

Reconciliation

I am not sure I'm going to preach a sermon today. I had the privilege of teaching the preaching class at St. Andrew's for a few years. I always began with lecture about being attentive to the movement of the spirit, to open oneself to the God-consciousness for when it was awakened the spark of the spirit lead to sermon writing. I wanted to emphasize this before the class moved on to the mechanics of exegesis and hermeneutic, of sermon form and structure, of how to incorporate illustrations and animate the voice. I entitled the course Passion for Preaching, not just because I had a passion for preaching but, more importantly, because I deemed passion was a prerequisite for preaching. It was a niggling spirit-filled passion that led to what I want to share this morning but I'm not sure it is a sermon. Today's remarks are not founded on the lectionary and have only a loose relationship to scripture. My remarks don't resemble any of the forms I taught and may better be described as an essay, or as diary entries, or as a story. Let's begin with a story.

Last Sunday I arose at Wakaw Lake to a lovely sunrise and a gentle breeze which caused the water to shimmer and the poplars too lightly tremble. It was the third Sunday of the month, the one Sunday of the month when the people of Wakaw United Church gather for worship. As I drove the fifteen minutes into town to lead the worship the word 'remnant' came to mind. I had the privilege of being the student minister for Wakaw United Church in 1979 when a Sunday morning congregation was filled with farmers and townfolk, children, parents and elders, a choir and a Sunday School. I returned to Wakaw Church about ten years ago as the Pastoral Charge Supervisor, a fancy term, that requires me to represent the United Church at their Board Meetings. For me, it also meant arranging for Sunday worship leaders and people like Sheila Lavendar and Bill Shank joined me in filling out a weekly roster of leaders. Over time some members passed on, while others moved to the city. Secularism increased in the culture and Wakaw was not spared its impact. Services reduced from weekly to bi-weekly to monthly. This spring the congregation reluctantly voted to put the building up for sale. In the meantime, a small remnant still worships together.

Last Sunday the remnant was particularly small, just me and four other people. After service we ate lunch together. If you think Smitty's or Smiley's is a reasonable destination for lunch after church, you have not been to the basement of Wakaw United Church. That day I feasted on garden potatoes (picked the day before), roast turkey and gravy, pork sausage, pickled carrots and a host of raw garden vegetables. Following lunch our conversation gradually came around to George's hobby of carving canes out of willow branches. He told us of how he had recently been driving by a stand of willow bush along a country road. After stopping his on the edge of the grid he began to harvest some of the willow for his next project. It wasn't long until a half-ton pulled up behind him. The man got out and told George that he was trespassing, there amidst the rolling fields without a house or barn in view. "Move on," the man said, "this is my land, and you are trespassing." George is indigenous. He climbed out of the ditch, got back in his vehicle, and drove away. It seemed to me that George kind of

'shrugged' at the end of his story. It was the kind of shrug that seemed to say I've heard that line too many times: "this is my land."

I recognized the shrug of resignation and realized that I had had a similar shrug about three weeks earlier when our British Columbia holiday was interrupted with the news that nine people had been murdered on the James Smith Cree nation. It was the kind of shrug that implied, 'oh, a first nation.' It was the kind of shrug that revealed thoughts of poverty and violence, of drugs and crime, of a people and a way of life where such events were to be expected. Fortunately, my shrug quickly gave way to a shudder as I recognized old messages and societal attitudes which I had absorbed which almost allowed me to dismiss the pain of the people of James Smith. I am shocked that I still possessed such attitudes that could obscure my view of a people's pain.

I hate this 'shrug of resignation' which is the product of stories told and absorbed over the years. My father's comments that Indians were unreliable workers; my Grade 8 teacher's sarcastic reference to 'Indian cars'; my mother's head shaking over an inebriated woman; my neighbours rant about welfare payments; the litany of negative news from 20th street and on and on. I shuddered as I realized how the phrase, "This is my land" had created so much upheaval, so much despair, so much poverty, so much pain. James Smith Cree nation – real people, real tragedy, real grief.

I am thankful that my shrug was only momentary. I am thankful that I shuddered when I recognized my own embedded racism. I am thankful that prayer soon followed - prayer that the strong ties of Indigenous family and community would sustain; that the powerful rituals of Indigenous spirituality would transform; and that we settlers might respect and double down on the work of reconciliation. Yes, as a descendant of settlers, I have come to respect the tremendous grace of the Indigenous community who, despite so many losses, are willing to reconcile with us. If I am to receive this grace, I realize that I must be willing to learn from these people about relationships and resilience and the sacredness of the land. 'They' have many things to teach 'me'.

