6-11; Matthew 4: 12-17

In our latest Presbyterian Church newspaper called "Connections", you will read the story of Viv Ketchum. Viv is a member of "Place of Hope" Presbyterian Church in Winnipeg. Viv is also an indigenous woman. She writes of how she was taken from her parents by government officials when she was a child. She was placed in a Christian Residential school, then a series of foster homes, and then group homes. Once she was too old for a group home she was left on her own. These experiences broke her. The abuse she suffered became the pattern of her life. She continued this pattern by abusing herself with excessive alcohol and being in a relationship with an abusive partner. Once she became a mother under this abusive pattern, the child care system took over. Her children would fall into the same pattern she did under the same system.

However... she also writes about how this destructive cycle was broken. At a particularly low point in her life, an indigenous social worker confronted her with brutal honesty about her situation. She told Viv that Viv could change her own life. It wasn't the words the social worker used that were most compelling, but her approach. She was not disgusted with how terrible Viv looked or how badly her apartment smelled. Viv had just come off a drinking binge. Even though her head was foggy, the social worker was able to get through to her, telling her about her own journey and her own struggle with the bottle. She overcame it and was standing there in front of Viv dressed well and looking healthy.

The social worker's open acceptance opened the door to a new start. Viv is now a writer and journalist and posts a lot of stories and reflections in various Presbyterian church publications. She now also has grandchildren and she feels the destructive cycle has been broken in her family. Sadly, this is not the case for many...

And then there are those who never get the chance to grow up. In the past few years we've been getting news stories about the high rate of suicide and murder among indigenous youth. When you suffer abuse by adults who themselves have suffered

abuse, the destructiveness continues to the next generation. Abuse toward oneself or abuse toward others continues the cycle.

Then there is also the lesser known story of the fate of many children who never made it out of residential schools. Recently, we've heard about Chanie Wenjack, made famous by Gord Downie of the Tragically Hip. Downie created the musical project called "Secret Path," based on Chanie's story. Chanie was 12 years old when he died. He ran away from a residential school and was trying to walk hundreds of kilometers back to his home from where he was taken by government officials. He died on the way, 60 kilometers on route, cold, hungry and ill clad for winter weather. Sadly, Chanie was not the only casualty of residential schools in Canada. There were at least 6000 indigenous children who died that we know of. The shocking thing about Chanie's case, however, is that he was running away from a school here in Ontario run by our own Presbyterian Church. This school, called Cecilia Jeffrey, was only closed in 1976.

Residential schools were funded by the government, but run by our churches. How could this be, you must be thinking? Well, it was imagined that these children were living backwards and needed the kind of education and Christian civilization only we western people could provide them. The key was to get the native out of the Indian, to Canadianize and Christianize them. Living with the consequences today we realize how arrogant, blind and sinful such thinking and behaviour was.

So how do we deal with all these consequences? How do we deal with the reality that sin is a part of our history and needs to be addressed?

Well there are many ways people deal with sin in life that are not good. We can blame the victim of our sin for triggering us or causing us to sin. If only they were better people, less irritating people, more likeable people, more 'with-it' people, things could have gone differently. If only they would deal with their problems and not constantly get into a mess, blaming us for something that happened long ago. Everyone has to be responsible for their own life.

Another form of blame is not blaming the victim but someone else. After all, it wasn't our generation who started and supported residential schools. Why are we saddled with having to deal with the consequences? We think as individuals. We resist taking

collective responsibility for something other Canadians were much more directly responsible for implementing and maintaining.

Another way of responding to our sin is to try to minimize or deny it. We've all followed the recent news of the Canadian senator who tried to defend residential schools or at least the good intentions of many teachers and administrators. I've heard such defensiveness from some in our own denomination too who had links to some of the teachers and administrators of our own residential schools. Yes, some of these teachers and administrators may have been good people, well-meaning people. But they were part of a system that was terribly abusive and sinful. To assume that children could be removed from their families and communities and that they would be better off in these residential schools... Clearly, we were not putting ourselves in their shoes and thinking about our own children and grandchildren. Clearly there was a deep racism functioning that somehow indigenous families and communities were deficient and those children needed to be saved by being removed from their families and communities whereas our children are fine.

But then, there is the gospel. And as Christians, we follow the gospel. It is hard to understand how those who conceived of the residential schools believed they were following the gospel too. Racism blinds us. We see things a certain way and we are blind in many ways. We read the words of the gospel but fail to understand what the Spirit of God is telling us through the words.

