

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Indigenous History Month

June 6, 2021

Scriptures:

Genesis 1:26-27
Matthew 22:34-40

Finding Neighbours Everywhere:

Let's talk about finding neighbours everywhere. Living where we do in Squamish all of us have connections with the indigenous community. Many of us have friends and neighbours who are Squamish Nation.

Still we have to admit for us in the united church and most Christian traditions our congregations have been oriented around other communities—especially the dominant, often White, Eurocentric communities who came to these shores as Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. I know many of us have made strides to make more connection, to become more aware but this week as the news struck it was a stark reminder of how much more work there is to do.

Many of you will know that in our school here in Squamish there has been significant movement in the education system to teach our children more about the first peoples of our land, their traditions and culture. You will also likely know that one day every year our children are encouraged to wear an orange shirt . On September 30th every year children dawn their orange shirts on a day that is designed to educate people and promote awareness in Canada about the Indian residential school system and the impact it has had on Indigenous communities for over a century—an impact recognized as a cultural genocide, and an impact that continues today. This past week children and teachers and anyone else willing and able to participate were encourage to wear Orange shirts (or orange of any kind) from May 31st-June 9th marking 215 hours , remembering the 215 children who lost their lives at the residential school in Kamloops.

Now I want to tell you that from the first day I heard about Orange Shirt day I started wearing orange on that day. In seminary were have been educated around the atrocities of residential schools. I have sat and listened to the stories of survivors at Truth and Reconciliation events and the news has always been hard. But this week as I walked onto the school grounds to a sea of orange I had to choke back tears because I knew the impact was so much deeper for so many than it had ever been before. I have spent my week trying to figure out how to respond and there are moments of grief that have crept up every day and that is a very good thing because somehow it hit a little closer to home. I knew that people I know and care about would be impacted significantly. I knew we had to take action immediately because that is what Jesus would ask us to do.

Jesus is so clear to the lawyer who asks him the question about what following God and true religion is all about. It's about love, he says. Love for God, love for self, and love for neighbour as for self. Jesus's answer stops the lawyer in his tracks as it can stop us in ours. This is a core teaching of our faith that suggests that paying attention to neighbourliness—how we love our neighbours, maybe especially the ones we don't get to see very often—is essential to celebrating who Christ is and who we are as we follow Jesus day by day.

Jesus was not one to stop finding neighbours at the end of a block or within one religious, social, or ethnic community. We know from the gospels he was constantly on the move back and forth between different, often rival, groups. He seemed to have no fear of arguing with the elite lawyers, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, or even Romans who defined the power structure of his time and place. He likewise recognized, spoke, ate with, and healed people of Syrophenician background, Samaritan background, humble people, those with no claim to power, fortune, or fame. To Jesus, God opened up possibility for relationship, friendship, where others saw only reason to condemn. His capacity to see a friend in a stranger is humbling.

It's raises a question of how do we become a neighbour to those who are not the same as us. You see, for many Indigenous peoples, one could say that the whole world actually is their neighbour! The traditional teachings of many nations have long acknowledged the essential oneness—the essential neighbourliness—of all living and non-living things. Traditional knowledge, passed down from generation to generation, has opened up a spiritually rich horizon of neighbours that includes not only the clans and kin of a particular tribe or nation but also kinship with the essential elements of life such as the air, the waters, and the land with its plants and animals.

For many Indigenous people, what we would call the gifts of creation—the plants and animals, the birds of the air, the fish in the sea, the land warmed by the sun by day and lit by the moon at night—these gifts are as much neighbours as we are to each other. This is wisdom that comes from Indigenous peoples' experience of living in this land for generations. Rather than hold a dominion model over creation, many Indigenous peoples celebrate stories of how creation taught them how to be human, how to live respectfully and with honour among all Creator's other beautiful creatures. It's a whole different mindset. It's a whole different orientation to what and who are kin. And very sadly, it's a beautiful part of the gifts Indigenous people offered to share, but were rejected, when our settler ancestors came to these shores.

The consequences for holding such differing understandings about being neighbours has been devastating. Devastating to the generations whose ancestors signed treaties with the Crown expecting to share in the abundance of these lands with the newcomers—not be dispossessed of it. Devastating to the generations who increasingly found themselves outnumbered by the newcomers pouring into their traditional territories, newcomers who had no conception of how the land was to be treated, no conception of how to live interdependently with the animals and plants, with the waters and the air. In other words, no conception of how to be a good neighbour.

Instead of recognizing the offer to share the land, the settling peoples saw the land as ripe for the taking. Treaties were broken, reserves were created, and residential schools were built. A whole

government apparatus was put together to control Indigenous peoples and their land, attempting to reduce sovereign nations to wards of the state.

Attempting, and still at it we know. We who benefit from this system—people who see the land not as living and sacred but as patches of ground to fence and resources to exploit—we are caught up in the sins of our ancestors. So many of us don't see the lie upon which so much of Canada and our wealth is built. And this continued unwillingness to recognize our failure to be good neighbours to the peoples into whose lands we moved is a cause of grief not only for Indigenous peoples but also to those other neighbours—the land, waters, air, trees, plants, birds, animals, and fish upon which we all depend.

Despite all the harm colonization has brought to neighbours Jesus would have us love, we celebrate that Indigenous peoples are our neighbours.

If Jesus were here, can you imagine what he might suggest we do? He once told a lawyer sent to trick him his summary of faith: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” By reaching out in love to Indigenous neighbours, we can signal we're catching on at last. Jesus had no reason to fear anyone he met because he knew each person already to be kin to him as gifts of God. To follow his lead, neither should we. Amen.