

Sunday, September 26, 2021

Colossians 3:12-17 John 17: 20-26 Luke 4:16-21

“Prayerful Words- Indigenous Awareness”

Our current sermon theme is words, words and actions and specifically today it is “prayerful words” which reflects what we as disciples of Jesus are called to share with God not just when we are in need, but when we can truly rejoice and offer God our praise and thanksgiving. We are a blessed people living in a country that produces abundant crops, has rivers and lakes galore and its people are a mosaic of the diversity of people from around the world.

This spring as a country many Canadians of all backgrounds were in shock when the news story broke of the discovery of children’s bodies on the grounds of a former residential school in British Columbia. There was confusion, lament, grief, mourning, hurt anger and more questions than answers. Many Canadians did not know that residential schools existed nor did they know that over 150,000 Metis, Inuit and First Nations children were sent to church-run schools. These children were removed from their families, forced them to speak English and French and disconnected them from their culture and traditions. This occurred between the 1860s until 1990s and the purpose of the residential schools was to assimilate the younger generation into Canadian society as they adopted Christianity. The schools were federally funded for the children who did not have a day school within 5 km from their home. The churches involved were asked to do this by the government of the time so mission workers from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and after church union in 1925, The United Church of Canada established many schools across the country—(MAP photo.)

One of the largest residential school was constructed in Spanish, Ontario (between Sault Ste Marie and Sudbury.) Original buildings were constructed in 1850 at Wikwemikong, but when fires occurred two new schools were built. St. Peter’s Clavier’s School- 1911 with a capacity for 180 boys and St. Joseph’s School for Girls constructed in 1916 with a capacity for 150 girls. The schools were constructed on a 1000-acre lot located at the mouth of the Spanish River. These schools like those across the country were seen through the public eye, as a positive move designed to teach the children out of a “life of poverty, dirt and ignorance”.
PHOTO Spanish Res Schools

Students were educated by Jesuit priests or Sisters in moral, academic and industrial training. Classes operated for half the day while for the duration of the day the students would be responsible for the entire maintenance of the grounds including cooking, cleaning, laundry, and farming. The idea was that the school also had to be self-sustaining as little funding from the government kept these schools going. Children grew their own food, made their own clothes and raised and sold livestock including cattle, chickens and hogs. Children also milled the wheat, baked bread, forged shoes for the horses; cut hides and made shoes and tailored shirts, pants and pajamas. The school drew Aboriginal children from reserves across Ontario

some of the whom were orphans; others committed to the institution as punishment for some misdemeanor; and a few were enrolled by their parents in order to receive some education and training.

PHOTOS

What occurred in these residential schools has left generations of Indigenous people without the ability to speak their native language, lost cultural experiences and the inability to understand family life. Native languages were forbidden in the school except on Sundays, Thursdays and holidays. The children were punished for speaking in their mother tongue. Punishment varied from school to school and depended upon who was in charge. Health care was the responsibility of the Indian Department, yet they were slow to respond with medicine, dental care and even tonsillitis treatment. Sickesses were prevalent and treatments were not always available. This led to the deaths of children often without notifying parents and as we are continuing to learn, in unmarked graves.

The United Church of Canada has a long history of working with first nations and Indigenous people. It was in 1986 that an Apology was first offered “We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were.” This was acknowledged in 1988 by the then All Native Circle Council of the UCC.

In 1998, the church apologized specifically for its role in Indian Residential Schools, and since 2008 has been actively engaged in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), which was created to address the history and legacy of Indian Residential Schools.
BULLETIN INSERT—TRC and the UCC.

Since this time the UCC has also recognized the partnership that is shared with Indigenous people across the country. In August 2012, the 41st General Council held in Ottawa, revised the church’s crest. The crest now includes the four colours of the Aboriginal medicine wheel (yellow- symbol of life and Asian people, black- south and dark skinned people, red- west and Aboriginal peoples, white north and white- skinned people). Also added was the Mohawk phrase “Akwe Nia’Tetewa:neren” which means “all my relations.”

