

Sermon: Truth & Reconciliation: like a watered garden
20 Sep 2015, 10:45am
Wildwood Mennonite Church

Scripture: John 9:1-12, Isaiah 58:1-12

Resources: Jennifer Henry's sermon on Isaiah 58, "On the Edge of Wilderness" \ EKH, "Truth-telling and Reconciliation on the Prairies," in *Vision*, Fall 2013
TRC – Calls to Action

Good morning ...

So glad we began this morning with Ada's dedication, with celebrating a little one. There is a teaching here in Treaty 6 Territory from long before any of our families arrived here, a teaching about 7 generations. When making decisions, consider the wellbeing of the next 7 generations. We have Ada and Rehema and Rohan here to help us remember this.

Last week when Krista was reflecting on experiences at the Mennonite World Conference gathering, she wondered aloud how the Spirit of God is moving here, within and beyond these newly constructed walls. Where are we waking up? Where are we acting for hope and for peace?

This morning I would like to share some of my reflections about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process that is just now coming to an end after almost 7 years of activity across Canada. I was privileged to be in Ottawa, together with Cheryl and Rohan and Ben, at the beginning of June for the ceremonial closing of the TRC and for me it was a very rich time of collecting the stories and learnings of the past years. Seven years ago, on the 11th of June in 2008, Prime Minister Stephen

Harper stood in Parliament and offered an historic Apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools. The Prime Minister acknowledged and asked forgiveness for a huge collection of injustices in our country that spanned 150 years, 7 generations. Let me remind you of some of the Prime Minister's words ... (a few quotes)

[quotes from <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2008/06/11/prime-minister-harper-offers-full-apology-behalf-canadians-indian-residential>]

The Truth and Reconciliation has been led by three incredible commissioners – Justice Murry Sinclair, Dr. Marie Wilson, and Chief Wilton Littlechild – who have travelled to many, many communities across our country to hear stories, to share what they were learning, and to shape a new history, a more honest and painful and helpful history. They hosted 7 large national gatherings, one of which was in Saskatoon in 2012 and several of us participated in that event. Over the last years, I have been able to participate in several regional and national TRC events and they have changed my life.

And here I would like to come back to our gospel reading this morning from John chapter 9. The story is about a man who was born blind. The disciples ask Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Now this may seem like an odd question to us, but it fit with the worldview of the time, that something considered to be a physical defect was caused by someone's sin. We actually do still carry this understanding with us to some extent, maybe not related to blindness, but other realities people live with. Jesus responds to the disciples with something like, “You're asking the wrong question. You've missed the point.” And then he says something about God's works being revealed. And then, Jesus spits on the ground

and mixes up some mud which he smears on the man's eyes, and tells the man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Questions about sin don't necessarily lead us to God, but healing, that can lead us to God.

When I first read this story with Indian Residential Schools in my mind, I immediately saw myself in the story. I am a woman born blind. I was born 3 decades before the last Residential Schools closed, and growing up I was entirely blind to that reality. I knew nothing about it. I was socialized into the Mennonite story in Canada. I learned about the Mennonite migrations of the late 1800s, the 1920s and 1940s. I heard stories of people overcoming hardships and prospering in this new land. I heard stories of community sacrifice for the shared goals of religious education and Mennonite identity. The stories that lived here in this land for thousands of years before Mennonites, or stories of Indigenous communities here when we arrived, these stories I did not know. I was blind to them. So, who sinned? Me? My parents? Jesus ignored that question and went about healing the man born blind, offering grace and wholeness. And I notice in the story that Jesus didn't impose healing upon this man. The blind man actually had a hand in his own healing. Jesus smeared the spit-mud on his eyes but then it was up to the man to go and wash in the pool. So what does my healing from my blindness look like?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission identified and honoured the role of the listener, the listening witness. They offered that role to us as non-Indigenous people, as settlers on this land. They offered us the role of witness. And this was an opportunity for healing ourselves from our blindness.

