

## SERMON JUNE 19 2022 KUC

Let us pray: Great Spirit God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you. Amen

In the epistle reading today, Paul continues his efforts to convince Jewish Christians that Christ does not require his followers to rigidly adhere to the Jewish Law of the Torah. Despite their conversion to Christianity, the Jewish leadership of the church in Galatia continue to believe that such customs as circumcision are essential for all believers. Paul points out that Christ again and again demonstrated that faith, not the Law, is the mark that distinguishes Christians from unbelievers. The only rule is the rule of love and we are expected to love everyone as God loves us, no matter where they come from or how they look. If we clothe ourselves in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

This message is important as we gather for the Indigenous Day of Prayer. I have been thinking all week about how this passage can be lived out in our relationship with our Indigenous brothers and sisters. Sometimes we who are committed to reconciliation underestimate the resistance felt and demonstrated by many Canadians to a new relationship between we heirs of the settler attitudes and those of us to take the promise of the new day in Christ seriously.

Let me tell you a short true story that illustrates how difficult it is to deal with inbuilt prejudice. I was in the bank the other day and the government poster reminding us that Tuesday is National Indigenous Day in Canada was displayed on the notice board. The man in front of me in line, looked at it with scorn and said loudly to his wife:

“I am sick and tired of all this publicity about the poor Indians and how hard done by they are. After all, the Residential Schools are a thing of the past—why keep dragging it up. It’s not our fault. Our taxes pay all their expenses while they don’t work hard like us. Half of them are drunk or high most of the time. It makes me mad!”

“And,” said his wife, “I am sick and tired of your ranting and raging, your refusal to act as a good Christian. You refuse to learn from the difficult stories they have tried to share. You seem to think, somehow, you are better than they are. I am not engaging in a public argument about this. You know I disagree with you and you cannot make me into a bigot like you. I’ll be in the car.”

There was dead silence in the bank. The man shrugged and said:

“Women! I’ll never understand them!”

And then the teller called, “Next” and none of us spoke up against his views. I felt angry and helpless, but I knew this was a person with deeply felt rage. As I moved to the counter, he was still blustering at the teller beside us. No one would respond, partly because we didn’t know how to and partly because none of us wanted that rage to come down on us. I felt ashamed that I could not deal in a forthright way. It made me wonder how many fellow citizens share his views.

I don’t pretend to be an expert on Indigenous affairs. But I ask you to consider some obvious examples:

- While the Residential Schools may have been closed for some time, the damage done to generations of those who attended and those who have to live with the survivors continues to affect every aspect of Indigenous life in Canada. Disproportionate numbers of Indigenous adults and children suffer from addictions, self-injury, trauma and depression; often they do not receive treatment and suicide continues to plague their communities. Indigenous children and youth may attend schools off reserve but all too often they feel segregated and shunned by students and teachers alike. For remote communities in the north, the only choice for those who want to go to high school is to leave their communities and board in towns and cities. Some are fortunate enough to find kind and supportive foster parents but often it is a lonely, frightening existence, far from home and cut off from traditional family and customs. The suicide rate is high and the danger of being drawn into addictive and violent behaviour is always present.
- The elementary schools are built by the federal government as they are legally responsible for providing and education to Indigenous children. Often, they are the only building on a reserve that has plumbing and running water. For many years, these schools were staffed by white settler teachers who did not honour the language and customs of the community to which they were sent. When I toured the remote reserves while I was Education Minister, the elders told me how important it was to preserve their language and pass it along to the young people. When I got back to Toronto, I did some research and discovered that one of the few things a Minister can do independently is to amend the order which decrees what languages will be considered languages of instruction. Over the strident resistance of the civil servants, I ordered that Ojibway, Cree, and Ojicree as languages of instruction in Ontario. That action only happened in 1991. Assisted by the elders, children are now able to learn their own words and to speak in their own tongues.
- Our criminal justice system continues to discriminate against Indigenous people. They are highly over-represented in our jails and reformatories. They are disproportionately charged with more serious offences and often experience physical abuse at the hands of police, guards and other inmates. They have a much harder time getting bail, applying for parole, and getting the services to which all prisoners are entitled. Although community sentencing circles are permitted by the law, only a few have been established successfully or consistently. That is a shame, because, believe me, the

Community is aware of every action a parolee takes. Non-compliance with such conditions as providing for their families or attending counselling are strictly monitored by the community itself. Re-offending or breaking conditions has immediate consequences when everyone has their eye on you.

- Indigenous communities do not have taxing power or the ability to pay the level of taxes needed to build and repair infrastructure such as housing or water treatment plants. As a result, they are dependent on the governments to provide grants and expertise. We all know our abysmal record with respect to safe drinking water and sub-standard housing. We are doing better, but, like the man in the bank, many citizens resent that their tax dollars are being used for such purposes.
- The child welfare system is the new iteration of Residential Schools. For many years, children have been routinely apprehended by child welfare authorities working for settler organizations. Children were most likely taken right out of their communities and away from their families. Indigenous communities have fought hard to take over welfare and protection for their children and youth. Under Indigenous agencies young people are entrusted to known and supportive family members, often grandparents or aunties; they stay in their own communities. Efforts to negotiate new child welfare agreements are gradually taking hold but it has taken the threat of law suits and reparations for settler law makers and civil servants to act swiftly and in good faith.
- Medical treatment, both routine and emergency, is often unavailable in a timely fashion. In many cases, the health station is staffed by a single nurse. Access to medications is spotty, given the remoteness of some reserves. In fly-in communities, women are most often sent out to larger communities for childbirth and those needing surgeries or cancer treatment must go to a larger medical facility. This is a frightening and disorienting experience. Some, like the woman in Quebec who was on the news receive inadequate attention or downright prejudice. In her case, she caught medical personnel on her phone making abusive comments and falsely accusing her of being intoxicated. In her case, the neglect resulted in her death. Mental health services are extremely hard to access even with Zoom, given the lack of connectivity in many communities, even in the south of the Province.

There are many more examples I could outline, but I'm sure you get the gist of the argument. We can and must do better as responsible citizens and, for us, as followers of Christ. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission did a thorough job and collecting the stories and outlining recommendations for change. Everyone does not need to read the full ten volumes of testimony and analysis, but all of us should be familiar with the Calls to Action, particularly those directed at the church. Apologies have been made but without the resources to meet real needs, apologies are just words. Governments are gradually coming to realize the cost of inaction, both in human and dollar terms. Enormous amounts of tax dollars are required to provide the services and infrastructure that are needed. I would suggest however that the punitive damages from the current and future lawsuits based on constitutional arguments would cost even more.

What do you suppose Paul would have said to us about living out the work of love in the world in our own place and time? We are called to live into our faith, to love our neighbours, however differently they may live or worship, whatever their language or colour. Christ made it clear that doing the work of love is not always easy or pleasant and is sometimes downright dangerous. It requires us to address the needs of others as we would want our needs to be met. We must be prepared to overcome our learned biases and fears, to truly regard all of creation as worthy of God's love, God's mercy, and God's forgiveness.

May God give us the strength and courage to truly be faithful Christians. Amen