

## **In Hope We are Saved**

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Romans 8:22-27

I've had the privilege of visiting a number of Indigenous communities throughout Ontario and Quebec for work over the last few years. I am a trainer with a company called ACHIEVE, based out of Winnipeg, and I facilitate workshops on themes such as conflict resolution, mediation, emotional intelligence, navigating difficult conversations, diversity and culture, etc.

Despite the great diversity that exists within and between these first nations, in some ways, I had a similar experience in every community that I visited. I was welcomed warmly, fed well and enjoyed the relaxed environments in which time expanded to suit the quality of communion between people.

If you were to look in my workshop notes, you'd see a typical European settler brain at work: "9:10-9:20 – intros and PowerPoint slides #1-3; 9:20-9:35 – icebreaker activity #1; 9:35- 9:50 – two definitions of conflict." You get the idea. This Western, "monochronic", linear portioning of time tended to fall apart when someone would inevitably start teasing the person next to them in the circle which would lead to laughter and banter – a common event. One elder told me, "we are a laughing people" and that struck me as a very beautiful thing to say about one's community. Another woman told me that if they didn't laugh, their tears would "fill the earth".

So, in the midst of our laughter and eating and course-related discussions, deeply painful stories emerged about the profound impact of residential schools on each community. When I visited the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation close to London, Ontario last month, I was keenly aware of the large photographs that hung on the wall of the band council office where our workshop was being held – photographs of their community's children lined up neatly in rows wearing school uniforms in front of a line of stern-faced white teachers in the Christian school that was built on their land.

And beside these photographs was a table upon which lay a dozen braids of children's hair that had been forcibly cut before they entered school. One residential school survivor that I read about named Robert Costco said:

*When the Christians took the Indian children off to boarding schools, the minister used to lead the children into the chapel and point up to the picture of Jesus, with long flowing hair, and tell the Indian children that they were*

*going to learn how to be just like that man, Jesus. After this statement, the minister would send all the Indian boys off to get their hair cut short.*<sup>1</sup>

This last March, I stayed with a Cree community in Waskaganish FN, a town on James Bay in Northern Quebec. It has a population of just over 2400 people, most of whom are fluent in the Cree language. In fact, I had to stop my workshops every so often to ask what people were saying because they were weaving between Cree and English so effortlessly. I was heartened by the success of this language renewal and the active language immersion programs that were being taught in the schools and at the community centre.

Waskaganish has the historical legacy of being the location of the first Hudson's Bay Company trading post that was established in 1670. But much earlier, this site was a summer gathering spot for Cree families after a winter in the bush. In the 1940s, over 90% of the Cree population still lived in the bush, but this dwindled dramatically over the following decades as a variety of factors forced families to settle into small towns and villages along the bay. ***The bush is still talked about as qualitatively different from town life – as a source of spiritual nourishment and healing.***

I read a Master's thesis by a woman named Margaret Garrard from the anthropology department at McGill university which presented her research on the women of Waskaganish, particularly in regard to their experience of Cree traditions. All of the women between 40 and 61 years of age that she spoke to had been through the residential school system, some having had to go as far as Fort George (900 km from home). Many of the women Garrard interviewed blame this system for their own "lack of traditional knowledge and skills" and they are inspired by their children and grandchildren's "renewed interest in the bush and bush skills". Here is a quote from one of the women she interviewed identified simply as "L" so as to protect her identity. L said:

*When I was growing up I didn't have a chance to go to the bush with my family very much because I was going to school. And when I was a teenager I didn't like going to the bush. I didn't respect, you know, my traditions. But since I got married, I have a camp and we get to go out at goose break and I notice that my kids have a very different attitude towards Cree culture. They like it. I take them every goose break, and I show them how to do things, like skin a rabbit and how to*

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<sup>1</sup>Charles William Miller, "Israelites and Canaanites Receive Help from a Russian" in *Journal of Religion & Society* Vol. 12, 2010.

*make snares – which I didn't learn from my parents, but which I learned from my husband. Those are the things I didn't have the privilege to learn from my parents. I just am showing my kids now how to live in the Cree culture...learn the Cree traditions.*

“L” talks about goose break. This is a very old tradition that has been revived whereby communities close down for a week, usually in May, and spend time with family and friends in the bush, telling stories, hunting and trapping and learning to skin and cook animals outside. It's meant to be an intergenerational experience, as are many Cree traditions, in which elders pass on their wisdom and skills to youth and children about living in *harmony* with one another and the land. The town of Chisasibi, further north on James Bay, even started an “Adopt a Youth for Goose Break” program which pairs elders with youth who may not have an elder in their own family.<sup>2</sup>

When I was on a workshop break in Waskaganish one day, I walked by a round hut with smoke coming out of a hole in the roof. There were a couple of parked ski-doods and 3 men stoking a fire inside. They invited me in and told me that they offer hot tea to whomever comes during the lunch hour. It was -35 degrees that day, so I was happy for the hot drink.

When I got back to the workshop, I told some of the participants about my experience and we got to talking about community life. One of the women told me that some of these men also hunt in the bush for wild meat and bring a portion of it to elders who can't get around very well and don't like store-bought meat. These elders have the attitude that store-bought meat has made the Cree weak. I asked if the town had a market in the summer, but she laughed at me and said, “no, we don't do that. We just share what we have with each other.” As a Mennonite, I was also impressed with the enormous size of their crockpots. We certainly don't have the corner on community.