In Luke 4, we read the story of Jesus reading in the synagogue from the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind., to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” He then looked up and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus then sat down. It was not in the reading of the passage that people were upset, it was in what was said and done by Jesus. He really introduced himself as being of God and the people were not expecting this. They were confused, angry and upset because he was merely Joseph’s son.

Jesus was not accepted by the people of his hometown. The First Nations or Indigenous peoples were here long before people moved from continent to continent. Colonization took

place and Indigenous people were seen as inferior and needed to be taught how to live civilly. They were not accepted by those who sought to build up this land and their land was bought and sold through time. Their children were rounded up in order to teach them the 'right way to live'. But this was not the result. Lives were lost, people resisted and Indigenous people were given lands upon which to live. And their stories still continue to unfold. Jesus knew that by his words that people would plot against him. He merely passed through the midst of them and went on his way. But we know that eventually he was arrested and tried and sentenced to death because of his words.

As we continue to learn more about Indigenous people, we need to listen to the stories and the teachings, not so that we take them as our own, but that we might understand a new perspective a different way of thinking about people and their relationship with God, Spirit and life in Christ Jesus.

Prior to Jesus' arrest, he prays not just a simple prayer of thanksgiving but a deep heart filled prayer of hope to God regarding his disciples. Jesus knew the time had come when he would be arrested. He knew that soon he would be put on trial and eventually die. He wanted to protect his closest followers and friends and so he prays to God. Jesus tells God the kind of relationship he has built with these people. They know everything that God gave to Jesus is from him. They know that the words Jesus spoke were from God and they believe that the Father sent the Son. Jesus asks for them to be protected and kept safe. Jesus knows that soon he would die and that he would return to heaven. In John 17 Jesus asks God that they may be one as He and God are one so that the world will believe.

Jesus knew the disciples very well and he knew them to believe and to trust Him with their lives. Their relationship was based on mutual trust and this is why he offers prayerful words to protect them and keep them safe during his trial, death and what was to follow. Relationships are foundational to how we get along with others. Relationships and the proper balance between them are the focus of traditional First Nations and Inuit worldviews. The Laws of Relationships are representative of all of these cultures to some degree. But it is important to remember that each culture has its own way of expressing these ideas through ceremonies, protocols, practices and languages. So when the phrase in Mohawk and translated to English was added to the UCC Crest, it reminds us of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships of Native people go further—the web extends to animals, birds, fish, plants and all animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. Each time we see these words, "all my relations" we are to be encouraged to accept the responsibilities we have within the universal family by living our lives in harmony with others.

As we remember and honour all the Indigenous children who went to residential schools today and on the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation Sept 30 let us acknowledge all our relations and seek apology and forgiveness, and to build up trust and hope. Paul wrote to the church at Colossae words of encouragement and hope as they were God's chosen ones.

He instructed them in what to do if anyone has a complaint against another to seek forgiveness just as Christ has forgiven. He also wrote that above all we are to clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. As we seek to learn and understand Indigenous traditions and teachings, we must let Christ's peace rule in our hearts and be thankful.

Jesus read words in the synagogue and told the listeners that those words of scripture were fulfilled in their hearing. He is the Son of God and not that long afterward, he was arrested tried and crucified. But we who are Christians believe he is alive and so when we 'let the word of Christ dwell in us we can teach and grow in wisdom and we may sing hymns of praise, hymns of thanksgiving, hymns of joy and wonder to the Creator. For the words we say and the actions we do, are to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus as we give thanks to God the Father.

Let us remember this as we seek to shine a light on injustice, as we pray in the name of compassion and truth and as we give to God the glory for all of his creation. In faith we can sing of God's greatness. Let us give thanks as we share one with another because we are called to act for we are each a child of God and every child matters.

PRAYER

Holy God, in praise and thanksgiving we offer our words of hope and love. May we respond in action as we learn and listen to life stories of Indigenous people. Bless us all as we seek truth and reconciliation. For we are one with each other and one in Christ Jesus. Amen.