

Sermon: June 6, 2021 – Acts 15: 7-19 and Psalm 130
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church - Rev. Greg Wooley

I am writing this sermon four days after hearing of the discovery at the Kamloops Residential School. At this moment, I carry within me silent, sorrowful, helpless, culpable emptiness, and am seeking the words God wants to enter that silence.

Watch at: <https://youtu.be/EpDvYajNs5U>

So I humbly ask God, “where are you in this?” For even if I could find no words at all, I know that God is not absent from this scene.

- We know God is present in the search for adequate response, when no response could possibly be adequate.
- We hear God in the sobs and the shouts of those whose emotions are responding to the disgraceful injustice of what has happened.
- We see God in the pause that many are taking to feel the feelings of this time, remembering previous discoveries at the Red Deer Industrial School and elsewhere, and bracing for the realities of further discoveries ahead... for there are many more unexplored sites, at the 139 Residential and Industrial Schools.
- We see God as people attempt to find a physical connection to the children in Kamloops who never went home, palpable, kinesthetic expressions of mourning, by solemnly laying teddy bears and pairs of children’s’ shoes on the steps of Churches and public buildings.
- We sensed God’s presence in the nearly 7,000 Residential School Survivors who shared their life’s story at the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, and in those who heard and believed when they heard of siblings and friends who were there one day and gone, forever, the next.
- We continue to hear God as voices are raised for justice: raised on behalf families who have endured Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls, Trans and Two-Spirit; raised on behalf of those who are still not believed when they tell of the repeated and ritualized abuse that they experienced at Residential School, carried as physical and emotional scars.
- We acknowledge the presence of God in each life extinguished and disregarded. In Christ’s final week we saw how structured power can degrade and brutalize and kill and this still goes on to this day.
- And we acknowledge that the relationships and sacred stories and traditions of Indigenous peoples are every bit as valid as anything I am saying from my Christian framework.

We pause with all these things for a full two minutes, acknowledging the presence of a God who at this moment is both weeping with the families and mobilizing the change-agents, in response to all children who have died in the care of the state: in Kamloops, in other Residential Schools, in institutions, in care. In God we pause and remember.

From the earliest days of Christianity, we have struggled to embody the inclusive heart of God.

A couple of weeks ago at our Pentecost service, we considered that the list of locations in the 2nd chapter of Acts might not be as far-reaching as we'd thought. Philosophically minded Jewish scholars and Hellenistic Greek thinkers could find respect for one another, but anyone outside that realm of superiority was labelled "barbaric," disregarded by those high-thinkers and viewed as well beyond the concern of the Divine. In today's reading from the 15th chapter of Acts we are at the equivalent of a congregational meeting, where the apostle Peter and others are debating who is in, and who is out, when it comes to the mission and membership of the Church: does one need to be Jewish first, as the first disciples were, in order to fully accept Christ, or can Gentiles meet the standard as well? Peter's impassioned speech confirms that God's love is for both, with no distinctions to be drawn between the two, and yet to this day we have a hard time conceiving, let alone emulating, the far-reaching love of God.

A sermon recounting all the ways and times that the Church has held God's love as exclusive and interpreted the Church's role as holy gatekeeper, would be encyclopedic in scope. So many times, people who thought a certain way or looked a certain way or loved a certain way have been persecuted, expelled, eliminated. On this Pride Sunday, and on a day when the fate of 215 children has underlined our shameful history with Indigenous people, we are well aware of how mean-spirited, targeted and at times fatal this abuse of power has been and continues to be.

We ponder this, with that question we started with: in all these scenes of the Church, understanding itself as commissioned to bring purity and propriety and advancement to the world, where is God? Where is the Holy Spirit? Where is Christ?

I know I've used this example before but I'll use it again: in the mid 1980s, Christian speaker Tony Campolo was in Burnaby, BC, addressing a conference of youth Ministers. There were hundreds of fresh-faced, sharp-dressed youth leaders – and me – there to learn how to transform our youth groups from 3 kids shooting hoops in a gym, to a rocking, transformational gathering of just the right teens. But part way through the presentation he stopped and looked at us and asked: if Jesus came back, and showed up at the high school where your youth group kids come from, where would he be? With the popular kids because they'd be good evangelists? with the honour students, the kids who would be good at following the commandments? No, suggested Tony, he'd start looking for Jesus hanging out with the outcasts. I'd say our theme speaker lost a good third of his audience right then but those who were willing to go where he was challenging us to go, were on the edge of our seats for the rest of his presentation. When looking for Creator God – for the Spirit – for Christ – I may be looking a long time, because I will tend to look for that holy presence in places that are safe and familiar and comfortable for folks-like-me. But that's not where you'd find Jesus – Christ is actively present with and in those pushed "outside the circle" and reminds anyone who figures that God is manly found with those who live inside approved, respectable society, that such privilege holds no sway in the kin-dom of God. The Holy Spirit is notorious for blowing the doors off of our best-laid plans. Creator God is present in every living being, the people I am drawn to right away and the people who I simply do not get. And the more we can learn this and live this, the more we can identify the love of God as wild and expansive rather than finite and controllable, the more we will experience the chaos and the unpredictability and the diversity that God reveals in.

Today, we acknowledge the damage done by Christian superiority and judgmentalism and racism and sexism – damage done to people’s lives, while also doing damage to the mission and reputation of Jesus. The 1986 United Church Apology to Indigenous People encapsulated this dual damage: “In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality. We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel. 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”. Bedazzled by an arrogant belief of being better than others and closer to God, the Churches, through our pulpits and through the Indian Residential Schools, demonized Indigenous spirituality, and dehumanized Indigenous children to the point that they didn’t even get their names written down when they died.

On this difficult day, we come with humility and confession to a God who presents a better way for all humanity and in fact, all creation. We seek God, as Creator, Christ and Spirit, and we find God comforting those who have been decimated and guarding them from further harm. We find God in full solidarity with those who will not be silenced in their pursuit of safe water to drink, and traditional ways to live, and health and education systems that fit. We find God in every heart now attuned to the Indigenous history and realities of this land, and every tangible action done now, and in future, in a true spirit of reconciliation. We find God calling the Church to be the body of Christ, to go into difficult places, to admit difficult truths, to push for changes not just within the Church but within society and government, to use the fullness of its resources and structures and connections and whatever power it might have left, for the sake of justice. We seek God...we find God... and God finds us... and we learn that God’s commitment to courageous, supportive, open-hearted affirming love will not be stifled or re-shaped or limited.

In the presence of that God, Creator, Christ and Spirit, we open ourselves to the next steps, whatever they may be. Amen.

References cited:

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The United Church of Canada’s apologies, response, and crest. <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/apologies-response-crest.pdf>

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada
http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf and
http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Volume_4_Missing_Children_English_Web.pdf