

Indigenous Day of Prayer Reflection
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, June 21, 2020

Matthew 5: 21-24

(Note: When I video taped this sermon, I had beside me an ink drawing done by Indigenous artist, Donald Chretien of ‘Brave Muskrat.’ So people viewing the video of the sermon would clearly see the picture that would be a central image in the sermon.)

I spent time with ‘brave muskrat’ this week. In Indigenous culture, Brave muskrat was the one to swim down to the bottom of the water during the Big Flood and bring back in his paw a clump of earth. The more powerful and obvious water champions, like the loon, the otter and the beaver, had tried but failed. And the clump of earth clutched in his paw was placed on the back of Turtle, and it grew into what became known as Turtle Island.

Indigenous artist Donald Chretien, whose studio is in Newmarket, Ontario, did this ink drawing of brave muskrat. And on the back, he wrote, “Despite the danger and ridicule from others, the humble muskrat braves the depth to retrieve soil for the turtle’s back during a flood. With Mother Earth’s breath, this soil grows into Turtle Island.”

June 21 is National Indigenous Peoples Day. It is a day we lift up the language, culture and history of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. The United Church of Canada began to recognize this day back in 1971 – 49 years ago. This month also includes the fifth anniversary of the 94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which addressed “the history and legacy of Canada’s Indian Residential School System. The United Church of Canada operated 15 residential schools, accounting for 10 percent of students, all of whom suffered cultural loss and many of whom were subject to physical, sexual, and other forms of abuse in the schools.”¹

I also want to recognize the global awareness of indigenous peoples around the world, as lifted up and named in the 2007 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In Article 2, this proclamation is given: “Indigenous peoples and individuals are free *and equal* to all other peoples and individuals and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular that based on their indigenous origin or identity.”²

Free *and equal* to all other peoples. Here lies the work at hand. Here too, lies the great divide, between indigenous peoples and the white people who more often than not invaded their land and made it their own.

Kaitlin Curtice reminds us that this ‘ownership’ is still alive and well. In her newly released book, *Native: Identity, Belonging and Rediscovering God*, she writes, “Donald Trump, in a speech to the Naval Academy, said, “Our ancestors tamed a continent!” If a colonizing

¹ <https://www.united-church.ca/news/fifth-anniversary-truth-and-reconciliation-calls-action>

² https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

sentence ever existed, it's this one, spoken by a president.”³ Our ancestors tamed a continent, the taming of the Indians who were savages. President Trump said this *two years ago*, in May, 2018.

Ms. Curtice is a member of the Potawatomi Nation, lives in the United States, in Georgia, and is a Christian. While her writing is based primarily on an American experience, she references a number of Canadian authors in her book. Her writing describes her struggle as she works to name the indigenous within her, as she works to release it from the whiteness that she grew up in, in both school and church, as she works to open up that ‘other’ part of her that was silenced, that was assimilated by the whiteness around her.

Curtice refers to the ‘thread of whiteness’ which “started when Columbus arrived and deemed Indigenous peoples savage and unworthy of life, a thread that continued as African peoples were enslaved and forced onto this continent. We see it today in hate crimes against people of color and religious minorities. It is a thread of whiteness, of white supremacy, that aims to erase culture, to assimilate those deemed “unworthy” of humanity.”⁴

We cannot unsee what we’ve seen. Can we unsee the recent beating of an Alberta First Nations Chief over an expired license plate? On March 10, police tackled, knocked down and beat Allan Adam, chief of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations in Northern Alberta. Can we unsee the struggle? Can we unsee his bruised and bleeding face? Can we turn away from two shooting deaths of indigenous people this month in New Brunswick - Rodney Levi, a man who struggled with mental health issues but who regularly attended his local church and had dinner at the pastor’s house the night he was killed? Or young Chantel Moore, only 26, visited by police for a wellness check, but who was killed by police? A newspaper account adds, “There have been calls for a broader inquiry to examine systemic racism in the province’s policing and criminal justice systems. New Brunswick’s minister of Aboriginal affairs, Jake Stewart, has said he supports the call, saying the province has a problem with systemic racism.”⁵

And then there is the lack of movement on seeking justice for the possibly 4000 murdered and missing Indigenous women across Canada. As the National Post reported on June 3, 2020, “The government inquiry into murdered and missing indigenous women released on June 3, 2019 blamed the violence on long-standing racism, colonialism and sexism, along with apathy in Canadian society.”⁶

The United Nations Declaration said, “Indigenous peoples and individuals are free *and equal to* all other peoples and individuals and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular that based on their indigenous origin or identity.”⁷ Which means, let them be them. Don’t assimilate. Don’t erase. Don’t silence.

³ Kaitlin B. Curtice, *Native: Identity, Belonging and Rediscovering God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 162.

⁴ Curtice, *Native*, 13.

⁵ <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/indigenous-man-fatally-shot-by-rcmp-was-welcomed-guest-says-nb-pastor/ar-BB15tqr8?ocid=se2>

⁶ <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/health-pmn/survivors-of-missing-slain-indigenous-women-in-canada-impatient-for-action>

⁷ https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, “If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” Reconciliation is not “a call to forget the past and move on”⁸ but rather to remember the past and name it. It’s about a “willingness to step into the difficult spaces and speak the truth.”⁹ And as Rev. Carolyn Wilson Wynne, who put together the liturgy we are using today wrote, “With every fibre of his being, our beloved Jesus lived and modelled relationships grounded in mutuality.”¹⁰

Our work is to ‘choose what kind of people we want to be.’¹¹ So, will I be someone who helps to enable systems that differentiate between people based on skin colour, by remaining ‘silent’ when I see something I can’t now *unsee*? Jesus said, If you have something against your brother or sister, go find them. Sit with them. And sort it out. And then, move forward into God’s vision of ‘free and equal’.

Indigenous artist Donald Chretien said to me, some say the muskrat died. Others say he lived. When I think about the brave muskrat, arm upstretched, soil clutched in his paw, determined to make it, even though he might not, I am inspired. Brave, humble muskrat reached that goal, giving his all to the goal – to bring life to the world.

Are *you* being called to right the wrongs that whiteness has decreed on those whose skin is not white? Will you answer that call the way brave muskrat did?

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Curtice, *Native*, 92.

⁹ Curtice, *Native*, 117-118.

¹⁰ <https://www.united-church.ca/worship-special-days/indigenous-day-prayer>

¹¹ Curtice, *Native*, 24.