

## Reconciliation – When Repentance Meets Forgiveness

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As a member of Treaty 6 living in Athabasca on the river which is the boundary between Treaty 6 and 8, I am grateful to Cree and Metis peoples of this territory for sharing this beautiful land. I want to particularly acknowledge the claims of the Papaschase to the reserve that was once set out in this area of South Edmonton. (Tonight's event in Millwoods, and Strathcona Ribbons of History poles recognize this claim.)

As we begin Advent, we hear John crying out in the wilderness "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 3:2). Repent! It's a message that makes us squirm, especially if we're feeling guilty about something; despite the promise that heaven is coming near. We don't want to open up cans of worms, or air the dirty laundry. We just want to get on with our lives and for everyone else to get on with theirs; but as surely as a wound goes untended and festers, we need to muster up the courage, or 'muscle up' as Marie Wilson said at the last workshop, to truly discover what is causing the pain in this country in order to heal well, to discover in what ways our relationships are broken in order to begin to mend them, and gently whisper the circle back again.

*Christians rejoice in the kind of repentance which buries the rags of soiled past in favor of the white garments of a new future. But even though this comes closer to John's message, this is not yet fully the kind of repentance which John proclaimed. The repentance John preached is not a mid-course correction; it is more radical than that. The repentance John preached is not repudiation of the past; it is more complex than that. The repentance John preached calls for a revising of the past. It calls for us to look behind before we dare to move ahead. It calls for us to encounter the past we have lived through but have not fully experienced, the past we have inherited but not inhabited, before we enter a future we do not yet comprehend.*

*(Something Is About to Happen, Tom Long, CSS Publishing Company, 1996, pp. 18-22.)*

Yes, friends, as people who have been welcomed from all parts of the world to live in this fair country, we as Christians and all Canadians have a shared past that we need to learn about, we need to feel it in our hearts and examine it from every angle, we need to come to know it as our own, we to listen to the truth intently, heartbreaking as it might be. A truth, which yes, Jesus says will set you free. And others have added, but first it will hurt like hell. It is a history that indigenous

peoples have experienced and know all too well what the impacts of colonialism are on their lives, but as church members we are only just beginning to wake up and acknowledge that our lives and relationships have also been twisted and distorted by the oppressive systems of empire and racist policies in place.

So repentance, apology, contrition, being vulnerable and declaring that you do not necessarily always know what is right... it is the gateway to reconciliation. (says Andre Gagnon).

Let me take a moment to introduce you to a wonderful elder in my life – Louisa Smith. She is a survivor of the infamous Alberni residential school, and comes from the village of Kitamaat. The United Church's response to the legacy of Indian residential schools, and thus my work, is guided by a national Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools. It is composed of 6 members from native ministries across Canada, two of whom have been survivors of UC operated schools. Louisa served a term on that Committee. I am deeply grateful to her and her husband Murray Smith (a survivor of the Edmonton IRS) for being elders and counsellors who were at my side, and at the side of many survivors in Port Simpson, BC as the UC prepared to offer an apology feast to Don McKay, Wii Haughtm-Skiik in 2008. He was also a survivor of the Edmonton IRS, who had been abused by a minister who was charged and sentenced. Louisa occupies a place deep in my heart. When I travelled to attend the TRC hearings held in Terrace for two days this past June, (because many survivors of Alberni and Edmonton live in that area), I was overjoyed to see Louisa in her copper coloured regalia and woven hat, acting as an Elder and preparing the space in such a good way for us to be able to speak from and listen with the heart. Late on the first day, as Louisa's name was being announced to be the next speaker in front of Commissioner Wilson, suddenly I saw Louisa beckoning me with her finger. Me? Why would she want me to sit with her? Surely she is beckoning someone else, but no... I was deeply honored and humbled to sit beside her.

Louisa began by saying she wanted to read a quote from Marie Fortune – she didn't know anything about Marie, but it summed things up well for her. As soon as she began, I recognized the quote. I had sent it to Louisa.

