

A Sermon for Sunday, June 21, 2015
First Nation Sunday

(preached by the Rev. Dr. Will Kunder at St. Andrew's United Church, Sudbury)

Thank you for the invitation to join you in worship this morning. It's good to be back with you. For most of my adult life, I lived, taught, and later ministered in First Nation communities. And, so, I want to begin by reminding myself that for thousands of years before the Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850 was signed, First Nations people have walked on this land; their relationship with the land is at the centre of their lives and spirituality. We are worshipping this "First Nation Sunday" on the traditional territory of the Anishinabek Nation and acknowledge their stewardship of this land throughout the ages.

This is the first National Aboriginal Day – and "First Nations Sunday" since the end of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 3 weeks ago today, with a huge "Walk for Reconciliation," the final events of the TRC began.

In many ways, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process began right here in Sudbury.... on an August afternoon in 1986...

Twenty-nine years ago this summer at the 31st General Council, the United Church became acutely aware that its Aboriginal brothers and sisters had something against it. Alberta Billy stood up and expressed the need in her heart for an apology from the United Church for what the church had done to Aboriginal people.

Twenty-nine years ago this summer, meeting here at Laurentian University, then-Moderator Bob Smith offered that apology, acknowledging the church's own legacy of attitudes of cultural and spiritual superiority, our own blindness to the values and gifts of native people and their spirituality, our own complicity in the destruction of Aboriginal culture.

He read these words:

Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality.

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

We imposed our civilization as a condition for accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed.

Two years later, Edith Memnook responded on behalf of the Native community. In the wisdom of the Elders, the apology was received and acknowledged but it would not be accepted until it was lived out in action. The church was being challenged to "walk the talk," to move from acknowledgement to the work of reconciling. A stone cairn was erected on the site of the apology but left unfinished to symbolize that more work on "reconciling" remained to be done.

In the United Church, we acknowledge that reconciliation is part of the ministry to which we are called and we understand ourselves to be. In our New Creed we say: *"We are not alone, we live in God's world. We believe in God who has created and is creating, Who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, Who works in us and others by the Spirit."*

For 20 years, I have seen evidence of crucifixion and of resurrection in the work I do. My several ministries within the United Church have involved addressing the legacy of Indian residential schools. The United, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches have found themselves on a very painful journey over the past two decades of facing the consequences of our complicity and role in a system meant to assimilate and, in effect, eradicate Aboriginal peoples in this country.

This may not have been the intent of many of our forebears who worked in our schools, (it certainly was not my intent while teaching in and administering residential schools) but as churches, we have had to face the hard truth, told by so many courageous survivors, of the horrors of physical, sexual and psychological abuse inflicted on so many children. Nearly 50% of the 80,000 former students who are still alive today have claims for criminal abuse. Abuse was not the exception in the schools. And this does not include the loneliness and loss of family contact and of language, the denigration of culture and heritage, and the loss of identity. As many as 4000 children are believed to have died in the schools. All of this was the result of a government policy and church missionary work intended to destroy them by re-making them in the image of the settler. Prime Minister Harper acknowledged this in the government's apology to former students of Indian residential schools in 2008, *"Two primary objectives of the Residential School system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child". Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country"*.

The impacts of this policy and history have been profound. Aboriginal communities and generations of their people bear the marks of poverty, disconnection, dysfunction, hopelessness, abuse, marginalization and racism. John Ralston Saul in his recent book, *The Comeback*, argues that *"the great issue of our time"* is justice for Aboriginal peoples, because it is the great outstanding issue of fundamental *injustice* in Canada, one with a long and destructive history.

Our churches bear the marks of this history as well. We have experienced a kind of death of innocence as the mostly invisible history of residential schools has become visible. We have had our assumptions that we were "saving the savage" challenged and * our presumptions that we had the truth shaken. We have had our hearts broken, and broken open, by listening to the real-life experiences of former students and their families

- in the claims they have filed against us,
- at the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,
- at survivor gatherings,
- and in private conversations. This is where the "statistics" become *real*.

