

The Gift of Reconciliation

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

It's an image that has stayed with me all my life.

As an American child of the 70's,
it was a staple of the years I spent parked in front of the TV,
watching after-school specials and cartoons on Saturday mornings.

Knowing how American media spills across the border,
there's a chance some of you saw it as well.

It was a Public Service Announcement,
with an Indigenous man, in traditional dress,
with an eagle feather in his headband,
canoeing down a river that then flows into the harbour
of an industrialized city, with smokestacks puffing away.

As he paddles along the current and later walks along the shore,
there's garbage everywhere.

Near the end of that PSA,
someone opens the window of a passing car
and hurls the leftovers of a fast food meal at the man's feet.

The PSA ends with this Indigenous man looking into the distance,
with tears streaming down his face.

The voice-over, over dramatic music, says:
"People start pollution. And people can stop it."

I have thought about those powerful images many times through the years.

With the help of YouTube this week,

I watched them again in all their grainy, gritty glory.

As a kid, I took away only the most obvious message:
Don't litter. Pick up after yourself.

Lost on me at the time, though,
perhaps because of my youth,
and certainly because of the obliviousness that comes
with the culture of white privilege that formed me,
was that the man wasn't only weeping over the garbage.

I now know those tears were being shed
for the loss of a landscape,
the loss of a way of life,
and the loss of life itself.

I now appreciate that the depiction of this Indigenous man
was an intentional, symbolic choice.

A powerful visual reference to another time and place.
And a powerful reminder that there's another way to live.

No 60-second PSA can convey history whole, of course.

And, yet, this one-minute ad did a remarkable job
of summing of 500 years of conquest and colonialism,
while raising a pointed though implicit question
about what our future might hold,
if we do not change our ways.

[To watch the video, you can find it here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exEUZS6bH3w>.]

This ad is now nearly 50 years old.
On some level, it feels dated and quaint.
And on another, it feels as timely as the day it aired on TV.

It seems to suggest that by not littering,
we could return to a beautiful, pristine world.

If only it were that simple.

Though our garbage is a problem,
it is a symptom of a much larger,
and far more complicated problem:
that we have built a way of life that is unsustainable.

Our consumer-driven economy will be the death of us if we do not change.

Because it is based on a model of endless growth
that assumes the resources of the earth are available to us
without limit, and without consequence.

But this, of course, is not so.

Everything on this earth comes at a cost.

And as that cost becomes clearer and clearer to us,
we are confronted with a choice:
do we change course,
or barrel on, with wilful ignorance, toward oblivion?

That's what that short PSA was asking half-a-century ago.

And it's what is being debated in various ways
around the globe at this moment in time.

Do we keep on as we are, or do we turn back?

It's like being on a speeding train,
knowing we will eventually run out of track.

Do we continue, full speed ahead,
or do we do something to slow down the train—
at least until we can find a way to put down a more sustainable track?

Or, more profoundly, do we allow ourselves to question
the whole train and the track, and whether
it's really taking us where we want to be?

That, by the way, is the deeper spiritual question
at the heart of all of this.

What is the way that leads on to life?
Where is the path that truly serves life?

I held those questions in my mind on Monday afternoon
as I joined with others to sit in the galleries
of the Legislative Assembly at Queen's Park.

It was Opposition Day.

The NDP tabled a motion
to declare a climate emergency in our province.

The hope was that Ontario would join
the growing number of cities and countries
who are going on record to say
that, yes, we are facing a crisis, an emergency—
not down the road, not further along the track—
but right here and right now.

There are many who say that such declarations are misguided.

That they're unnecessary.
That they're just talk.
That they're political window-dressing in the lead-up to elections.

And that it's problematic for something that will take
years or decades or more to address
to be rightly be called an emergency.

An emergency, after all, signals an intense time of crisis.

And then things go back to normal, or the "new normal."

I, for one, believe there is value
in naming that we're in an emergency,
although it is one that will take lifetimes to resolve.

There is a need to pull the fire alarms
in order to wake people up to the dire situation
that we humans are facing—

and that we humans have created.

Because without such alarms sounding,
it is easy for us to believe (and hope and pray)
that picking up our garbage is enough.

When what is urgently needed,
if life on this planet is to not only flourish but survive,
is a radical transformation of how we structure human society.

That's why it was so disheartening to listen
to MPPs on Monday repeatedly tout their plan
to help people in Ontario protect against flooded basements.

By the frequency with which it was mentioned,
it seemed to be the government's central plank
in staving off the worst of climate change.