The tragedy of the James Smith reveals much about the wisdom of Indigenous culture. In the early days of this tragedy community members and leaders recognized that the violence was a result of generations of displacement, injustice and trauma. In the non-Indigenous world, with our unprecedented valuing of individualism, we are quick to assign crime and violence to individuals - so-called 'hardened criminals' or persons who have been radicalized or those with mental health issues. Setting crime in such an individualized context fails to ask about the conditions in which crime seems the only option; where radicalization is a response to perceived injustice; and where deteriorating mental health is deemed an embarrassment to remain unnamed. My first learning from the James Smith people is their ready recognition that violent acts do not happen in isolation. There are root causes which require corporate responsibility.

The second piece of wisdom I gleaned was an expanded understanding of the impacts of intergenerational trauma. The partner of one of the victims stated, "It's sick

how jail time, drugs and alcohol can destroy so many lives.” Indeed, the trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples is legion including the loss of land and livelihood and the impact, directly or indirectly, of the residential school experience. Drugs and alcohol are one way of dealing with the pain.

I have spoken previously of attending the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in Saskatoon where my colleague in the health region, an Elder in the Spiritual Care Department, gave testimony. This man had battled his own demons of alcohol and drug use which resulted in violence and incarceration. As he deepened his spirituality and his knowledge of traditional ways he began to heal from these addictions. He eventually found work as an Elder at the Prince Albert Penitentiary. He was tough as nails, possessed a remarkable sense of humour, had reclaimed his personal dignity and was outspoken about any injustice he experienced. Yet, what I witnessed in his testimony to the commission was the re-surfacing of his trauma as he first listened to the stories of residential school survivors and then, in his own testimony, recognized the link between his parents’ experience as residential school survivors and their inability to parent him. This strong, dignified man was undone by these memories, yet now he turned to his spiritual practices rather than the numbing effects of alcohol to help him cope. As I listened, I learned that trauma leaves an indelible legacy where substance abuse is used to dull the pain. Indigenous peoples know the reason that addiction runs rampant in their community and, although they may never again speak the name of Myles Sanderson, they know that his actions cannot be reduced to that of individual evil. He inherited trauma, he experienced trauma, he produced trauma.

Forgiveness is another lesson I am witnessing in the people of James Smith. When I think how easy it is to hold on to resentments, when I think of my own aunt’s hatred after her daughter’s murder, when I think of how some Humboldt families are lobbying to have Mr. Singh extradited, I realize how difficult forgiveness can be. Yet in newspaper articles and news reports we hear people on James Smith already speaking about forgiveness. We saw the brother of one of the victims supporting a family member of one of the perpetrators, embracing her and encouraging forgiveness. When Mr. Burns embraced Damion Sanderson’s partner he declared, “Our family is here to forgive. This woman shouldn’t have to bear that kind of guilt and shame and responsibility.” To speak of forgiveness so soon after this tragedy is surely testimony to a deep spirituality which may be the only way through such difficult circumstances.

Chief Arcand told the media that First Nations’ people heal through laughter and culture. One place for laughter is in the midst of community and as I surveyed the stories coming from James Smith since the tragedy, I read of no less than three community fish fry’s. It was explained that Indigenous culture uses feasts to bring people together so that in eating together no one is left alone and healing can begin. Similarly, people gathered in sweat lodges and around sacred fires believing that they provide spiritual doorways for the departed to join their ancestors. Rituals, once banned on native lands, have resurfaced to offer strength and solace. As the technological mindset of Western culture continues to deride ritual, Indigenous peoples are reminding us of its importance.

I do not pretend to know the pain experienced by the people of James Smith Cree Nation or the challenges its community has and will face in the future. What I do know is if I am to accept the offer of reconciliation, I must be open to learning **from** Indigenous people. Not least of all to learn about the land that we share and of a different way being on the land. My heart aches for George. My ire rises against anyone's brash statement that this is 'my land.' My people brought this concept of ownership to the land and now I am looking for a new understanding.

Recently I have been reading some writings from the late Indigenous author Richard Wagamese. He endured the 'sixties scoop' ... the child of residential school survivors he was picked up by the authorities and fostered out into an endless string of homes where he was culturally deprived and physically assaulted. After his journey through alcohol, drugs and incarceration he returned to the land where he found healing. He writes:

The way my life went, I was in and out of a lot of homes as a kid and teenager. As a young adult I never really felt at home ... I do get lonesome for the land though ... Once I walked out into the bush again or stood at the edge of a northern lake I understood what it was I'd been missing. Within each of us is the residue of the places we come from. We carry the information of our cultures and our histories within us like latent genes. The feel of home we carry between our ribs. It's not an Ojibway thing. It's a human one.

Maybe that's a starting point for entering into the gracious offer of reconciliation: to see the land as our common home and one another as human, all of it a gift from the Creator. Amen.

Rev. Brian Walton