Early in my ministry at the Six Nations Reserve, near Brantford, I have searing memories of standing in the basement of a former Anglican school, while a man connected with one of my congregations told of how he and other students looked anxiously out the window down the long driveway from mid-June on, for a glimpse of their parents, coming to get them for the summer -- and how he realized by mid-July for nine straight years that no one was coming for him. I have stood in the semi-darkness of an abandoned office in a United Church residential school, shortly before it was torn down, with a former student, who found the courage to revisit the room 30 years after she had been sexually abused there to confront her demons. I have heard a former student tell of how his Achilles tendons were cut to prevent him from running away from a place that he, and many, many others, experienced as incarceration. I travelled to the home communities of 6 of my students who committed suicide while I served as their principal - their protector - in the residential school system.

Is it possible that this broken relationship can be healed? After all the pain and suffering and death, can there be new life? Where is the evidence?

The grandmother of former National Chief Shawn Atleo said, at the time of the apology by the Prime Minister, "*Grandson, they are beginning to see us!*" The invisible history of the residential schools and of the current realities in Aboriginal communities is beginning to be seen by Canadians.

My friend, George, who I spoke of earlier, turned his painful experience at the Mohawk Institute into an opportunity for helping others to learn about that history at the former school which is now the Woodlands Cultural Centre. In spite of her experience at the school, my friend has devoted her life to diaconal ministry within the church continually reminding us of the importance of listening to Aboriginal voice and wisdom when we were not very open to it. George and Bernice are evidence of resurrection. They "embody" it!

The "Idle No More" movement is evidence of grassroots momentum for change and reconciliation. And Canadians are responding, the media is paying attention and high profile Canadians are calling for social and political changes through organizations such as Canadians For a New Partnership. The Provincial Premiers are pressing the federal government to act on the issue of clean drinking water and adequate housing on reserves, equitable funding for First Nation education, and the staggering number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls.

In each of the denominations that ran residential schools there is also evidence of healing and new life. Each has repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, a European and Christian worldview from the 15th century which undergirds the assumptions of superiority that authorized explorers to claim and subdue and appropriate any lands they encountered.

The United Church is attempting to live out its apologies by revising its crest to incorporate Aboriginal presence and wisdom, and by initiating programs of education and right relations.

We are taking seriously the 94 "Calls to Action" contained in the final Truth and Reconciliation report. And will be making decisions at this summer's General Council about how we will offer solidarity for the report.

We have a long way to go yet, and though we bear the scars of our complicity in this horrendous injustice, I believe that evidence of resurrection, of new life, of new understanding and new commitment is emerging all around us.

Jesus commissioned the motley group of fearful, confused and frail human followers to become the visible, living, empowered evidence of resurrection by undertaking a ministry of reconciliation. He called them to “embody” the resurrection, if you like. In II Corinthians, Paul amplifies this call, *“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”*

We too are called to embody the resurrection. Every time we choose love over hate, goodness over evil, truth over lies; every time we offer compassion where there is suffering, and hope where there is despair, every time we work to right injustice, we live out the ministry of reconciliation. We become living evidence of resurrection!

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was established under the terms of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement to which our church is a party, came to the end of its 6-year mandate a few weeks ago. It has done the historic work of exposing the truth of our tragic past but will also point the way forward to a reconciled future for our children and grandchildren.

We just marked 90 years of life as The United Church of Canada. So much yet to do.

We do not always see or hear with our hearts. We do not always act with justice. We sometimes feel that we weren't there when the children were taken from their parents and sent away to school. Our parents weren't there nor were our grandparents. We wonder why we are being held to account for the actions of people that we didn't know and, so long ago.

But, we are the bearers of many blessings of our ancestors of blood or faith. And so, we must also bear their burdens and responsibilities.

The last Residential School closed in 1996, that was in our time and we did not know the truth.

We seek forgiveness for what has been done to God's children.

We seek acceptance of our commitment to justice and our desire to walk towards reconciliation.

We ask for God's grace to heal all of us.

Full reconciliation may not happen in my lifetime or in yours. But our faithfulness to walk this journey and the faithfulness of our children will determine whether the cairn is ever finished-and more importantly it will determine whether we are able to arrive at the vision held out by Chief Bobby Joseph who said, "We need to reach a place where we can reconcile, and at the end of the day, your children and mine can walk forward together, as equals. There are a lot of people in Aboriginal communities who are still very angry. But I have hope that little by little, heart by heart, we will begin to heal and learn to walk forward together." May it be so. Amen.