

“Being the Church”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, June 6, 2021

96th Anniversary of United Church
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Words before the sermon: This sermon speaks to ‘being the church’, as we’ve borne witness to for 96 years! But this sermon also addressed how to be church when 215 unmarked graves were discovered last week at the Kamloops Residential School.

While today is about celebrating 96 years of being the United Church of Canada, today is also the day to push our story to the sides, and place into the center, the story of the 215 children whose unmarked graves were discovered on the grounds of a residential school in Kamloops, B.C. a week ago. We’ve had the privilege for far too long of always having our story in the center, taking up the room. Today is the day to signal a change in whose story is in the center. Because as a church, if we can’t put the stories of those who need justice, who have no voice, in the center, then the church has lost its way.

Phyllis Airhart wrote the classic history of the United Church of Canada, a comprehensive review of the energies and faith that went into the writing of the Basis of Union, creating the United Church of Canada in 1925. She outlines the reasons why people from the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches felt that a national church was needed. It was to be a collective identity of a faith rooted in the Canadian context. She writes, “Those who made the case for union were convinced that they would build a strong church by overcoming the limitations of difference; they sought unity in what they could believe and accomplish together.”¹ She titled her book, “A Church with the Soul of a Nation.” Today I ask myself, the soul of what nation? Of whose nation? A nation clearly rooted in colonial values.

Sarah Travis tells us what this looks like to the colonizer and the colonized: “Western powers have constructed a world order that situates themselves at the center and pushes all others to the margins ... The lives, possessions, and land of colonized persons have been dominated, without their permission and against their will, by others who have perceived an inherent right to seize what does not in fact belong to them.”²

In response to last week’s announcement of the discovery of 215 unmarked graves of little children by ground-penetrating radar, we see a flurry of orange shirts, and flags at half mast, and editorials and news story copy. We are too good at this quick response, this show of solidarity, that fades from view, and the indigenous voices go back to the margins from where they came. And we take up the center again. That is what colonialism does. That is what Canada does.

¹ Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada* (Montreal: Mc-Gill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 14.

² Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 25.

The apostle Paul writes in our passage today, “I believed, so I spoke.” If I believe in the words I’ve come to know as touchstones of my Christian identity – like Micah’s – And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8) Or Jesus, in the temple, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free.” (Luke 4:18) If I believe in this, do I speak? If I believe in seeking justice for the oppressed, if I believe in helping those in need, if I believe in respect for all God’s people, if I believe in the restoration of dignity, respect, and rights to those who have been victimized, why don’t I speak?

Indigenous author, Bob Joseph writes, “It is estimated that 6,000 of the 150,000 children who attended the schools between the 1870s and 1996 either died or disappeared. The numbers are not precise because no one kept accurate records: not the schools, the churches that managed the schools, or the Indian agents. Children died at the schools from disease, malnourishment, and broken hearts.”³

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 2015 resulted in the publishing of 94 Calls to Action. Call to Action 74 is about Residential School Cemeteries and it reads, “We call upon the federal government to work with provincial, territorial and municipal governments, churches, Aboriginal communities, former residential school students, and current landowners to develop and implement strategies and procedures for the ongoing identification, documentation, maintenance, commemoration, and protection of residential school cemeteries or other sites at which residential school children were buried. This is to include the provision of appropriate memorial ceremonies and commemorative markers to honour the deceased children.”⁴ In 2019, the Federal Government set aside \$27 million dollars to look for unmarked graves in residential schools in Canada. They are only now releasing the funds, citing administrative tasks for the delay, but no doubt spurred on by the media frenzy over the unmarked graves found in the apple orchard behind the Kamloops Residential School.

Paul uses the language of contrasts⁵ in this scripture text, between one’s outer nature and inner nature, between what is visible and what is invisible. While Paul writes this as a personal model for growing in faith, it applies equally to a community of faith. Today, there is a sense in the United Church that an outer shell is falling, falling away to reveal an inner nature which, as Paul writes, “is being renewed day by day.” The outer walls are falling away because of outrage, because of weariness. As a church we’ve lamented the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls. As a church we’ve lamented the violence that has erupted over treaty rights across the land. As a church we’re grieving the 215 children in the unmarked graves.

Richard Wagamese offered this wisdom, paraphrased here, “You listen the first time. You hear the second time. And you feel the third time.”⁶ As a church, are we feeling it now? Can we *now* say, we believe, and so we speak?

³ Bob Joseph, *21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act: Helping Canadians Make Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples a Reality* (Port Coquitlam: Indigenous Relations Press, 2018), 53.

⁴ Joseph, *21 Things*, 154.

⁵ Feasting on the Word, Exegetical Perspective, 113.

⁶ Richard Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway’s Meditations* (Madeira Park, Douglas and McIntyre, 2016), 13.

When I can begin to name the wrongs, when I can sit beside those who have been wronged and grieve and lament, then the outer walls break down, walls of ignorance, walls of resistance, walls of protocols and regulations and policy written by a colonial hand, when I can do all this, then the inner nature that Paul writes about, the one that is renewed day by day, begins to find room in me.

Phyllis Airhart wrote of the United Church of Canada in 1925, “They sought unity in what they could believe together.” Friend and colleague Rev. Wanda Stride, and beloved by this congregation, composed a song for a regional annual meeting this weekend. In the song, she sings of the church as a place of hope, when we listen. When we truly listen, the one we are listening to is now in the center, where they belong. As Wanda and her writing team wrote, “Belonging starts with me. Tear down barriers and see it from another’s place, even if the world’s resisting. Christ is calling each of us, to show up, and listen.”⁷

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ Permission given from Rev. Wanda Stride to use the lyrics and show the YouTube video of her song, “Take the Time to Listen”, June 5, 2021.