



## **Sermons** **from Northwood United Church**

**“We Will Survive”**

**Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, Matthew 18:10-22**

**Will Sparks**

**September 22, 2013**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer, Amen

I am at the PNE. It is Friday afternoon and the Forum has been turned into a huge hearing room with a stage at one end. It is decked in beautiful cedar planking with huge pieces of beautiful red and black painted figures at the front and at the entrance. The room seats perhaps one or two thousand people with room for many more around the sides. It is not full, but there are a lot of people there. The smell of sweat grass and the sound of drumming hang in the air. Peggy Cave, Linda Hibbard, Treena and I have come to witness the proceeds of the National gathering of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a government sponsored commission, put in place by the current government in an attempt to hear and address the devastating history of Indian Residential Schools, allow an opportunity for the truth of what happened to aboriginal children in these schools to be told, heard, and acknowledged in the belief that hearing the truth is a necessary precondition for healing, and a new relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in Canada.

We were there to witness this historic event. We sat down not far from the front and Joan Moris, a friendly looking woman, probably in her late 60s came forward and told the story of herself, her parents and her grandparents who were all taken from their families and homes and spent their entire childhood in residential school. She also told of the hospital in Nanaimo set up to deal with native children and adults who got sick in residential schools, where experimentation, forced sterilization and extended electric shock were all performed on children and young adults.

Nora Hanuse, a woman a little younger than me, whose mother, aunts and uncles attended residential schools and thus had no experience of parenting, talked about the effects of the residential school legacy on the next generations and the challenge to “take back what is mine, my language and my culture.”

Carol Lucas, better known in her childhood school as #66 talked of thinking as a 6 year old child that her parents had tricked her into being there and being confused on the first night when she was scared but not allowed to crawl into bed with her sister. She talked of getting punished for seeking comfort from her sisters, confused that she wasn't allowed to have anything to do with her brothers, and being sexually abused by a priest repeatedly for years. She talked of her rebellion at these abuses and the punishments that ensued. She talked of her late sister and her mother who will never get to tell the truth of their experience.

John Dennis talked of his 10 years in residential schools and trying to learn not to hate Catholics and not to drown the pain in alcohol and drugs.

And as we sit there these stories become like wave upon wave of grief and pain crashing on the shores and the words of the prophet Jeremiah come to me. “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician here? Why is the health of my poor people not restored?” And is restoration of a people and a culture after generation upon generation of this kind of treatment even possible? And for those of us whose life experience is so utterly different from this, how can we even begin to understand let alone participate in the healing? And as churches who ran these very schools, who hired well intentioned teachers who loved their children, and predators who abused

them, and who for decades refused to hear and acknowledge the reality of these experiences, how do we now engage in a new and respectful relationship with people broken by the actions of our ancestors. Is there a balm? Is there a way to heal?

It is hard to know how to bring these questions to this place this morning because unless you have experienced these things, unless you know someone who has been through residential school or whose parents have been, it feels very unbelievable, like some story from another place in the world where really bad things happen. It is part of our Canadian history and the history of the church that I never learned in school. For me the first people to bring this part of our history to light, ironically, were church people. And here we sit as a congregation without a strong connection to native people and culture, exploring ministry with people of various cultures, but not particularly connected with aboriginal ones. What is our role?

Firstly, we need to know the truth. As Canadians and as United Church Christians, we need to know the truth. The Truth and Reconciliation project is spot on in recognizing that the truth is a necessary precondition for healing. And that means that our church history and our history as a nation must be re-written to include this devastating reality. Dr. Duncan Campell Scott, head of Indian Affairs from 1913-1932 said “I want to get rid of the Indian problem... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada who has not been absorbed into the body politic...” The body politic he was talking about was western, Christian culture. The residential schools that the churches ran served the purpose, acknowledged now by our current prime minister, “to kill the Indian in the child.” Some well-intentioned teachers took jobs in residential schools out of a genuine desire to love and nurture children, to give them a good foundation in life. These teachers were devastated to learn the effects of residential schools on their students and often later to learn what was happening to their students in the dormitories, dining halls, and infirmaries, right under their noses. We need to hear the stories, know the truth, and let that truth become a part of the body politic, church and nation. Denying or ignoring that truth does not make it go away. It only allows it to continue its corrosive effect on our church and our nation and on the survivors and their children beneath the surface. First, truth heard- part of the healing balm.

Secondly, the truth needs to be acknowledged. Our churches and our nation need to approach every single survivor and their children and grandchildren, and acknowledge what was taken from them. It is one thing to make honest and broad statements of apology, and that we have done as a church and as a nation. It is another thing to approach every survivor, and there are at least 80,000 living today, and say to them, “I am sorry for what my church took from you, and let happen to you. It was wrong. It never should have happened, and I am sorry.” You know what a genuine apology for a wrong truly acknowledged can do in a relationship. And I am pleased to tell you that this is happening. Peggy, Linda, Treena and I sat in a circle on Friday while 10 survivors told their stories, and there, representatives of the denominations who ran the schools they attended heard their stories, heard the pain and wreckage of their experience, and acknowledged and apologized for what they had experienced at the hands of those who were supposed to be instruments of the love of God. And each of them was offered a prayer shawl, many of which were created by some of you. It is powerful- genuine acknowledgement and apology, another part of the healing balm.

Thirdly, we need patience. Healing takes time. The damage done to aboriginal people and culture took place over seven generations. It will take at least seven generations to recover. If the longing for a balm to heal this is the longing for a quick fix, it is not going to happen. A forest does not recover from fire in one season. An abused people will not recover in one generation. Our relationship will take several generations to be transformed. How many times must I forgive? Seven times? Seventy times? It takes time. And I know, there is a tendency to want to say, “what is done is done. It was wrong, yes. Now get over it. Get past it. Quit dwelling on it.

That doesn't help." And frankly, as Alvin Dixon said when he was here last year telling his story as a survivor, he too has limited patience for going over and over the story and is not interested in wallowing in it. However, it takes time to get there, and that timing is not for us to say- it is for the survivor to say. Patience- another part of the healing balm.

And finally, you and me. We are part of the healing balm. Everyone has a role to play in the creation of a new relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people. We can listen. We can learn. We can take advantage of the resources that are out there so that we understand. We are part of the body politic, the collective of Canada, the community of the United Church. We can learn the true history of our nation and our church. We can look for ways to support native social service and recovery organizations. We can question things that don't make sense to us, and we can oppose racism wherever we see it. We can turn on the news tonight and celebrate the tens of thousands of people who are spending this morning walking in the rain in downtown Vancouver to declare support for a new relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people here.

Is there a balm in Gilead? Yes, but it is one that provides a slow healing to the community of earth and one that involves a piece of all of us. What is your piece? Amen