# GOD'S KIND OF LOVE

***JOHN 17:20-26***
***LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH***
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***MAY 12, 2013/7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER***

I want to begin with something of an apology. Or at least an explanation.

Today is Mothers Day, but this will not be a Mothers Day sermon—at least not a typical one. This is not because I think Mothers Day is unimportant or that mothers don't deserve special recognition or anything like that. Far from it!

The reason is because a number of you have been asking me, over the last little while, when I will be sharing something of my experience in Montreal a few weeks back when I went with a delegation of pastors and other leaders to attend the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Quebec National Event.

So, before this experience receded too far into the rearview mirror, I wanted to share a bit about what we saw and heard in Montreal.

Later, I will be linking these reflections back to the text that we just heard read of Jesus' last prayer with his disciples before heading the way of the cross, part of the "Farewell Discourse" found in John 14-17.

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For those who don't know, I spent four days in Montreal (April 24-27) where we attended the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in a downtown hotel.

What is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

On Wednesday June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology to former students of Residential Schools. He apologized on behalf of Canadians and the Canadian government for the nearly 200 000 aboriginal children who were sent to the government and church run Residential Schools across Canada (including 25 in Alberta). He apologized for the way in which these schools deliberately

I want to read a few excerpts from PM Harper's Apology:

In the 1870's, the federal government… began to play a role in the development and administration of [residential] schools.

Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.

These objectives were based on the assumption aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal.

Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child…"

Most schools were operated as "joint ventures" with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United churches.

The government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities.

Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed.

All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities.

First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools.

Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home.

The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on aboriginal culture, heritage and language.

While some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children, and their separation from powerless families and communities.

The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today.

One of the primary commitments that came along with this official apology was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—seven events across Canada

where victims would have the opportunity to tell their stories, and where those involved in running these schools would have further opportunities to apologize.

Thus far, there have been five events—Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Inuvik, Halifax, and now Montreal—with two more to come (Vancouver this fall, and then in Edmonton in March 2014).

The hope was and is that these events could play a role in moving toward a more hopeful future for all. So, it is important for us to hear these stories.

Even if Mennonites were not directly involved in the same ways that the Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, the United Church, and the Presbyterian Church were, we still fall under the same broad tent.

And as we heard on a number of occasions, it is "Christianity" that many aboriginal people continue to resent and reject as a result of their experiences. We are guilty by association, if nothing else.

So, what did we hear? The days were structured in such a way as to allow two long periods each day where survivors and victims were given space to simply share their stories with the Commissioners of the TRC.

Of course, we heard many painful stories of physical and sexual abuse and of the crisis of identity that comes when attempts are made to systematically eradicate the language and culture of a people group. And, of course we heard many stories of resentment of the church.

But for me, the most painful part of the experience was hearing about how the residential schools tore families apart.

On numerous occasions, we heard from women about the agony of a mother watching her children be taken away.

We heard of the way in which the families who were separated often descended into dysfunction and abuse. Often children would be unable to speak in the old languages when they returned. Parents were often wracked with guilt and coped in profoundly unhealthy ways. There was a learned shame in both parents and children, simply for being who they were. These patterns continue to trickle down into the present.

One seventy five year old Metis man broke down weeping when he recounted the experience of breaking down when seeing an ordinary mother with her child on a Quebec street corner—about how it reminded him of how he was never hugged as a child, never told that he was loved, never kissed on the cheek before bed.

It is easy to allow Canada's legacy of residential schools to be a kind of abstract historical issue, but hearing these stories, seeing these faces made it very clear that the deepest tragedy of all was the effect that these schools had in alienating mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, grandparents and grandchildren, and on and on.

One young man in a panel discussion was asked about any advice he might have for what a future of reconciliation might look like. He paused, and then said, "I don't know what to say about reconciliation between us and the government…. For me, reconciliation is much closer to home. I need to learn how to love my mom and dad again. I need to learn to forgive them for never teaching me how to give and receive love. I need to forgive them for all the alcoholism and neglect. For me, reconciliation is about my own family."

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In John 17, Jesus prays for his disciples and for everyone who would ever come to believe and follow his summons based on their teaching.

He prays that they would be one, and that they would be filled with the same love that he and the Father share with one another, that the world might believe.

What kind of love is this?

It is the kind of love engages a Samaritan woman at the side of a well with the offer of living water.

It is the kind of love that raises the lowly and brings down the proud.

It is the kind of love that redefines what "my neighbour" looks like and challenges us to see even (or *especially*) the least likely people as those who we are bound to love as ourselves.

It is the kind of love that lays down its life for others.

