

Bloomingdale Mennonite Church – Feb. 27, 2022

Together in Suffering, Together We Heal

Last year, on May 28th, I was driving up a logging road in northern BC, to go to the Unist'ot'en Healing Centre. That centre, run by women of the Unist'ot'en clan, is trying to reconnect the larger Wet'suwet'en nation to their traditional lands and cultures, their laws and lifeways. The Wet'suwet'en, like many Indigenous nations, are a bruised and battered people.

Their children were stolen through residential schools; their lands ripped up by resource companies. And yet there, in the middle of their territory, they are doing healing work... helping people recover their language, coming alongside those with addictions, learning how to harvest medicines, and protecting the Wedzin Kwa, their sacred headwaters, from a pipeline project that's being built without consent. This is a remarkable people— at once suffering AND resilient.

On May 28th, when I was driving up to Unist'ot'en, I heard the news. *Do you remember that day?*

215 graves found at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. 215 children buried on a school ground.

The discovery of the children at Kamloops sent shockwaves throughout Canada, and the church. *Why didn't we know this? How many more graves are there? And how could followers of Jesus been party to such violence... violence that we now recognize as genocide?*

Back in 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada had told us about unmarked graves – and so many other sins of colonialism – in their massive 6 volume report. But for some reason, we didn't have ears to hear, or we didn't choose to hear. Yet now, people across these lands are listening. And many are asking with sincere hearts, how DO WE reconcile... how do we mend this fractured relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples; a relationship that is full of such suffering and loss and injustice?

I'd like to explore this questions through a lesser-known biblical text— James 5, verses 13 to 20. It's a passage that speaks about suffering, but also the real possibility of healing... healing us all.

James asks, "are any within the community sick, and thus in need of prayer... specifically, the prayer of the elders."

Now if we use this text, *creatively*, as a guide to interpret our current political and moral context, as a way to exegete the relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples, I believe it can help us see at least 3 realms of interconnected suffering... and how we might bring about some genuine healing.

“Are any among you suffering?” asks James.

Oh yes. Many are suffering. And the first among us are Indigenous peoples. Now we all know about the children whose lives were taken at residential schools—over 4100 graves identified by the TRC, hundreds more in recent months, including 54 found two weeks ago in Kamsack, Saskatchewan... and many more to come... some estimate upwards of 15,000. We can scarcely imagine the collective trauma that Indigenous communities are experiencing because of the harm inflicted on those most vulnerable little ones.

And we all know that it doesn't stop there—in the past, and with residential schools. The suffering of Indigenous peoples is a very present matter, and it's so vast and overwhelming. Today, Indigenous children account for 52% of the children in foster care, even though they only comprise 7 percent of the child population. Today, 40% of Indigenous kids live in poverty. Today, Indigenous women represent 42% of the federal prison population. Today, Indigenous suicide rates are 3 times as high as they are for non-Indigenous peoples.

How wide, how long, how high and deep is the pain of Indigenous peoples?! And of course, we all know that Indigenous peoples' suffering is intimately connected to the land, and to its wellbeing.

This is the second realm of suffering that we must consider. The distress of Indigenous lands, and of Mother Earth.

Did you know that there are around 400 million Indigenous peoples in the world? That's only 5% of the global population. And yet that 5% is living on and protecting lands that hold 80% of the world's biodiversity. Its' extraordinary.

And did you know that here in North America, Indigenous resistance to resource extraction has prevented greenhouse gas pollution that's equivalent to at least one-quarter of annual Canadian and U.S. carbon emissions. Despite experiencing the highest levels of poverty of any people group, despite holding the least privileges among us, Indigenous nations are at the forefront of caring for creation.

Now that's some of the good news. But the hard news is this. First Nations in Canada only have 0.2% of their original land base. That's it! If you put all their land together – like a jigsaw puzzle – you could fit that land into the Navaho reservation in the United States, and you'd still have half that Navaho reservation leftover. What this means is that Indigenous peoples in Canada are homeless in their own homelands.

Yet it gets even worse, because Indigenous peoples know that their homelands – and ours – are in real danger of ecological collapse. Last August, the global community received the latest IPCC report (that is, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 6th Report).¹ According to the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, that report is “a red alert for humanity.” The facts are now undeniable. We are currently at 1.26 degrees global heating. And unless we rapidly drawdown all **current fossil fuel infrastructure and rapidly make a green transition**, we are on track to blow past 1.5 degrees Celsius – the warming limit that everyone agreed to at Paris back in 2015 – we'll blow past it in the next decade, and the results will be disastrous.

