

Psalm 146

Complicity

It was a call one day in the spring of 2024. On the line was a person from the PCC church office in Toronto. "Hi Joyce, we know you are to be a commissioner at the General Assembly in June. As you are aware there is going to be a time during the assembly where the apology for the PCC's complicity in colonization and the residential school system will be given. We are wondering if you would consider being one of a group of people who will be in the room designated as a support person and a person to whom people can go to if they need support and prayer during or after the apology is given."

I said yes, and then wondered if I was up for the task. I thought, what the heck have I just agreed to? I did not feel adequate for the responsibility, but I also knew that I wanted to be present for this moment in the church's history.

I know so little. I spend time here at the church speaking to our community members who come to the door looking for bus fare. Our congregation supports the work of other organizations in the community that do the hands-on work of caring for the vulnerable population to feed, house, and clothe those in need. Just this summer a sixty-day project took place called "I was thirsty" whereby members of this congregation and community supported the purchase of bottles of water and the delivery of the water to encampments in the city. I know it impacted those who participated in this work and those who were shown care and compassion.

I have availed myself to learning opportunities hosted by our church including the Blanket Exercise that tells the story of Indigenous People in Canada in a profound way and hosted an indigenous speaker and professor for an evening event inviting the community to share in learning with us about relationships and the generational harm that has come out of the residential school system in particular. I have attended webinars and read documents.

I was grateful to be asked and I prayed that I would be enough should anyone come my way for support. I deeply thankful for the group who, along with me, were asked to do the same. We prayed together and then we stood around the gymnasium where the Assembly was meeting, holding everyone in our prayers. The Assembly was prepared through drum and prayer to hear the apology. Normally the Assembly proceedings are live streamed for people to watch, but at this point the cameras were turned off. The live stream ended in order to protect those in the room and in order that anyone who might

inadvertently be listening in without support would not have to endure a trigger or trauma alone.

It was impactful. I have read about our history as a church. I have read and learned about the history of colonization and the Doctrine of Discovery. On the PCC website there is a brief outline of what the Doctrine of Discovery was and is, as is written...

“The **Doctrine of Discovery** is a set of concepts developed from a series of papal bulls (decrees) issued around the 15th century. It goes hand in hand with the concept known as *terra nullius*, Latin for “empty land.” The bulls that developed and supported these concepts provided theological justification and legal backing to European monarchs to invade and seize non-Christian lands, enslave non-Christian people “in perpetuity” and take their property. The sinful idea that European colonial powers had a right to appropriate lands and possessions and treat non-Christians as undeserving of rights flows from this doctrine and these concepts, and heavily influenced the legislation that eventually governed Indigenous-Crown relations. This doctrine and these concepts also profoundly shaped the system of residential and day schools in which the church was complicit.¹

This history has shaped our relationships with Indigenous People for centuries. Here we are, far removed from those decisions of the early church, but in countries around the globe and in our case, Canada, the church has a history to deal with that has proven to be harmful. I could show you a timeline of the work the PCC has done in regard to the work of healing and reconciliation, but the apology itself will give you some understanding. Though I cannot attest to the work of all denominations, there have been statements coming from Lutherans, The United Church, the Anglican Church, and others all in the spirit of healing and reconciliation.

The Truth & Reconciliation Commission with its 94 calls to action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples have also shaped how many denominations are now approaching the work of healing and reconciliation.

Today, as Orange Shirt Sunday anticipates the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation here in Canada, we are doing our part to remember the children of residential schools and to learn how our own words and actions can harm or heal and how the church has been a part of that history.

In the scripture reading from Psalm 146 we hear of a Creator God whose care is focused on those who are at risk, those in need of special attention because they are vulnerable.

¹ [Doctrine of Discovery - The Presbyterian Church in Canada](#)

God made sky and soil,
sea and all the fish in it.
He always does what he says—
he defends the wronged,
he feeds the hungry.
God frees prisoners—
he gives sight to the blind,
he lifts up the fallen.
God loves good people, protects strangers,
takes the side of orphans and widows,
but makes short work of the wicked.

This is the God who shapes our understanding of what is important and who is important. Our words and actions are ways of putting our faith into action demonstrated in the way we care for others just as God cares for and has compassion for those who are in need.

I understand that at times all of us can feel vulnerable and are in need of God's care and compassion, but today we are focused on those who are marginalized, suffering, and at risk, in particular the Indigenous People who share this land with us. Today we think about how we continue to be complicit in harm, whether it be by judging those who we think should just quit drinking and doing drugs, pick themselves up and get off the streets, or by voting for those who have no concern for those who are struggling.

As Christians, we are called to care, to have compassion. This is not about us. It is about responding to the needs around us in whatever way we are able as individuals and as a church. It is about restoring people to wholeness and then rejoicing with them and each other when the pieces all come together. And though this doesn't feel like it happens very often it does happen. When it does, we give thanks to God that in some small way we were part of something bigger, something meaningful, something that makes a difference.

When I think of that day in June last year at the Assembly I am humbled because someone did trust me enough to come and share their story and to have me pray with them. Others in the room tasked with the responsibility to listen and prayer experienced the same. What I learned in that moment was that I can listen. I can hold another's pain and I can love them. I think that most of us have the capacity to hear another person's story without judgement, without having to feel like we need to fix it, because in this case we can't. But we can be present. We can show up. We can listen and be humbled that God would trust us to be image bearers of God in those moments.

Today as the Apology of the Presbyterian Church in Canada for its complicity in colonization and the residential school system is read, I ask that you put your story aside to hear the story of the Indigenous People of our country. Do not judge or

question. We know that some people experienced good things in these schools and went on to have promising and good lives and experiences, but many did not. Many were harmed and that harm continues because we don't know their story or we judge or dismiss it as not our problem because it is history. Know that how we respond now continue the legacy of harm or the legacy of healing.

A reminder that, should you need, I will be available to hear your story after the service.

Hear now the apology...