

“God has given us the ministry of reconciliation” – sermon for TUMC, 28 April 2019

Scripture: II Corinthians 5.16-21 and Matthew 5. 21-26.

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In the Hollywood fantasy drama “Field of Dreams,” Ray is an Iowa farmer who hears a mysterious voice in the wind blowing through his cornfield. The voice encourages him to build a baseball field right there in the corn. “If you build it, **he** will come!” The voice becomes increasingly insistent. With his wife’s support, but amid taunts of lunacy from townsfolk and siblings, Ray ploughs under his corn crop and builds a baseball diamond, complete with lights for night games and bleachers for spectators.

Then, the ghosts of baseball stars long dead emerge from the 7-foot high cornrows to play ball. At first, Ray understands that the “HE” who is to come is the disgraced Shoeless Joe Jackson, the baseball great banned for life for allegedly throwing the 1919 World Series. But then comes a new message from the wind “Ease his pain,” and Ray realises that his baseball field is giving second chances to people who sacrificed too much in their lives. The last one to receive a second chance turns out to be his long estranged and now dead father. Dad is the “He” who is to come. He had been a minor league baseball player who had not been present in Ray’s life, causing lasting bitterness in Ray. But now, in a simple game of catch on Ray’s “field of dreams” they have a chance to talk, listen to each other, and see life from each other’s point of view. They experience forgiveness and a restored relationship. Ray asks his ghost father, “Is there a heaven?” His father answers, “Oh yeah. It’s the place where dreams come true.”

2000 years ago the Apostle Paul had a similar dream - of reconciliation and restored relationships. But not just for heaven. It was about 20 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection when Paul wrote in poetic grandeur that in Christ there is a new creation, that through Christ God was reconciling the world to herself, and that God has entrusted us with God’s ministry of reconciliation. Paul was writing to the fledging community of Jesus followers in Corinth, a large and prosperous city 80 kms west of Athens Greece. These Jesus followers were quite the conflictive bunch. Paul addressed their quarrels about food practices and idols, about sexual promiscuity, about worship rituals, and about alliances with competing leaders. Some members claimed spiritual superiority via ecstatic acts during worship. Conflicts had spilled out of

“church” and into the courts. One group was actively opposed to Paul and his teachings. Whew, our TUMC pastors have had it easy.

Into this caldron, Paul writes to them, challenging them to be reconciled – to each other and with Paul, because if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of God’s new creation. The old is no more; look, all things are new! Biblical scholars believe that Paul shaped these verses from very early liturgies of embryonic communities of Jesus-followers. Let’s try it! Turn to your bulletin:

- ALL - Through Christ, there is a new creation!
- WEST section- God has reconciled us to herself through Christ!
- CENTRE section - God has given us the ministry of reconciliation!
- EAST section - God was in Christ, reconciling the world to herself!
- ALL - God entrusts the message of reconciliation to us!

Thirty years after Paul wrote these words, Matthew wrote his Gospel. Our passage today begins with Jesus teaching that unbridled anger leading to curses and insults will result in similar judgement as with murder, precisely because such rage leads to killing. The second half of the passage then applies Jesus’ words to the issue of conflict in the early church. If during worship you remember that your sister or brother has something against you, leave immediately to reconcile with her or him, and then return to congregational worship. We can hear the echoes of Paul’s earlier challenge to the Corinthians.

So God has trusted us with God’s message of reconciliation. And today this first Sunday after resurrection we proclaim that reconciliation is at the core of the Gospel and God’s mission in the world. Pre-eminent missiologist David Bosch says that “Serving, healing, and reconciling a divided, wounded humanity” is God’s mission,¹ and we as the church are part of that mission – the good news of God’s reconciling and liberating love for the world, incarnated in the life, worship and witness of congregations of Jesus-followers. This reconciling and liberating love moves us to end oppression and injustice, and to commit to a new life of mutuality, justice, and peace. If anyone is in Christ, they are part of a new creation.

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis Books, 2011.

