

Sermon: June 12, 2016 Isaiah 58: 9b-12
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Today's sermon and service are all about the power of apology, spurred by the 1986 Apology issued by the United Church of Canada to First Nations people. Knowing that this anniversary was coming up, a question that has been pestering me is, "what do you do after an apology has been given?" Not just *this* apology, but *any* apology, offered after a significant breach in relationship. When you have apologized to someone, how do you and they move forward together? When you have received an apology, what boundaries do you put around that relationship? When is it OK to decline an apology?

I realize that this kind of topic can be traumatic for those of you who have had big traumas in your life such as infidelity, betrayal, neglect or abuse, and if that is the case please know that my intent this morning is not to drag you through that again, unsupported. As with all Sundays, you are invited to engage the subject material only in ways that are safe and healthy for you and to unpack things with me afterwards if that is needed.

Having said that, each of us learns lessons about apologies and forgiveness from the time we are very young. We may be taught to never apologize, claiming it's a sign of weakness; we may be taught to always forgive, opening ourselves to more risk, because Jesus told us to turn the other cheek and forgive seventy times seven. More than likely we develop a strategy somewhere in the middle.

When I was a young boy, it was not unusual for me to express my opinions with my fists, so my parents needed to come with a strategy fairly quickly. One of the few scriptures that was ever quoted in my household was Ephesians 4:26, "do not let the sun go down on your anger" so whenever there was a conflict in our home Mom required that we deal with it right away. On the surface that was wise enough, not letting something simmer and get worse, but it meant we did a lot of inauthentic apologizing, saying "sorry" and offering peace offerings such as those little boxes of Sun-Maid raisins without analyzing or owning what had led to the blowout in the first place. So while this pattern helped me realize that there are many things in life that do warrant an apology, it didn't change the behaviour because none of my remorse was productive or instructive. I knew if I slugged a kid I'd have to swallow my pride and head over to his house with an apology and a little box of raisins, but I was just as likely to pop him again the next time I got angry. There were no strategies in place regarding my anger, just processes to follow in order to apologize afterward. And Mom must have bought those raisins by the caseload.

That's a fairly benign example, but way down toward the other end of that same spectrum we have the all-too common experience of domestic violence. Dr. Marie Fortune, a United Church of Christ Minister who has spent her whole career addressing these issues, describes the cycle like so: TENSION (buildup, threats), EXPLOSION, and HONEYMOON (remorse and buy-back). Some source of pressure builds up – shortage of money, interpersonal stresses, unresolved childhood issues, addictions – and leads to threats of violence then violence itself. Almost immediately there is remorse and often, but not always, a phase where gifts and sweet words and kind deeds are offered, even as the pressure starts to build toward the next blowup. Within the United Church of Canada there are a number of consultants trained to handle Church-related incidents of abuse, specifically sexual abuse, and I happen to be married to one of those consultants, so I asked Shannon about this. When you're caught in this cycle, what do you do after the apology is issued? What usually happens, and what should happen?

The key to the whole thing, is what the perpetrator does with their remorse. Is remorse immediately and only followed by the "buy-back" activities described by Marie Fortune, "giving them gifts, being loving and attentive, and promising that they will never hurt them again" or does remorse lead to seeking help, establishing a relationship with a skilled counsellor, learning ways to recognize and talk about the underlying issues, perhaps engaging his or her own woundedness? Unfortunately, the economic resources are usually so scant, the family concerns so broad, the confidence of the victim so shaky, and the honeymoon phase of the cycle so nice that the victim frequently returns to the site of the violence, even though their partner is still only *talking about* getting counselling rather than actually *seeking* help... but unless *something* causes things to change the cycle, which may be a family legacy of violence passed down for generations, will not be broken.

The Book of Isaiah, chapter 58 understood the cycle on a big societal level way back when, and puts it this way: "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk...if

you...satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday...You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail." It is God's intent that we will repent or "turn away" from hurtful actions, and that our apologies be backed with actions. In a brilliant bit of psychology written some 2500 years before that was even a field of study, Isaiah calls on people of faith to put away the actions that enact violence (the yoke of oppression), the thoughts that justify violence (the pointing finger), and the words that accelerate us toward violence (malicious talk).