In other words, it felt like a plan
to rearrange the proverbial deck chairs on an already sinking ship.

But what was even more disheartening to me
was that this truly life and death issue
didn't draw every MPP to Queen's Park.

The government benches were largely empty that day,
save for the few who must have drawn the shortest stick
and had to be there to offer some defence in the debate.

The environment minister, himself,
was only there for a few minutes to respond to the first question,
before stepping out for what must have been more important business,
though I can hardly imagine what that might have been.

It was a nice touch, however,
that he wore a green necktie for the occasion.

For most of the afternoon, though,
from my perch behind the government benches,
I was able to see that, to a person,
MPPs spent most of the afternoon on their phones,

checking email and their Facebook pages.

I watched two government MPPs
loudly joke and laugh with each other,
over photos on their phones,
as a member of the Opposition wept
as he spoke with passion about the predicament that we're in.

That scene pretty much summed up the whole afternoon.

And that scene pretty much describes where we're at—
or, better, where we've been.

Driven to distraction and denial.

But something is shifting, in me and in many others.

The message that our most ardent activists
have been trying to get across for decades
is finally sinking in, and finally causing us to change.

The message of that PSA so many years ago is now made all the more real
when we take in the evidence all around us
that people started pollution, and people can still stop it.

We are at a turning point, tough,
when personal practices alone
aren't enough to avert climate catastrophe.

Our individual efforts to become even more responsible recyclers
aren't enough in the face of a global crisis.

What is needed instead, I and many others believe,
are two major shifts.

One is that we radically re-evaluate our relationship to the economy,
that we examine our relationship with stuff.

That we reconsider the things we buy and use and discard.

That we change how we eat, how we travel, how we live.

And that we ask ourselves, in all things,
how can we shift to truly sustainable ways of being?

The second shift is that massive pressure must be put on our governments
to guide the larger changes in our society.

That, of course, is already well underway,
though on a limited and sometimes meager scale.

Things like carbon taxes are an example of such intervention.

But every action provokes a reaction,
and so it is with these efforts to bring about change.

Which is why the pressure on government must be ongoing.

It's never easy in a democracy to impose change on the people.

That is why the voices of those demanding change
must be heard, over and over again.

That is why there must be increasing acts of resistance to the status quo.
That is why we must curb our participation
in a way of life that is killing us.

This is no easy thing to do.
And it can't be done all at once.

On this little planet, our lives are wrapped up
in layers and layers of the interconnected web,
and sometimes in ways that cause serious harm.

It can be difficult to untangle ourselves from that.
Which is why this has to be about more than personal action.

None of us can lead sustainable lives without depending on others.
We are all in this together.

Amid all of the debate and rhetoric on Monday,
the most meaningful moment came for me when Sol Mamakwa stood to speak.

He is a member of the Kingfisher First Nation in northwest Ontario and represents the riding of Kiiwetinoong.

In the gentlest of ways, he reminded us that what we are talking about when we talk about climate change are things most basic to life: air, soil, and water.

The most basic things, and the most sacred.

I had planned this morning to preach about reconciliation with the Indigenous Peoples of this land.

In a way, that is what I have done.

The way of life that has been built by we who are settlers on these shores has resulted in literal and cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples.

It has resulted in the loss of their traditional lands, and the loss of their ways of life.

And adding insult to unspeakable injury, what has become of their traditional lands now threatens us all.

The path to reconciliation always takes us back to the land.

It is clear that the healing work of reconciliation cannot truly take place without our also working to heal the land that we all now call home.

We who are non-Indigenous have a lot to learn about how to deepen our relationship to the earth.

About how to know the sacred depths of nature, made real to us in air and soil and water.

The words attributed to Crazy Horse, of the Lakota Nation, which Beth Ann offered as the Call to Worship, have come true.

Upon suffering beyond suffering;
the Red Nation shall rise again
and it shall be a blessing for a sick world.

A world filled with broken promises,
selfishness and separations.
A world longing for light again.

I see a time of seven generations
when all the colours of mankind will gather
under the sacred Tree of Life
and the whole Earth will become one circle again.

In that day there will be those among the Lakota
who will carry knowledge and understanding
of unity among all living things,
and the young white ones will come to those of my people
and ask for this wisdom.

I salute the light within your eyes where the whole universe dwells.

For when you are at that centre within you
and I am that place within me, we shall be as one.

May we find our way to such knowledge,
such wisdom, such healing,
for the sake of our world,
and for the sake of us all.

Amen.