

How do we listen?

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Remember those intermissions in the Gospel stories of Jesus, the busy days Jesus had, but then he went away somewhere quiet so Jesus could talk to God? Quiet to pray? To listen? To be honest, I see so much in the Bible where there is talking, teaching, of laying out rules, conflicts, and reconciliations – lots of action.

But there are, also, moments of quiet. Perhaps we can pay attention to them too. In the Hebrew Scripture, there is a wonderful story about how God is experienced in quiet. The prophet Elijah¹ is being pursued by evil queen Jezebel, he has run as far as he can. Exhausted, he falls to the ground, presumably prepared to die. It is in that moment of resignation, too tired to fight anymore, that Elijah he experiences the fullness of God's presence.

Did God come to him, or, was the Holy Presence with him the whole time, and Elijah didn't always notice? Faced with the fray of life, was Elijah hearing only his inner voice in his time of crisis, but when he gives up, lets go, he hears the gentle murmur of God, a sound only heard minds and hearts are quiet?

How rare and precious are those moments for you and me? I'm wondering this week, as we celebrate the power of forest, even as human industry has pillaged old growth forests, and on this week as we take time to reflect on the tragic legacy of Residential Schools, and the Churches' role in that system.

I'm wondering, has the Christian Church been so busy preaching, and teaching – essentially, hearing its own voice – that it has not taken enough quiet moments to truly listen for the quiet murmur of God in Creation. Do we listen intently enough to the voices of those being harmed by the church?

European Churches arriving here on Turtle Island surely must not have been listening enough to the voice of Jesus, his teaching about unconditional love. It is worth asking how Christianity missed that message of love as it dismantled Indigenous spirituality, families, and culture. So, perhaps the lesson for us today, is, that Christianity needs to listen more now than ever before. We can never listen enough – listening for that voice calling us to love God, love neighbour, love the enemy – love, love, love.

That is a difficult spiritual practice for me – how about you? Sitting quietly – waiting, listening. When we listen, and it seems there is no voice, how tempted are we to allow our mind to work again, our own voices filling in the quiet.

In the early 1900s, the Residential School system was in place. Was no one paying attention to the evils of that system? Dr. Peter Bryce was a public health official with the federal Ministry of the Interior, he was sounding the alarm over the inhumane conditions

¹ The book of 1 Kings, chapter 19

he found in the country's residential school system.² He repeatedly tried to spur the government to action for decades, and was ignored. He published "The Story of a National Crime: An Appeal for Justice to the [Natives] of Canada," a 24-page exposé on what he discovered. He carefully studied the statistics, the high incidence of tuberculosis in residential schools and massive death toll. It is difficult to fathom how the last Residential School closed only in 1996. It has taken a long time for Church to listen.

Childish as it may seem, our Reading today personifies forest, giving Creation a voice. If we walk through a wooded area today, what would we hear? Perhaps some variation on, "Here, have some life-giving oxygen. You're welcome."

The Le Grands had a unique opportunity to visit British Columbia and a camp where old growth forest advocates blocked the clear cutting of ancient forests. There were some unique individuals in that community, I might dare to say even strange.³ But I was amazed at how clearly they heard the voices 1,000 year old Douglas Firs.

Let us take time for quiet today. If we can find a wooded area, or even just a tree, listen for its gentle murmur. Listen to the leaves rustled by the breeze. The good news is, we are on a healing path, righting the wrongs of the past, the United Church of Canada among other Christian denominations. We might be tempted to respond, "Well Dave, we've learned, and surely we would never do that again."

We are always in danger of becoming busy again; speaking so much that we forget to listen. So this week, in response to the Day of Truth and Reconciliation, we are challenged to ask ourselves: Where are the voices of God that have been muted in the name of progress?

May we have the courage to unmute the voices that might teach us another way more like that of Jesus. Amen.

² "Meet the residential school whistleblower everyone ignored." By Jenny Lamothe, Sudbury.com Nov 3, 2022. Found at <https://www.sudbury.com/local-news/meet-the-residential-school-whistleblower-everyone-ignored-6050787>

³ If you're interesting in learning more about those who speak up for the Rainforests of British Columbia, Google "The Rainforest Flying Squad". On Facebook they are at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3000229293436275>