This is God's kind of love and this is the love that Jesus prayed that would bind us together as one and spread forth into the world.

How have we been doing? It is easy to come away from an experience like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with the impression that we have failed quite profoundly.

Again, even though there are countless examples of good being done in Jesus' name, what we heard in Montreal was almost the *opposite* of this kind of love.

The church has a lot of negativity to undo.

Another story from Montreal to illustrate:

It was nearing the end of a long day of listening and I was looking for a place near the back of the hall to sit quietly for the last session of the day. Near the back of the room, I was somewhat surprised to see a flip chart stand with a drawing on it sitting in the middle of the aisle.

I was even more surprised to see a young aboriginal man wildly gesticulating beside it as he was speaking in a very animated fashion to a young woman with a notepad. I edged closer to get a better look (and maybe a listen). The closer I got, the more obvious it was that this young man was very angry indeed.

I looked more closely at the drawing on the stand that they were arguing about. It was a chart with two columns. On one side, there were carefully crafted images of a wide variety of animals. There was a globe displaying North and South America, alongside drawings of aboriginal dwellings and a circle representing dialogue and mutuality. These were holistic images of life and interdependence and respect.

At the top of his column, standing over all the other drawings, was a tree. Underneath the tree were the words, "Symbol of Life."

The other column had very different drawings and a very different feel. There was a bulldozer and big drops of oil. There was a square schoolhouse and a severe, imposing-looking church.

Each of the images on this side of the chart was entirely coloured black. These were destructive images of oppression, ignorance, and disrespect. At the top of this column, standing over all the other drawings, was a cross. Underneath the cross were the words, "Symbol of Death."

For a few seconds, I just stood and stared. It hurt me to see the cross—this symbol that means so much to me, this symbol that represents what I have devoted my life to, this symbol that speaks to me of one who lived and taught and died in order to reconcile all things to God—portrayed in such dark and hateful terms.

My instinct was to explain, to offer other examples, to point to the good done by the church throughout history, to show him that he was wrong.

But this is how this young man has experienced the church. Rather than experiencing the church of Jesus as an agent of the love and welcome of God, he experienced death and oppression.

So what do we do?

As followers of Jesus, our challenge is as simple as it is profoundly difficult. We are to love like Jesus did. We are to reach across the boundaries and the barriers that exist between human beings, and simply love our neighbours.

We are to seek justice and to love mercy—for all people, no matter what the colour of their skin, no matter what their religious and cultural beliefs.

We are to seek to be tellers of truth and agents of reconciliation in all domains of life.

The church has not done very well at answering Jesus' prayer in John 17. Rather than being filled with divine love, we have imposed the message of Jesus on others in damaging and dehumanizing ways.

Throughout the TRC, I found myself thinking, "yeah, but I had nothing to do with this… it was other people." But even if we played no direct role in the residential school system, all of us are inheritors of a dysfunctional system characterized by mistrust and suspicion with our aboriginal neighbours, and privilege gained at the expense of others.

Even if we didn't have anything to do with the original decisions, we can, as followers of Jesus, determine to be a part, however small, of building bridges with our Aboriginal neighbours.

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A question I have been thinking about a lot lately:

<u>How does the world get to know Jesus?</u>

How does the world see the beauty of the one who never imposed himself on anyone, the one who rather than seeking to dominate, to change, to coerce, to rule and assimilate, laid down his life for his friends and his enemies, taking on the form of a slave? The one who pointed to a new family of God where we are all equal, where we can all be adopted children of God?

Quite simply, the world gets to know Jesus by looking at his followers.

We cannot undo the past—whether we are talking about big issues like the history of Canada's treatment of aboriginal people, or about the more everyday issues of our own lives and relationships.

But we can renew our resolve to help the world get to know Jesus by how we live and what we say from this day forward. Many bad things have been done in Jesus' name throughout history (as well as many good things). We can't undo these. But we can

resolve to do our part to making sure that people encounter a better, more unified image of a church that has been transformed and captivated and united by the love of Jesus.

At the end of one of his talks, Éloge Butera, a Rwandan genocide survivor and a TRC Honorary Witness, talked about the way forward in this world where human beings are capable of inflicting such evil upon one another.

In a room characterized by a wild combination of ex-Christians, anti-Christians, confused Christians, and every other imaginable posture to the religion bearing Christ's name, Butera read from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21). Overcome evil with good…

This is our task, our privilege, our calling as those who follow the Crucified One.

May God help us to be lovers of truth, agents of reconciliation, and, above all, those who are filled with God's kind of love for the sake of all the world.

Amen.