I left that trip with such warm feelings and a desire to return soon, so I was deeply saddened to read about what happened in Waskaganish about a month ago in response to a group of community members who were planning the first traditional powwow to be held there – a gathering with food, singing, dancing and other Cree ceremonies centred on healing and fellowship.

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Garrard, “Towards an understanding of tradition in Cree women's narratives, Waskaganish, James Bay”, 2004. [http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=81491&local\\_base=GEN01-MCG02](http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=81491&local_base=GEN01-MCG02)

During the late 1800s and 1900s, the Canadian and American governments outlawed many Indigenous ceremonies, including powwows. In 1876, Canada's "Indian Act" "obstructed the celebration of powwows by restricting Indigenous peoples' right to conduct cultural and spiritual ceremonies and wear traditional outfits." Of course, some communities resisted and continued to organize underground powwows. "The Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation and Thunderchild First Nation in Saskatchewan held powwows for 75 years during the restrictive period."<sup>3</sup> It wasn't until the 1950s when these restrictions were lifted.

In Waskaganish, this September, plans for the first town powwow hit a hitch. As I mentioned earlier, the town has about 2400 residents, who are almost entirely Cree, and there are five active Christian churches. Members of some of these Cree Christian churches argued that they didn't want to have a traditional powwow because it conflicted with their religion. So, a town referendum was held and 57.5% of the town voted against having an official powwow, even though the organizers did receive a letter of support from the Anglican diocese in response to the referendum results.

The organizers were devastated and one elder on the planning committee, named Susan Esau, said: "I feel that it's not fair... The laws protect Indigenous people and their ceremonies. Why would we go against the law in our [own] community? I don't understand." She also talked about how she believes this opposition is a legacy of the long ban on Indigenous ceremonies and the deep influence of the residential school system.<sup>4</sup> Despite the negative results of the referendum, a powwow was still held in the tradition of resistance like the historical powwows in Saskatchewan.

I am saddened by the legacy of Christianity which has led to cultural memory loss and fractured communities. It's easy to wish that Christianity would've never run its ships onto Native soil. But here we are. And what do we say to generations of Cree people that now consider themselves to be Christian? 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s of Indigenous people in Canada identify as Christian. Wouldn't it be a further act of domination and colonization if European settlers were to say that the Cree should not be Christian anymore? Surely that conversation must come from within Indigenous communities themselves. I pray that the community of Waskaganish can rediscover its harmony – a value so central to the Cree way of life.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/history-of-powwows>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/waskaganish-powwow-referendum-1.4812657>

Many cultures that have been colonized by Christians have struggled with these issues. In Latin America, liberation theology emerged as a way to read the Bible through the lens of liberation from real, material forms of oppression. The Exodus narrative in which God frees Israel from Egyptian slavery is used as a text of deliverance, in which God champions the powerless.

But the Exodus narrative as a model of liberation is not necessarily a fitting one for all oppressed peoples. For example, Robert Allen Warrior, a Native American from the Osage Nation, argues that the Exodus is an *inappropriate* model of liberation for Indigenous people in North America.

In an article entitled “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians”, he talks about what comes after Israel’s liberation from Egypt. He writes, “[Israel’s] new dream became the land of Canaan” which Yahweh gave to them by defeating Canaan’s “indigenous inhabitants.” So, “Yahweh the deliverer became Yahweh the Conqueror”. Warrior explains that “Native Americans will identify with the Canaanites (the conquered), not the Israelites (the conqueror).”<sup>5</sup> The Exodus narrative, then, is not a uniform text of deliverance from oppression.

George E. Tinker, A Native American theologian who is also from the Osage Nation, argues that any “theological reflection cannot be done without taking the social, cultural, and political...human context into account.” He says that while a “[Native] theologian may want to identify as a part of the Christian whole, the resulting theology may be quite distinct from the familiar European Christian theologies.” A Native theology may, for example, have “much more in common with traditional tribal thinking than with the usual established European categories...[and] this may [cause] considerable discomfort in colonizer churches.”<sup>6</sup>

Most of us belong to these historical “colonizer churches”. And our church is committed to a process of truth and reconciliation. We yearn for dialogue and communion with our Indigenous brothers and sisters. As settlers, we might have to settle into what Tinker calls a state of “considerable discomfort” for a good while and allow the foundations of our orthodox theologies, creeds and dogmas to be shaken, admitting that we are not fully formed Christians without further need of revelation.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today” in *Christianity in Crisis*, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> George E. Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty*, 2008.

In conclusion, 1 Corinthians talks about the many members that make up the body of Christ and the variety of spiritual gifts they bring. The foot cannot say that because it is not a hand it does not belong to the body; nor can the eye say that because it is not an ear it does not belong to the body. What if we were to think of this body of Christ as the flailing limbed body of an infant that doesn't quite know what to do with itself and wonders, are these my hands? How am I to grasp what I want? Are these my feet? How am I to walk? The tremendous will is there but I just don't know how to make it happen! Let us take this middle-aged body of Christ and inhabit the awkward, clumsy body of a child once again. Let's allow ourselves to learn to walk a different path with some stumbling and some success.

In the introduction to his book, "American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty", Tinker explains that his work reflects the inherent "resistance" and "optimism" of Native peoples. And he offers this gift to the colonizer: "a different way of seeing the world...that is transformative and liberating." Let's accept this gift and be lead by the Indigenous voices in our midst – away from town and into the bush – into territory that is at once old and familiar to them and new for us.

Amen.