

Shame!

I've known about the atrocities of Indian Residential Schools for a long time. I first learned of them when I was at Seminary and shortly after graduating I met an Indigenous priest who was working with the Six Nations near Brantford, Ontario. He had been a residential school survivor and was very hesitant to share his stories. They were simply too painful.

Just imagine you are at home on an ordinary Saturday afternoon. Your kids are playing with their friends at the park when there's a knock at the door. You open it and a piece of paper is thrust into your hands, written in a language you cannot read. The people at the door are dressed officially, in some kind of uniform and they are speaking to you in a language that you cannot understand.

In the distance you can hear the sound of children's voices and you try to push past them to get to your children, but you are held tightly. The children are bundled into vehicles and whisked away. You gather with your neighbours, trying to figure out just what happened, but nobody understands the language that was spoken. Nobody has any idea where your kids have been taken.

How would you feel? What would you do?

The Residential School System was a part of how Canada became a Nation and how settler colonialism took shape in Canada. Other measures of colonial control over First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples are all closely tied to the Residential School System.

In BC there were 18 Federal-Church operated residential schools: Ahousaht, Alberni, Cariboo, Christie, Coqualeetza, Cranbrook, Kamloops, Kitimaat, Kuper Island, Lejac, Lower Post, Port Simpson, Lytton, Mission, Alert Bay, Sechelt, Squamish and Anahim Lake. The first school opened in Mission, BC (St. Mary's) in 1867; it was the final school to close in BC in 1984. The Catholic run Kamloops school became one of the largest schools in the residential school system, with more than 500 students enrolled in the early 1950s.

Indian Residential Schools were created to assimilate Indigenous, Métis and Inuit children to settler society. Their purpose was, as described in 1920 by Duncan Campbell Scott, "to get rid of the Indian problem.... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department." (Scott, Dr. D. C. (1920). Department of Indian Affairs, 1913 – 1932)

This entailed preventing Indigenous children from speaking their native language, from using their Indigenous name or practising their Indigenous culture. The children were forced into scratchy uniforms, their feet were forced from moccasins into tight leather shoes. And worst of all, their long black hair, symbolic of identity, power and strength was cut. All because the settler communities believed that Indigenous culture was an oxymoron and they needed to become God-fearing, English Speaking, brown skinned settlers.

These atrocious acts of cultural and physical genocide were carried out by my ancestors in the Anglican Church and United Church. Because of this I feel profound shame. The Church to whom I have devoted my life was a tool of desecration, of murder, and of genocide. Assimilation was the goal.

Generations of Indigenous parents were separated from their children. How do you learn to parent if your children are taken away? If your children were fortunate enough to come home, they refused to speak their Native language or practice their Native customs. They had new English names and were taught that how they were raised was wrong and even shameful. Could you imagine?

In 2016 I had the honour of holding space at a Kairos event in London, Ontario where many Residential School Survivors came and shared their stories with Church and community leaders as part of a Truth and Reconciliation Gathering. I had an interment of ashes at a cemetery not far from where we were meeting, and had let the organizers know I would be slipping out to conduct the ceremony and would be back afterwards.

There was a woman only a few years older than me, who was talking about how the residential school system had destroyed her mother's culture and

when it came time for her to go to school, she was unprepared for the sterile and cold environment. She went to residential school because that was the only option. It was against the law to withhold your children from school. She described things that made me physically shudder and brought tears to my eyes. I felt unable to look away and at one point my eyes locked on hers.

I caught the time out of the corner of my eye and knew I needed to leave for the interment. I stood up and apologised, stopping at the door to ask the organizer to express my apologies for having to leave in the middle of her presentation.

By the time I finished the interment and returned to the Church where we were gathering, lunch was coming to an end. One of the ladies in the kitchen saw me come in and gave me a bowl of piping hot soup and a freshly baked bun. It tasted incredible.

As I was finishing up, I saw the woman who had been speaking, come into the room. I stood up and realised she was walking towards me. In unison we apologised to each other. I shook my head and explained that I had to leave to conduct an interment of ashes at the cemetery. I wanted to apologise for leaving before she had finished speaking.