Even if the Nation-States of the world live up to their current climate commitments in the years to come (and we shouldn't trust that they will given thirty years of inaction), we are still hitting between 2.7 and 3.2 degrees by the end of the century. Climate models predict that we are actually on track to hit between 3 and 4 degrees. And the amount of suffering and death in such scenarios is unthinkable.

For example, the IPCC states that areas that experience 2 months of drought under 1.5 degrees warming, will experience *10 months of drought under 3 degrees*. In a 4-degree world, extreme temperature events that currently take place 4 to 5 times every 50 years, *will happen 39 times*.² **Let that sink in.** What that means in simple terms is that whole sections of our planet will be uninhabitable, plagued by drought, fires, and crop failures. In that scenario, hundreds of millions will suffer from famine and starvation; and billions will be made climate migrants and forced to move³; which means a whole lot of conflict, war, and the death of untold numbers.

In Romans 8, the apostle Paul says, “Creation is groaning.” Well, we are well past that now beloved. Mother Earth is reeling. And in order to address this suffering, the powers of this world – like Canada – must, according to the United Nations and Pope Francis and so many others – we must heed the voices of Indigenous peoples who are defending their lands and our common home.

¹ IPCC, 2021: *Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [MassonDelmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, S. L. Connors, C. Péan, S. Berger, N. Caud, Y. Chen, L. Goldfarb, M. I. Gomis, M. Huang, K. Leitzell, E. Lonnoy, J. B. R. Matthews, T. K. Maycock, T. Waterfield, O. Yelekçi, R. Yu and B. Zhou (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press.

https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf

² Ibid., p. 24

³ <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/117/21/11350.full.pdf>

But Canada, despite our rhetoric, consistently struggles to do so...

And that brings me to the 3rd realm of suffering in this Indigenous-Settler relationship. James asks, "Are any of you sick and in need of healing?" And in response, we must confess that Canada requires healing.

You all know that for generations, governments, businesses and churches believed that there was an Indian problem, and that Indigenous peoples needed to be fixed and saved through a combination of Jesus, capitalism, and wardship. Some still say such, yet with a lot more finesse. Yet Luther Standing Bear got it right when he said, back in 1933, "*There is NO Indian problem as created by the Indian himself.*" The problems that Indian peoples face today are [quote] "due to the white man's cast of mind." Or, in the words of contemporary Mohawk scholar, Taiaiake Alfred: "*Canada does not have an Indigenous problem. It has a Settler problem.*"

And YET the problem with this problem, is that most of us non-Indigenous peoples don't see it – the PROBLEM - because we do not understand WHO WE ARE in this relationship with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous homelands that we need to reconcile with.

Canada was a settler colonial project that was created through the theft of Indigenous peoples' lands and life... and the reality is... it still is. Yes, some things have changed – the way we Canadians talk about the relationship, some of the resources that are available in this relationship – but fundamentally, Canada remains a settler colonial polity, whose wealth and wellbeing is sustained by stolen Indigenous lands. *Remember – only 0.2 per cent of the land is Indigenous today.*

But what does that mean to people like us... settlers who didn't directly create this problem, people who genuinely lament the injustices and who long to be agents of healing?

Here's a hard truth. Because Canada is a settler colonial society, none of us stand outside this system that dispossesses Indigenous peoples and fractures Mother Earth. Though we may have come to an awareness of colonial harms, though we may grieve such and even resist such, that does not purify, exempt or lift us up out of the ongoing colonial project. In other words, we are part of this settler society... and because settler society is sick, we – as a collective – are in need of healing.

The apostle Paul said, “As one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.” In our social context, we’ve got **3 realms of interconnected suffering**: *Indigenous peoples, Mother Earth, and we settlers*— suffering to different degrees for sure, and suffering for different reasons. But it’s all interrelated. Cree Elder Stan McKay says, “We’ve all been damaged by colonialism. Our healing is different, but Settlers have to work through their stuff in order for us to mend the relationship.”

So if we Settlers are sick, how do we seek and receive that healing?

James encourages us, in verse 14, to call the elders so that they can pray over us, anoint us with oil, and to help us confess our sins.

But who are our elders? Who are those wise ones that we settlers can turn to, in order to help heal such systemic suffering?

I have three ideas to put forth, and these will parallel the 3 communities of suffering that I’ve just outlined.

The first set of elders that we must invite into our lives are the original peoples themselves. They are our older brothers and sisters in these lands. They know the harms of the settler colonial system better than anyone, and how we can address such. As Pope Francis says in his Encyclical on Climate Change, “Indigenous peoples are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners.”

And how might we invite these Original elders into our hearts and lives? A powerful first step is to take up and read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. I’m sure you all have seen these. They are the two core Indigenous-articulated documents that every Canadian needs to know. They were crafted by the witness of residential school survivors... and by survivors of colonialism from around the world. They outline the paths of collective healing that we must take, and the minimum standards of relational respect.

