

**Sermon: Orange Shirt Sunday, Sept 24, 2023. 1 Cor 1: 18-24 and Psalm 23.  
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Imagine how ridiculous the early Christians must have seemed to their neighbours. I mean, just listen to what they were saying! Almighty God, fully present as this young man, Jesus, from Nazareth... and to top it off, he died a humiliating, agonizing death. And as for reports of resurrection, well, don't even start. Amidst the haughtiness of Greco-Roman thought, which viewed these Christ-followers as unsophisticated, and the immovable barrier of the Jewish scholarship of the day, Paul called the early Church to embrace the foolishness of the cross. Spiritual arrogance was going to get them nowhere amidst such formidable opponents, so dare instead to be fools for Christ. If only that perspective had been more fully embraced.

Spiritual Arrogance is at the root of so many of this planet's problems. How many wars have started with each side claiming the spiritual high ground, and regarding the opponent as infidel or even demonic? What proportion of the danger faced by gay and trans folks, including the nationwide march held last Wednesday in many Canadian cities, has its roots in spiritual arrogance? A simple Google search for the topic, Spiritual Arrogance, revealed that the vast majority of the top twenty articles come from two sources: conservative Christian, which I would have expected, and Buddhist, which caught me a bit off guard. Both of these called people back from the arrogance of the ego to the core teachings of the tradition.

The authors who really caught my attention, though, came from neither of these traditions, and I'll share a bit from three of them:

Holistic Life Coach Dr Elizabeth Galen shares, "Spiritual arrogance is all too common in this world. People who think they've found the divine (or God or whatever word you prefer) let their newfound spiritual prowess go immediately to their head. Here's a hint, though: The more arrogant that someone is about their spiritual abilities and the more they need to display their divine connection overtly, the less connection they are likely to have".

A female Muslim blogger named Rushda writes, "What makes spiritual arrogance so dangerous is how easily it can overtake the believer, turning their own religiosity against them. Arrogance is like that—it catches us unawares, insidiously worming its way into our thinking. So often we see arrogance in others and are instantly repelled by it—and yet, we are completely oblivious to our own."

And David Langness, writing within the Baha'i tradition, wrote "By the very nature of our spiritual search, we tend to find some pretty satisfying and serious personal truth ... [which can] give us the false sense that we have knowledge and insight that somehow outranks other peoples' knowledge and insight...[but]...Mystical, inner exploration and discovery, when it truly results in the expansion of our minds and hearts, does not create arrogance – instead, it creates humility, and the ongoing realization that what we've learned represents just a tiny fraction of what remains to be learned'.

All three of these authors, and in fact most of the Buddhist and Christian authors as well, remind us of the core human value of humility. Feeling confident that I am loved by God is a wonderful thing, but only if you're open to the reality that someone with entirely different beliefs and background is just as beloved.

This morning's service, evidenced by lots of orange shirts and flashes of orange here and there, recalls a time when spiritual arrogance was foundational to life in this land and was used with heartbreaking consequence. Founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of progress - that humanity just keeps improving as it leaves so-called "primitive" ways behind and adopts

more “sophisticated” ways – the approach to Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island was European arrogance in its most unbridled form. And as I have spoken before from this pulpit, as a third-generation preacher, I have no way to dodge this and say it belongs to someone else; I carry a full share of the shame.

Rarely have I been as proud of The United Church of Canada as I was in 1986 and half-way through seminary, when the first apology to First Nations people was issued. Twelve years later, a second apology specifically named the Residential Schools for what they were, but that first apology, I think, directly named the spiritual arrogance that made the whole evil system run. Spoken by the Moderator of the United Church, the Right Rev. Bob Smith on behalf of the 1986 General Council, that first apology said this (and I’m going to take my time reading it, to let each section sink in):

*“Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured.*

*We did not hear you when you shared your vision. 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.*

*We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God’s creation healed.”*

As happens whenever great harm is done, an apology is not the end of things; it admits the wrong, it expects that restitution will be needed, and it asks, humbly, for the opportunity to seek new beginnings. As the 1986 Apology so accurately stated, not only did our spiritual arrogance as a Church and as the newly-dominant culture do its best to disrespect and stunt traditional teachings and ways of being; it played to our worst selves, living not by the humility and grace of Christ, but by the arrogance, violence and coercion of empire. In misshaping another culture, our legacy got stunted, too, and that has consequences that we don’t get to just shake off.

Amidst all of this, how can we be hopeful, and not just immobilized? I’ve got two hopeful things to share, one directly related, the other one indirect but still powerful.

The indirect one relates to a task I was involved in this past week. We were interviewing for the new Special Assistant position here at Ralph Connor, and I was struck by the number of times that the candidates named things like respect, honesty, kindness, engagement, and a form of inclusiveness proven by actions, as key things for them as human beings and for us as Church. I was moved and encouraged by these candidates of different ages and genders and backgrounds, lifting up these things that we can and must be as Church, as the humility of welcome and service push all notions of spiritual arrogance to the sideline.

The direct source of hope was experienced on Easter morning this year, at our Riverside service. We were honoured to have Iyarhe Nakoda Elder Glenn Stephens with us, and his message for us as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people desirous of reconciliation was to

focus on the final words of the Psalm 23. “Surely goodness and mercy” he said, and paused, and repeated several times... “Surely goodness and mercy”... “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”... and then he made sure that we caught his meaning, that it was all God’s people together experiencing this... “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.” A vision of heaven, perhaps, though the Psalmist didn’t picture that. This vision, in the Psalm and in the wise words of an Elder, is one of humans walking humbly with God here on earth, in a way that transforms this world, this life, healing the brokenness that we humans have created. Standing outside at Riverside Park, above the Bow River, I was mesmerized by what Glenn had said. As someone impacted his whole life by policies and attitudes designed to minimize and maybe even eradicate his Indigenous personhood, these were powerful words, filled with grace. There are big stumbling blocks to reconciliation and it may well be regarded as folly or impossibility, yet in the midst of that the desire of the Holy to bring us together and find the sacredness and goodness of life, is a resilient, determined, unstoppable force.

This is not a day for easy answers, but neither is it a day to be stuck in place. While the Church has a lot to answer for, the God whom we know as Creator, Christ and Spirit continues to push for healing, and justice, and life. There will be hard times amidst that, there will be conflict, there will be choices and changes that may not feel much like good news, but it will be real, and it will be truthful, and it will be holy.

Spiritual arrogance is a powerful thing. It can so easily find life in individual hearts, in cultures, in religious institutions, and it doesn’t just have the one target...which is why it is so important to recognize it, not just as something that has found a home in someone else’s actions, but as something that might be trying to find a home in our hearts as well. We are called, again and again, to align our hearts and actions with a God who sees all her children as beloved. On this day of orange shirts, remembering the experience of Residential School survivors and those who did not come home, our hearts are called to acknowledge this and all manner of brokenness, and to choose to be motivated by love.

Not ego, not fear, not protectiveness, but a love that is willing to look weak, and humble, and foolish – the love of Creator God, living within us and around us and between us. May this be so. Amen.

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