[http://www.livestream.com/trc\\_cvr/video?clipId=pla\\_aa966bb4-4754-4e56-b73b-49a7ab651efd&utm\\_source=lslibrary&utm\\_medium=ui-thumb](http://www.livestream.com/trc_cvr/video?clipId=pla_aa966bb4-4754-4e56-b73b-49a7ab651efd&utm_source=lslibrary&utm_medium=ui-thumb) (Louisa Smith, third speaker, 51 minutes into that period, June 25 afternoon Terrace; on June 26 afternoon about 1 pm, Cecile speaking apology and handshake of reconciliation)

*"Reconciliation means to bring together that which should be together in right relationship, to renew a broken relationship on new terms, and to heal the injury of broken trust which has resulted from an offense inflicted by one person on another."*

*If justice is the right relation between persons, then reconciliation is the making of justice where there was injustice. Reconciliation happens when the offender repents and the injured forgives, creating the possibility of a new relationship.*

*Forgiveness alone or repentance alone cannot accomplish reconciliation. But when the two meet, the possibility is real. No longer, then, is the victim or the offender defined by the offense, but once again are two persons whose brokenness is healed and who can encounter each other anew." (Marie M. Fortune - <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org> - Marie Fortune, based in Seattle, is well known for her work on child sexual abuse, and particularly abuse perpetrated by clergy. She wrote the book entitled "Is Nothing Sacred?"*

Louisa went on to introduce me as her new found friend, and to explain that she saw and watched the UC coming to terms with the atrocities, but knew that I, Cecile had not been at Alberni, yet that I was acknowledging that UC personnel had run the school. She said how she "had to come to terms that not all the churches did me harm, but some of the people in them, so I had to make those two distinctions inside of me. Being validated of those atrocities though, are words of healing for my spirit. You cannot measure the harm done to my spirit."

At lunch on the second day, I was consulting with Louisa as to whether I might offer a public statement of apology to those present, and suddenly an opening in the program arose – Commissioner Wilson was not back from lunch yet – and the MC was opening up the floor to anyone who might want to speak. The TRC recorders were rolling. In a flash I found the mike in my hands. I invited the 10 or so other United Church members present to stand with me, and I proceeded to offer words of contrition and apology for the harm done, and our church's commitment to walk together in the spirit of Christ, including rejecting the northern Gateway pipeline planned to run through the territory we were gathered on. When I concluded, Louisa took the mike from me, and said, "I have forgiven the United Church, and I am going to shake the hand of each of these persons here. I invite any others here to join me if you wish." To our amazement, in a display of overwhelming grace, about 20 survivors came forward and not only shook our hands, but embraced us. One man handed me a candle. I promised him it would light the path wherever we walked. Reconciliation happened that day – repentance met forgiveness – but it needs to happen over and over again.

Later in the afternoon, another survivor said that for him reconciliation was simply when people turned up to listen like the United Church had for the past two days.

Recently, Rev. Michael Lapsley, a prominent Anglican in the Truth and Reconciliation movement in South Africa, was the preacher for the final worship at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in South Korea.

His text was from Luke 24:45-49, the conclusion of the story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, listening to the grief and pain of his walking companions who had witnessed much suffering at the hands of their own people and colonizers. Jesus was opening their minds to understand the scriptures where "It is written...that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all the nations. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Michael appealed to friends around the world to help him with this sermon. One of the responses he got was from his friend Jane Alexander the Anglican Bishop of Edmonton who put it this way:

*"I was just reflecting on a recent experience I had at a hearing for the TRC here in Canada. [Hobbema actually] I think what resonated with me as I read the reading was the reminder that for true peace and reconciliation to even have a chance, you have to be physically present, one with another. We had an opportunity to be in a church listening circle with former students and family members from the residential schools, to be close enough to one another to hear a breath, to share tears and to make space. In the circle, for the spirit to come there is a sense of creating sacred space. It seems to me that Jesus comes to the ordinary place of the disciple's lives and makes it holy, by his presence and by his words".*

On March 27-30, I invite you to show up and be physically present at the Truth and Reconciliation gathering, with your whole hearts, bodies and minds. Witness the truth being told. Inhabit the past like you've never done before. Discover what repentance and forgiveness means to you on this journey of reconciliation and liberation. Stay here in the city and let the transforming power of God's grace clothe you. May it be so. Hai Hai.