At TRC gatherings, survivors of Residential Schools were invited to tell their personal stories to the Commissioners, and we were invited to surround them and to

listen. We use the phrase “to bear witness,” and we do have bear it, to carry it, hold it, and sometimes it’s hard, it hurts, it’s heavy and we cannot pretend everything is okay. And while it can be very hard, it is also very human. Listening makes us human. It connects us. We can hear each other into being and reshape ourselves, restore our sight. What a jumbled mess of words and questions and amazement stir around in our guts and souls as we accept the role of listening.

And what have I heard? Oh so many, many things – pain and anger, hope and dreams, startling bits, jokes and memories, hooks into my own life, wisdom and teachings, redemption, love. We’ve been invited in to a most intimate re-storying of our community and our country. The stories are disturbing, troubling, heartbreaking. And our hearts should be broken by these things – children snatched from their parents and grandparents, stripped of their identity, isolated, abused, never told they were precious. Our hearts should be broken wide open to make room for transformation.

Many Mennonite settlers came to the prairies to escape violence in Ukraine and elsewhere. We have benefitted immensely from the treaty negotiation processes, which opened up large tracts of land for Mennonite settlers to recreate communities based on language, religion, culture, and communal practices. At the very same time and in the very same landscape, Indigenous communities, generation after generation were shattered by the Indian Residential School policy and the Indian Act, which systematically sought to strip Indigenous peoples of their languages, religion, culture, and communal practices. Now some of us have said, “but that wasn’t us.”

Mennonites didn’t do those things. It was the Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians and United Church folk who made the agreements with the Canadian government. But that’s kinda like the question, “Who sinned.” And, actually, history is more

complicated. “Mennonites were both actively and passively, officially and informally, involved in a system imbued with good intentions but touched deeply by paternalism and racism.” (TRC and Mennonite Church Canada) During WWII Mennonite Conscientious Objectors were placed in Residential Schools and Day Schools in Manitoba, replacing United Church teachers who were serving in the military. In the 1950s and 60s Mennonites ran Indian schools and homes in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario. From 1962-1989, three residential schools in Northwestern Ontario were operated by Mennonites, and from 1973-1990, Mennonite volunteers served at Montreal Lake/Timber Bay Children’s Home here in Saskatchewan.

The TRC is a gift to our Mennonite church as well, a church that preaches peace and reconciliation, but that is also implicated in harm and violence. Isaiah 58 might be a faithful companion for us as we journey into truth and reconciliation. But a warning, those prophets, they say hard things. This text, which Tom read earlier, is poignant in its challenge to us but also in its promise.

[notes from Jennifer Henry’s sermon, “On the Edge of Wilderness”]

This Isaiah text is most likely from the period when the people of Israel are returning from Babylon, struggling with the possibilities and also the challenges of community reconstruction after trauma. They are holding in their hearts the hopeful promises that come to us from earlier in Isaiah, even while facing the day to day practicalities of nation-building anew. It is an unsettling time.

We do not know the precise controversy that provokes verses 1-5. Perhaps there were rivalries between different forms of religious observance – perhaps the “hymnal vs. worship band” controversy of the day. But the prophetic message is clear: to turn away from empty fasts and from religious piety that serves primarily one’s own

interests. Ouch. The critique here is not about the irreligious – those who do not know Yahweh or who have forsaken God – but those whose religion is found to be false pretense, missing the point.

Speaking into our Canadian context, this feels like a piercing challenge. Most early settlers on the prairies, Mennonites included, were not irreligious. Christianity was part of the architecture of agricultural settlement. Religion in fact fuelled the colonization of Canada. But did Christianity, including the Mennonite version, get distorted by racial superiority, by interests in land and security, by a missionary zeal? In the name of Christ, Canadian churches sat with the government and collaborated in a more-than-century long project of boarding schools that intended to “kill the Indian in the child.” Seven generations of Indigenous children – small children – were isolated from their families, cultures, languages, and traditions in these Indian Residential Schools run by the churches.

Seen through Isaiah’s critical eyes, and with the benefit of hindsight, what might we call that distorted sense of mission? A self-serving religion? I fear it might be so, at least in part. The churches not only failed to do justice – to accomplish the compassionate justice that is the challenge here in Isaiah – but the churches actually perpetuated injustices in religion’s name.

