

**Truth and Reconciliation Sermon,
St. John's United Church
Sunday, June 14, 2015**

Thank you, Lynda and the Worship Commission for agreeing to move next Sunday's celebration of National Aboriginal Day to today. Because next Sunday is also Father's Day, we wanted to give each day its proper attention. So that is why we are celebrating our First People's this Sunday.

Two weeks ago, Paul and I attended the Closing Events of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the Delta Hotel in Ottawa. We went in Monday afternoon, in order to lend our support to the cause, but our experience was so powerful and life-giving that we went back the next two days,... and asked to speak with you today. We hope that our stories and learnings are something that can enrich you, as all of us begin this new moment in our country's history..... because that is what it is.... a new moment, with a new covenant... to be written on our hearts. Other countries have had Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that have had varying degrees of success in terms of how they helped their peoples live together. This is **our** time, to grow through the gift of reconciliation we are being offered.

Note on it not being political.

First, come with us into the Delta Hotel... it is around noon, on Monday, June 1st. A lot of Indigenous people are standing around outside, and as we enter the lobby, there are hundreds people inside, and a group of several men, standing in a circle loudly drumming.... the beat of the human heart. Some of the onlookers spontaneously join hands and start a round dance moving around the lobby. Because of the crowd, and not wanting to interrupt the dance, I can't get through to go to the ballroom where a panel will be discussing the United Nations Charter on Indigenous People. I ask a woman at a booth if I can cross behind her table in order get to the other side. She hands me a free CD of songs written about the stories that some Residential School survivors had told the Commission. Though I'd come

into the hotel feeling like it might be a bit awkward.... me being white, like the abusers,... and them being Indigenous: the victims,.... that feeling begins to fade. Every time I catch someone's eye in the hallway, they are smiling back at me, I think, glad that we have come. As the days go on, my guess is that about 2/3 of the attendees are Indigenous, and 1/3 are descendants of settlers. But then, how can you really identify who is who? What is clear is that **we are all in this together.**

The Scriptures we have heard this morning were originally spoken to people who lived two thousand and more years ago. The words were spoken for them, but are now spoken new and fresh for us, in this world of 2015, in this country, Canada.

1. "The days are surely coming , says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant.... I will write it on their hearts." When the French and later English explorers and settlers came to Canada, there was a sense of respect between the native people and the newcomers, by which they worked together and helped one another. There were some who took advantage, but it seems that, generally things worked for both. But some seven generations ago, the covenant went sour, as Residential Schools were created, and a concerted effort began: to take the "Indian" out of the children... and all of the sad history that went with that.

But in our lifetime, we have been changing.... A new covenant has gradually been surfacing. Do you remember watching Cowboys and Indians on TV in the 1950's? We took it for granted that the Indians were always the bad guys. Those programs are a symptom of what we, at some level, believed. Fifty years later, there are no more cowboys and Indians riding across our TV screens. And, now, more importantly, what was a shameful secret in that time, of abuse at the Residential Schools, has been brought out into the open. Indigenous survivors have told their stories, and their children and settler people have listened. We now have an opportunity to put that era behind us and begin again, to create a new covenant with our First People. There are ways it will need to be worked out by our political

leaders. But starting right now, there are ways it needs to be, and can be, worked out within our own hearts.

Story: On Monday afternoon, as I sat down to hear the first panel, I put my purse on the floor by my feet, and immediately thought, "I must keep an eye on it, given the other people in this audience... Indigenous people". I was shocked at my own thinking! I'm not racist... but maybe, in some ways, I am! That was **step one** in my change of heart.

2. Jeremiah describes the time of the new covenant when: "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

The Christian missionaries to this country told the people they met here to know the Lord... to know Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit.... the Christian understanding of God. But they didn't recognize that the people already knew God.... They knew God the Creator.... the one who provided the wonderful countryside they lived in, and the animals and fish they caught for their nourishment. We need not judge those missionaries by what **we now** know. We have had the benefit of learning to look at others from a broader perspective. Immigrants to Canada have brought a variety of faiths and have given us the opportunity to recognize that God speaks to different peoples in different ways.... but with basically the same message: love God and love your neighbour. Today, we have the opportunity to see the gifts that Native Spirituality has to offer their own people, and us.

3. What can they teach us?.. For one thing, we have always thought that we have dominion OVER everything in creation, like the Psalmist said. As the western world - mainly Judeo-Christian, struggles with environmental issues, many people feel that we tend to use the riches of the earth for our own profit, because of having "dominion over". The Indigenous People did not approach God's creation as if they owned or dominated it. When an animal or fish was killed for food, they offered a prayer of thanks to the Creator and to the spirit of the animal. That spirituality of **respecting**

nature can counterbalance our spirituality of "having dominion".

4. Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel says, "If your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be **reconciled to** your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Indigenous people do have something against us. Now we must go and be reconciled to them.

There are steps to this process...