Now they won’t take long to read – only an hour each. But let’s not just read them. Let us pray through them, like Scripture. Let us do *lectio divina* – sacred reading - and listen to the leadings of the Spirit as we slowly contemplate the words of the *Declaration* and the *Calls to Action*. And if you do that, before you know it, you will find yourself, taking steps of learning and solidarity with Indigenous peoples... steps toward justice and even to friendship.

A second elder that we must invite into our lives is the land. As my friend, Adrian Jacobs says, “The Land is our teacher and the Earth is our faculty.”

According to the United Nations, there is no time to spare. We are in a crisis and we are heading toward catastrophe—we must listen to Earth Mother. Catholic teacher, Thomas Berry, says,

“In this present time, the protest of the pillage of Earth, the compassion for Earth, and the commitment to the preservation of Earth are left mainly to Indigenous peoples, youth movements, and secular environmental organizations as though the matter were too peripheral to be of concern to Christians.”

This must change, and soon. Every Church must make the defense of lands and the waters a priority. We must follow Indigenous leadership on this, and be willing to do as they do – and that’s sacrifice to resist corporate and state powers that don’t want to change, or won’t do it soon enough. In the words of Metis artist Christi Belcourt, *Mother Earth must become our government*—the Elder of elders– or else we will perish.

Now these ideas might seem radical, especially this last one. And that’s where I think a 3rd set of elders can give us courage to press into the paths that Indigenous peoples and lands are calling us into. And this 3rd set is found right here, in our church – the Mennonite church.

Allow me to explain.

When I moved to Winnipeg in 2011 to work as Mennonite Church Canada’s Indigenous-Settler Relations director, I discovered four profound covenants that our church, together with MCC, had made. I didn’t know any of this when I was a Mennonite pastor way up in northern BC. And I so wish I did. Here’s what I found:

- In 1970, our conference offered a confession to Indigenous communities, acknowledging our sins of paternalism and racism... and our struggle to respect Indigenous peoples’ territories as their own homelands.
- In 1987, we joined ecumenical communities in proclaiming a remarkable New Covenant, which promised support for Aboriginal self-government, self-determination, and even support for a major redistribution of land back to Indigenous peoples.
- In 1992, on the quin-centenary of Columbus, MCC made a promise to, among other things, support “the just fulfilment of outstanding land claims”; and then

- In 2010, our national church made a resolution that acknowledged Mennonite church complicity in the residential school system.

Four confessions, four covenants from the past that stand as wise elders FOR US. They offer you and I courage to enter into streams of Indigenous-led justice. These elders tell all those around us, even in the church, that this work of Truth and Reconciliation is not only important, not only political, ***but is a core gospel matter... that this goes to the very soul and heart of what it means to be church in these lands some call Canada.***

Well three years ago... something happened. A friend of mine found another one of these covenants while looking for communion wine in his office. It was a far-reaching commitment from 1977 in which our Mennonite grandmothers and grandfathers promised to, get this,

- live lives of energy simplicity,
- call on governments to move away from fossil fuels and toward renewables; and
- to respect the rights of Indigenous peoples who are saying no to extractive projects in their territories.

1977!

When I heard this I was stunned. How did I not know this? And I knew right then and there that I had to do some detective work. And not long later, and with the help of friends, we found more than 20, 30, 40, more commitments that our church has made over the last 50 years toward Indigenous justice. Holy words crafted by elders in our community about everything from land rights to spirituality and the problems of racism; words that were written in the context of relationship with Indigenous peoples; words that were trying to get the rest of us in the Mennonite church on board with the healing project.

Imagine if we in the Mennonite church became reacquainted with these elders? Imagine we brought them into living conversation with Indigenous elders and Mother Earth. Imagine what kind of healing work we could do together? In the words of St. Paul, I am confident that if we do such, the Spirit will work through us more than we can ask or imagine.

In James 5, verse 16, we're told that the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. Then in verse 17, James lifts up the example of Elijah, that elder prophet, who was able to stop the storms of heaven with his fervent petitions. But note what James

says of Elijah. He was (quote) “a human being like us.” In other words, a mere mortal like each of us. For James, the healing of suffering... and the doing of great deeds... is not just the purview of heroes. No, **it is for mere mortals like me and like you.**

We need miraculous healing today to address

- the profound suffering of Indigenous peoples,
- the urgent travail of Mother Earth, and
- the deep sickness of settler colonialism.

It's not heroic prophets who alone are called to this work... but also humble mortals like you and I. We are called to offer our gifts of prayer, of presence, and of action. We are all needed. ***Are you in?***