But, it’s too easy to criticize our religious ancestors for their practice of faith. The challenge of Isaiah in the present is to ask: “Have we really fully turned away from this kind of religion?” Are there colonial remnants in our faith? Does our religion continue to serve our own survival and security ahead of justice? Are we actively seeking reconciliation with people who have been harmed by the church in the past?

Isaiah is clear: true religion embraces the ways of justice. Beginning in verse 6 the prophet delivers the call to “loose the bonds of injustice ... let the oppressed go free.” Offer bread, home, clothing, hospitality. True worship is expressions of justice. This turns on its head all the ways that we make false separations between faith and peacebuilding, between worship and acts of justice. Isaiah is saying that our actions of justice are in fact our prayers. Justice is the fast that God requires.

So, we can apologize for the history of Indian Residential Schools, but that apology means little if we are not committed today to working toward justice for Indigenous communities. In Ottawa in June on the day of the release of the TRC findings, I was seated behind rows and rows of survivors of IRS. As the commissioners spoke, I was filtering their words through these now old bodies of RS survivors whose child bodies were so affected by the IRS policy and practice. An amazing test of the TRC work. The words of the commissioners had to ring true through these bodies who still live with the impacts. Everyday. And who are waiting. For justice. For significant changes – MMIW, lands and resources, languages and cultures ...

The apology is only words on a page until we act it out. Let's do that. Let us make the apology come alive and breathe in our communities and our churches, in our schools and workplaces. What is your sphere of influence? Gathered in this room is ... the educational system, the healthcare system, the thrift shop circles, service industry and much more. So much potential for good relations.

If we can do this, then there is a promise for us in the Isaiah text. If we embrace justice, then we will find our true identity. We will be given a new name “You shall be called repairers of the breach, restorers of the streets to live in.” If we live justly, our “bones will be made strong and we shall be like a watered garden.” Earlier this

summer, many of us were waiting for a long soaking rain to give life to our gardens. If we live justly, we create life giving spaces like well-watered gardens. And, we get new names, maybe like “treaty people,” or “friends.”

We can, with clear-eyed, restored vision, choose in small and large ways to be repairers of the breach, restorers of the streets, to create places of reconciliation that feel like well-watered gardens.

I need this promise of restoration in Isaiah to keep my vision clear and my hope strong for all of our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, for whom we want only healing, wholeness and love.

I offer this a poem, which came to me after being in Ottawa in June, as a closing this morning. The photos are taken by my friend Alison Ralph.

I

I am a woman born blind
 socialized into a colonial story
 with church collusion
 was it my sin
 or my parents'
 but now my eyes
 have been washed
 with the mud of survivors' stories
 and I am beginning
 to see



II

in front of me
 sit rows and rows
 of survivors
 I receive the words
 of the commissioners
 filtered
 through these now old bodies
 which carry within them
 child bodies
 taken
 from circles of love
 humiliated
 abused
 buried in unmarked graves



a massive test
for something so small as words
to ring true
through the bodies of children
listening for
acknowledgement
recognition
dignity
love



III

a horrific moral wound
intergenerational trauma
cultural genocide
listen
no matter how uncomfortable
an important lesson
awaits



IV

the commissioners
are midwives of a new day
delivering us out of the dark
toward love and respect
with art and dance
drum and song
reminding us
to be human
together



V

ninety-four calls to action
no stones left unturned
let justice roll down like waters
righteousness like a deep river



VI

we are kin
made so by treaties
and the creator
do not turn yourselves
from your own kin
walk in a good way
toward reconciliation



through reparation and restitution
languages and cultures
lands and resources
do justice
love kindness
walk humbly
be gentle
with the children
and grandchildren
and great grandchildren



VII

back home
 along the south saskatchewan river
 where my grandmother
 coaxed vegetables and roses
 from the sandy soil
 providing feasts for our bodies and souls
 what will I do with my reclaimed sight
 the test of our love
 will always be
 the tender hearts
 of all the children



- emkh, 8june2015

For further reading: TRC Findings <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>

Response of the Churches to the TRC http://www.anglican.ca/news/response-of-the-churches-to-the-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada/3004539/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+acc-news+%28Anglican+Church+of+Canada+News+Stories%29

John 9, Amos 5, Isaiah 58, Micah 6