And while we're on the Biblical witness toward this issue, I need to say more about Jesus' notion of turning the other cheek, and forgiving 70x7 (Matthew 5:39, 18:22). By telling his followers to turn the other cheek Jesus is not counselling us to be doormats in the face of violence, but he is saying that the cycle of violence will never be broken if we are constantly seeking payback. Though the law of Moses gives the right for revenge and defines it in very equitable ways, to seek such revenge is to buy in to a system where violence still rules the day. So Jesus calls his followers away from revenge, for the power of light and life and love are stronger than the power of fear and violence and vengeance.

As for forgiving seventy times seven, it may just be such a ridiculously large number that we're being told to involve God right away because the task is so big, but I do think that the numbers 70 and 7 are significant. Seventy = the followers of Jesus sent out into the world to bring hope and healing, i.e. the entire Christian community; Seven = the seven days of the week, i.e. every day. If taken this way, Jesus is telling us that forgiveness is not a tiny, personal action that happens in the blink of an eye but rather is something that unfolds over time within community, supporting those who are wronged in their healing AND supporting and holding accountable those who created the harm as they seek to find new, healthy, sustainable ways of being. You see, the cycle of violence loves to be left on its own, so the support and accountability that come from brave, loving Christian community may well be the most powerful tool at our disposal in breaking and transforming the cycle.

And with that being said, from this general examination of what it means to truly apologize, and the conditions under which an apology is accepted, we look across to that specific time thirty years ago when a process of apology was begun with our indigenous sisters and brothers.

Just to be clear, our Church has offered two formal apologies: one in 1986, which was more general, and another one in 1998 which got much more specific about the wrongs that were enacted at the Indian Residential Schools. Both are poetic and heart-felt and, I believe, genuine, but there is something about the 1986 apology that lifts it into the category of "bravest and best things the United Church has ever written."

This paragraph, in particular, moves me deeply each time I see it, say it or hear it:

"We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be."

And as tempting as it is to double back and excuse much of our story with the well-worn, "well, it wasn't all bad & many of the people had good intentions" argument, that doesn't lessen the damage or the need to acknowledge the brokenness. A desire to eradicate any and all aspects of First Nations Culture within a generation led to the removal of generation after generation of children from their homes. Eradicate and remove are words that do their work within a cycle of violence, not to mention the actual physical and sexual violence that was enacted in the Residential Schools, and this violence has put everyone into a state of brokenness. We were and are impoverished by the chasm that we created between our cultures, an apology was definitely warranted, and I give thanks for those who had the courage to speak it aloud.

I also have great respect for the wisdom of the native elders who two years later, in 1988, acknowledged the apology but came short of actually accepting it. Their acknowledgement closed with these words: "[We] hope and pray that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are the words of action and sincerity. We appreciate the freedom for culture and religious expression. In the new spirit this Apology has created, let us unite our hearts and minds in the wholeness of life that the Great Spirit has given us." In other words, they understood the cycle of violence, and were unwilling to re-enter the relationship if we were just talking about change and not actually doing anything about it. And you know, much as I would like to think that we will suddenly emerge to a point where everything is fixed, the words of the 1988

acknowledgement might always be our shared way forward: continued sincerity on our part, a reclaiming of spiritual tradition by our sisters and brothers at Morley and Norway House and Mount Elgin, and a growing belief in all of us that God our parent and creator desires wholeness and unity and equity and respect in our way forward.

Apologizing, and knowing what to do next, are never easy, especially when regrettable things have been said and done. As people of faith we commit ourselves to move beyond mere remorse to actively seeking healing, in every situation where we have wronged another. We seek supportive community for situations where we have been the ones wounded. And we invoke the deep love of God, the reconciling heart of Christ, and the guidance of the Spirit, as we remain accountable and committed to God's own vision of wholeness – the path of Shalom – in our homes, our communities, and in our walk with our Aboriginal Sisters and Brothers. Amen.

Reference cited:

Fortune, Marie – quoted at <http://www.nwalsafeplace.org/about-abuse/cycle-of-violence-2/>

United Church Apologies - <http://www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/apologies>

Other useful resources:

UC Aboriginal Ministries - <http://allnativecircleconference.com/>

UC Residential Schools - <http://thechildrenremembered.ca/about/>

National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation - <http://nctr.ca/map.php>

UC processes re Sexual Abuse - <http://www.united-church.ca/leadership/church-administration/sexual-abuse-prevention-and-response>

more about Marie Fortune - <http://www.faitrustinstitute.org/about-us/history>