

February 17, 2019
Deborah Laforet

1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

“Kill the Indian in the Child”

A few years ago, in a church I served in Saskatchewan, I was a part of an exercise that helped us to begin to understand what it might have felt like to have children forcibly removed to residential schools from First Nations communities. We were all asked to play a part. Some played the children, who were positioned together in the middle of the room, around a table with sacred objects. Surrounding those children were those who played the part of their parents. The next layer were the elders, the grandmothers and grandfathers, chiefs, storytellers, and healers. The outer circle were the warriors, those who protected the inner circles. Some of us might say that our lives are like this, that our children are the centre of our lives, but for the indigenous people, the young people are the centre of their whole community, the centre around which their lives revolve.

As a part of the exercise, we were then given some history. Today, I'll share with you a couple of quotes, the first being a passage from “Seven Fallen Feathers” by Tanya Talaga.

The Crown used the treaties not only to take land from Indigenous people, but also to absorb the next generation into Canadian society. The children were taken from their “savage” families and sent to schools run by Catholic, Protestant, and Presbyterian churches. In 1883, Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John A. MacDonalD, described the plan to Members of Parliament:

“When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from their parents influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.”

If every Indigenous child was absorbed into Canadian society, their ties to their language and their culture would be broken. They wouldn’t live on reserve lands; they’d live and work among other Canadians and there would no longer be a need for treaties, reserves, or special rights given to Indigenous people. The single purpose, and simple truth, of the residential school system was that it was an act of cultural genocide.

Secondly, I'll share a quote by Duncan Campbell Scott, who is a well-known writer and poet, whose literary work has now been overshadowed by his role as the deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs. Scott enforced and expanded residential schools by making it mandatory for all First Nations between 7 and 15 years of age to attend. In 1920, he said: *I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone . . . Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department...*

So imagine all of us in circles, surrounding the children, the life centre of the tribe. Now imagine, people chosen to act the part of Indian Act agents, invading this circle, grabbing the children from the inner most circle and escorting them out and away.

The rest of those circles, those who had surrounded the children, had lost their centre. The traditions were still there but there was no one to whom to teach them and pass them down. The parents had had their role taken from them. The elders, instead of caring for the children and passing down traditions, became responsible for grieving families, trying to fill the emptiness of this loss. Even the warriors and protectors felt their role had been diminished. Their centre, the children, had been taken from them. Each of the circles was then asked to turn from looking into the circle to looking outside the circle, as they awaited the return of their children, some of whom never returned. With no centre, they were lost. They were unbalanced. Many sought outside substances to numb the pain and fill the emptiness.

When the children returned, most came not knowing the language of their people anymore. They wore different clothes, their hair was cropped short, and many had forgotten the customs of their people. They walked into the centre of that circle and felt alone. The connection with their families was broken. They were foreign to each other. Their community didn't know how to act with these children who came back different. The children, not only abused by a system that took their culture, but abused physically, sexually, and emotionally, returned to their communities with shame. They also found ways to numb their pain and fill the emptiness, even taking their own lives.

The purpose of these schools was to "kill the Indian in the child," and by extent to kill the Indian in Canada. Unfortunately, this is still happening. This is not just events from our past. Read "Seven Fallen Feathers" and learn about seven high school First Nations students, sent to Thunder Bay to attend high school, who lost their lives. Because there are no high schools near their communities, young, Indigenous people are still being sent away from their families to go to school and some of them are still not returning home.

One of our scripture readings this morning was Paul's letter to the community in Corinth. It's one of those passages that you have to read more than once and slowly. Paul kind of speaks

in circles to make his point. “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.” (1 COR 12-14)

Paul believes in the resurrection of all people. If Christ has been raised, then we are all to be raised. If Christ has not been raised, then none of us will be raised. What does this mean? What might it mean for all of us to be raised from the dead? Now part of me wants to preach on how this passage might be relevant for us as individuals but today I’m talking about the part that we, as Canadians and as Christians, played in the cultural genocide of indigenous people in Canada. If Christ has been raised, might there be a resurrection of the Indigenous people in North America?

Jesus appeared to his disciples after his death, after his body was placed in a tomb. We don’t know how this happened. We don’t have any proof that it happened. We only have stories, stories from people who were significantly impacted by experiencing Jesus, the Christ, people who came alive again with spirit and passion, after their mentor, teacher, and friend had been taken from them. They could have stayed locked up in a room, fearful for their lives, filled with grief. They chose another path. They chose to follow Jesus and everything he had taught them. Their experience of Jesus *after* his death brought new life to his followers, who came out of their locked rooms and continued the life of Jesus in their own way.

The indigenous people of Canada, First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples, are fighting to come alive again, to break out of those locked rooms. The Empire that invaded their lands sought to kill them all, first with guns and disease, and then through manipulation in treaties, taking away their sovereignty, their freedom to live on the land as they had for thousands of years, and by taking away their children, in an effort to assimilate them, to “kill the Indian in the child.” But we are witnessing to a resurrection, a resurrection in which we can actively take part.

In 2011, as President of Saskatchewan Conference, I was invited to a Truth and Reconciliation community event in Lebret, SK. As a white person, I had no idea how I would be welcomed and included in this event, but I really had nothing to worry about. They were glad to have me there. They treated me as a dignitary, inviting me to join the opening procession, having me sit at the head table, and asking me to speak to them. They shared some of their stories. Some of the young people shared their drumming and chanting. They passed the pipe. I was invited to join them in a sweat, my first and only experience. Even though it was a day of sharing their stories of abuse in residential schools, it was also a day of celebration, that they were together, that their young people were again learning their language and taking part in their customs. I came away that day feeling like I had witnessed a small resurrection of a people. Instead of walking away, heavy with guilt and sorrow, I felt uplifted and hopeful.

Our ancestors were the ones who made policy to get rid of the “Indian” problem. We are now living with the consequences of those policies. The land on which we reside was not empty when Europeans arrived hundreds of years ago, but that’s the story we are taught. We grow up with stories of explorers and pioneers who forged into this unchartered territory to make a home, sometimes mentioning the savages that tried to prevent them from doing so. This land was already populated by a people who, I believe, were taking better care of it than we are now. The point of this last month has been to help us open our eyes and to be aware, to help us look past the untrue stories we have been told, the heroes that were anything but heroes, to the truth. We need to change the story that has been passed along for so many years. We need to hear all perspectives, be open to the pain that has been caused, be more compassionate of the brokenness we are seeing, and, most importantly, we need to listen, listen, and listen some more. This is what will eventually bring reconciliation between our peoples.

We heard the words of Jesus from the gospel according to Luke:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

The indigenous people of this land have been waiting too long for these blessings, and a reward in heaven is not sufficient. Jesus continues to say:

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

We are the rich, the full, the laughing, those of whom people speak well. We are the privileged in Canada, who don’t have to send our kids away to far off cities to be educated, who aren’t scared that they will go missing and found dead, who usually feel confident of a roof over our heads, three meals a day, and no one hurling racist insults or worse at us. Woe to us if we aren’t aware of our privilege and aren’t taking heed of those without.

May that day come when we, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can celebrate together the resurrection of a people and a culture. May that day come when we can all sit down at table, break bread together, and hear each others’ stories. May that day come when people of diverse backgrounds, cultures, abilities, preferences, can rejoice and leap for joy, celebrating in our similarities and our differences, living and loving together.

May the love Jesus showed for children be an example to us. May that divine love that surrounds us be spread to one another, and especially to the all children. May we strive to listen and to make this place a heaven on earth for all people. May it be so. Amen.