She laughed and said she was apologising because she thought her story had hurt me and she wanted to make sure that I was alright. We stood, embracing each other's arms, both crying and laughing.

We went back into the room and continued listening, but sitting beside each other. Every now and then her hand would take mine and we would sit quietly listening to another person share their pain through their stories and survival.

By the end of the day, everyone present was exhausted. At the closing session I asked how we move from sharing experience to true reconciliation. I was told three things needed to happen for reconciliation to take hold.

The first is acknowledgement of hurt. Accepting responsibility without trying to explain. For example, "I acknowledge that my actions hurt you, but I was

only following orders" is not a proper acknowledgment. "I acknowledge that my actions hurt you" is a proper acknowledgment.

The second is a heartfelt apology. "I'm sorry you were hurt" is not the same as "I'm sorry I hurt you" or "I'm sorry my actions cause you hurt".

The third is to make amends. This is where the rubber hits the road.

One of the most horrific examples of continuing abuse to First Nations Communities is the lack of access to safe water. There are First Nations communities who have had boil water advisories in place for 25 years or more! Now, we in Fernie, are used to boil water advisories annually for a couple of weeks to a couple of months in the Spring/Summer season. Imagine the howl and cry if we were told that we'd have to boil our water for 25 years?!

The federal government promised in 2015 to end all boil water advisories to First Nations Reserves by 2020. While many water advisories have been lifted between 2015 and 2020; of the 193 First Nations Communities in B.C. there are still 18 water advisories over 16 First Nations in B.C. Progress is being made, but it's not enough.

My ancestors caused, in many cases, irreparable harm to the bodies, hearts, minds and souls of helpless Indigenous children. The remains of 215 children were found in Kamloops, 3 ½ weeks ago. We know that this is the beginning of something both horrifying and, with the Creator's grace, a concrete way to make amends.

At the recent Pacific Mountain Region AGM, a proposal was passed to work with the Alberni First Nations in repatriating the remains of the children with their families, or if there is no family remaining, to re-inter them with appropriate customs. We will need to purchase the ground penetrating radar to begin the process. The United Church has committed to working with Tseshaht First Nation in Port Alberni to change the former Alberni Indian Residential School into a place of healing and learning. The building will house an Interpretive Centre, a museum, will offer healing opportunities and ways to teach settlers about the history of the Indian Residential Schools.

This gives me hope, that while my ancestors used hatred and ignorance in their desire to assimilate, I commit to learning from my Indigenous siblings in order to pave a road from assimilation to reconciliation.

This road will take a long time to build. It will be filled with many tears, some anger and some fear. Yet if we commit to doing the hard work of reconciliation we need to remember that acknowledgment comes first, then apology, then amends.

One of the concrete ways we can do this is through studying and learning the Truth and Reconciliation 94 Calls to Action as well as the 46 Articles of the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, also known as UNDRIP. More information will be forthcoming on this.

I truly believe that even though we did not know those 215 children were buried in mass unmarked graves, the Creator did and has remained with them. The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Philippi reminds them "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you". (Philippians 4.9, NRSV)

We must remember the sins of the past, in order that they will never be repeated. It hurts to sit with shame. Yet it is necessary, in order to move towards action, and through that action, move towards the light.

Following this Sermon I have assembled a series of slides that I call "Images of Reconciliation". While watching the images we will hear Corey Payette singing "Gimikwenden Ina" from his musical written about an Indian residential school in Northern Ontario, called "Children of God."

From John's Gospel "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it". (John 1.4, NRSV) We must live as children of the light. If we seek only to act in the dark, we are not living into God's light. In order to live into God's light, we must love everyone as God has loved us. Then, and only then, when we look into the faces of strangers, and those different from us, will we truly see the face of God, reflected no longer in the face of a stranger, but in the face of a sibling - a child of God.

Amen

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Sermon for National Indigenous Day
20 June 2021
Philippians 4.4-9
John 1.1-18