So, what is the gospel telling us? Let's begin with our gospel reading. It is the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist has just been arrested. Jesus moves to Capernaum in Galilee where he will begin to teach and preach. What is the basis of his message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Let me put this into words we can all understand. Jesus is speaking as the Jewish Messiah to his own people the Jews from whom God wants to spread the light of his gospel to the world. The problem is the Jews are as embroiled in sin as the rest of the world. How can they be light from God to the world? They need to repent. To repent means to change direction, 180 degrees. Why must the people change direction? Because they are following leaders who are fuelling in them hate for enemies and a thirst for revenge and power over their enemies. The way you win in the world is to defeat your competition and humiliate those who have humiliated you.

Jesus is proclaiming that this is wrong. This is sinful. This is destructive. The people have to change their thinking and their attitudes 180 degrees. What the world needs is a different kind of fellowship – the kingdom of heaven. This fellowship is about relationships that are not based on competition or power-moves or defeat and vengeance toward enemies. This fellowship is about relationships based on love. And in a world broken by hurt, betrayal and damaged relationships love heals by becoming forgiveness. Forgiveness heals broken relationships and opens the door to the possibility of reconciliation. Reconciliation becomes a door to a new fellowship of love.

Jesus is proclaiming that if the people repent, God's dream of kingdom fellowship can be established. Repenting of sin, changing direction, forgiveness of sin and reconciliation. This is the pathway to re-establishing God's love as the rule of life.

Wow. Sounds wonderful. But is this what happens? Think about our world today. Think how difficult it is for people to repent of their hateful, resentful and prejudicial ways. Think how difficult it is for people to prioritize love when it involves repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. It's hard enough in families. It's even harder in the wider world.

It's no surprise then that the story of Jesus and his message ends up with a crucifixion. The first step was for the authorities to ignore Jesus. But once he starts to influence people and possibly turn them away from the agenda of hate and thirst for revenge and dominance, he becomes a threat. He must be stopped. Hate and hunger for power has one method. You crush your enemies and competitors. Jesus is killed.

But then there's the resurrection. The resurrection proclaims that Jesus wins. And Jesus wins not by using his enemies' methods against them. Jesus wins by the methods of the very same love he preached all his life - forgiveness and the offer of reconciliation. This is what the apostle Paul is talking about in our New Testament reading: "God proves God's love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us... For while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of God's Son... and more than that even, having been reconciled we will be saved by his new resurrected life which will now be our life too. Jesus forgives and opens the door to healing broken relationships through the offer of reconciliation. Even those who crucified him are welcomed if they are ready to change direction and walk through the door into God's kingdom fellowship of love.

And this brings it back to us – not only our personal lives and our personal relationships, but also our relationship as Canadians with indigenous peoples. The Truth and Reconciliation commission is very much a gospel-like attempt to find healing with indigenous brothers and sisters through repentance, confession and a search for reconciliation. It was commissioned by the government, but many communities and churches also participated. Even before the Canadian government began this process more recently, however, our own Presbyterian Church in Canada began a journey of repentance, confession and a search for forgiveness and reconciliation.

In 1994, our General Assembly delivered a confession to the indigenous peoples of our nation. Let me quote the last two clauses of this confession: "We regret that there are those whose lives have been deeply scarred by the effects of the mission and ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. For our Church, we ask forgiveness of God. It is our prayer that God, who is merciful, will guide us in compassionate ways towards helping them to heal. We ask, also, for forgiveness from Aboriginal peoples. What we have heard we acknowledge. It is our hope that those whom we have wronged with a hurt too deep for telling will accept what we have to say. With God's guidance, our Church will seek opportunities to walk with Aboriginal peoples to find healing and wholeness together as God's people."

Whoever we are, we all need repentance. Sin is a part of our lives individually and collectively. We all need healing in spirit as much as in our thinking and embodied life. We all need to learn the difficult art of forgiveness. But we are also part of the resurrection life of God's people in Christ. This means we are made for reconciliation and the fellowship of love.

Even though our world continues to be broken and scarred, may we as Christians continue to model something better. Sin is real, but so is God's healing and reconciling love. May we experience it afresh at this time of our lives, in our personal relationships as part of the church and as part of this nation; Amen.