- For those First Nations people who came to speak to the Commission, a huge step was taken in healing when they told their stories.
- Being able to speak the words and relive the memories would have taken much courage and healing-already-in-process. Telling the story is important for the speaker and the listener. Story: One afternoon at the hotel, again watching a webcast from the main room downstairs, because of the crowds there, I heard the speaker at the podium say, "Before you leave here today, look around and see someone you haven't spoken to, and introduce yourself". I looked around and saw a man who looked a bit rough around the edges, sitting alone at a table near me. I put out my hand and said hello. Initially he asked why I was speaking with him, so I smiled and told him I was doing what the woman on TV had told us to do, and that I wanted to meet him. (I felt I sounded kind of limp.) He softened and told me he had just been joking. We went on to have a lovely conversation, in which he told me that his father's mother had been abused in the residential schools, and so his father had been abused, and in turn, had abused him. He had ended up an alcoholic on Toronto streets. He eventually got help, and is now sober. The ray of hope in his story was that his mother had been a strong influence for good in his life. But he, too, had grown up in Residential Schools, where he was not abused, but where there was "No one to tell me

they loved me." I asked if there is anyone who tells him they love him now, and he looked around and acknowledged a white woman standing near him, his partner, a woman who looked very much like us women here... not at all rough, and obviously close to him. It was good to meet that man... to talk with someone I'd be nervous to talk with on the street, because of his looks. He is no longer drinking, and has found healing in understanding the past and appreciating his gifts in the present. I found healing in his trusting me with his story. I hope he found some healing in my listening.

- To have had their stories listened to and respected and validated is another step in healing. Story: On Tuesday morning, when the TRC Chair, Murray Sinclair, delivered the report, we couldn't get into the crowded ballroom where he was speaking, so found a hotel TV that carried the webcast. It was another crowded space, with chairs being saved for any survivors present. When Mr. Sinclair asked the survivors in the ballroom to please stand, the survivors who were sitting around the TV also got to their feet. Mary was sitting on the floor up front, and so could look back and see their faces... each seeming to be focused on their own personal sad memories. The audience clapped to honour them, clapped our respect for them, clapped our wish to soothe some of the pain by recognizing what they had suffered alone so many years ago.
- Another piece of the reconciliation story happens when the children of survivors of the schools hear the stories and begin to understand why their parents or grandparents had parented them in certain ways.
- Story: Last week, we received an email from an Indigenous friend who, we knew had always had a difficult relationship with her mother. She told us that, the weekend of the TRC closing, she had visited her mother, and because of the consciousness-raising by the TRC, and her understanding what had happened to her mother at

Residential School, she had been able to forgive her mother, to hug her, and, for the first time in her life, tell her mother that she loved her! That is a huge part of the TRC... reconciliation, built on understanding, **within Indigenous families**.

Jesus said, "if your brother or sister has something against you.. , go and be reconciled". How can we, as individuals do this? Story: At the end of our first day at the TRC, Chief Peter Joseph, a calm and wise man, spoke to end a panel on: "Where do we go from here?" He acknowledged that we can feel overwhelmed by all that needs to be done to correct injustices and improve the quality of life for Indigenous people. But he encouraged us to not feel swamped... "It took seven generations to get to this point, so it will take a few generations to fix it." He said it calls for each of us to do what we can do. I went out of there, wanting to do something, but what?

I found that little ways presented themselves: When we got home, I phoned a few friends to invite them to join us the next day... so they, too, could get on board, learn and experience as we were doing. On day two, I picked up two more CD's to send to my family, so that they can learn something of what I have learned. I even wrote a letter to the Editor of the Ottawa Citizen, and it was printed! And then, we asked Lynda if we could speak at this service.

Where to from here? Something we plan to do is to attend the National Aboriginal Festival at Vincent Massey Park, this coming weekend, June 19 - 21. In the past, I might have felt I was intruding into a festival that didn't belong to me; but now I understand that it does belong to all of us, because it is part of Canada. And I hope that, when we go, we will become more at home in those cultures, appreciate more of their strengths and music and ritual, and show by our presence, that we value them. Because they are us!

At the TRC, we found grounds for hope. There were many very capable, well-educated Indigenous people, men and women, giving leadership.

We may tend to think that the discussion about reconciliation will be

between elected persons and the First Nations leadership. But the bottom line is that Indigenous People and you and I need to have this conversation... Acknowledge that we are sorry and show the sorrow by our actions.

What can we do? Perhaps it is, when we meet a "drunken Indian" on George St., instead of looking away and avoiding eye contact, we can feel some compassion, knowing that something of the history that may have gotten him or her here... to not look away, but to treat them with **kindness** and **respect**. We do not need to fear such a person, but, rather, to understand them.

What can we do? Perhaps when racist comments are made in our presence, we need to not let them pass, and so agree by our silence, but speak up.

What can we do? Perhaps keep our hearts and minds open to opportunities that will come, and be followed if we allow ourselves to notice them.

And may our God: Creator, Son and Holy Spirit continue to bless us all, now and forever!

Rev. Paul Vavasour and Mary MacDonald