Reconciliation begins with repentance and conversion, recognising sin and brokenness, and then seeking transformation. The gathered congregation enacts reconciliation in worship in a corporate practice that fosters, shapes, and sustains communities of God's mission. In worship we are shaped and moulded to be that community bearing witness to God's message of reconciliation in the new creation that Paul declared.²

We as a congregation have been on a long journey toward reconciliation with LGBTQ people. It has been a journey of pain and brokenness, and of healing and joy, and our worship services have been central. We are not yet finished, for reconciliation with LGBTQ folks is not an item on a to-do list to check off. Yet we have learned much along the way. The brief narrative I'm about to share only touches on some high points. The on-line footnotes will point to the fuller story. And thanks to many of you for your reflections as I researched.³

In the 80s a few congregants shared their same-sex orientation, and eventually left TUMC. In the 90s, an adult education class dedicated three months to human sexuality. Then, in 2002, our associate pastor for youth shared during Sunday worship that she was in a dating relationship with a woman. Thus as a congregation we embarked on a careful discernment process. However, fourteen months later, the process imploded in mistrust, pain and anger. While we did agree that all people regardless of sexual orientation were welcome as full members, we could not reach agreement on renewing covenant with our associate pastor; essentially she was fired. Neither did we agree on marrying same-sex couples or hiring pastors who were LGBTQ.

² Irma Fast Dueck, "A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics: A Praxis Approach," ThD diss., University of Toronto, 2006.

Alan and Eleanor Kreider. *Worship and Mission after Christendom*, Herald Press, 2011.

Ruth A Meyers, *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission: Gathering as God's People, Going out in God's Name*, Eerdmans, 2015.

³ In addition to personal experience, this narrative draws on:

Gary Harder, *The Pastor-Congregation Duet*, Friesen Press, 2018.

Lydia Neufeld Harder, "Wrestling with God through the 'Messy' Process of Discernment: A Case Study," Unpublished paper, 2016.

Toronto United Mennonite Church, "TUMC and Human Sexuality - A Timeline," Unpublished paper, 2018.

Plus many interviews and conversations with TUMC congregants.

Soon after, two momentous worship services shaped our trajectory toward reconciliation. The first included a litany that named our pain and fear, our distrust and disagreement. I remember how painful it was to read that together in worship; indeed, one congregant called that Sunday the “worst [worship] service ever.” Yet it marked the beginning of our healing journey. In the second service a month later, we said farewell to our associate pastor, honouring her ministry among us. In worship we apologised to her, affirmed her gifts and prayed for her. And we committed to continued support of the development of her gifts.

Reconciliation grew as we slowly came to embrace the presence of LGBTQ people among us, both in leadership and as part of worship. This “openness to the leadership gifts and acknowledged presence of LGBTQ+ people were significant parts of our journey toward healing and reconciliation.”

This welcome and inclusion was experienced dramatically during two services. In the first, we blessed the covenant of a member and their same-sex partner who had been married in a civil ceremony, and in the second we formally blessed the marriage of two congregants who had earlier been married but without an official TUMC role. Both worship services were joyous and celebratory, with applause and cheers to God bursting out among the gathered community. And the jubilant celebration of babies born to LGBTQ couples and their parent-child dedications, along with a same-sex couple’s engagement announcement and then marriage were also vital to our growing embrace of these sisters and brothers as fully part of us.

Respect and forbearance undergirded this growing embrace and sustained our discernment journey. Some congregants were impatient for TUMC to be more explicitly affirming, and advocated at congregational meetings for more concrete actions. While these proposals were not immediately approved, neither were they shunted aside; they were given to a task force or committee for further discernment and action. The subsequent recommendations were then presented in care-filled loving ways, rather than with a sense of urgency; this encouraged us to move along together. A second example of the respect and forbearance that sustained discernment is seen in our welcoming statement, which was increasingly read to open our services. The statement signalled a clear move toward LGBTQ

inclusion while at the same time confessing that we were still on a journey. The way we framed it turned out to be very valuable. Saying in worship “although we don’t always agree with one another, we share a belief in Christ and a desire to be his followers” allowed some of us to hold a minority view and still feel part of the congregation.

This robust forbearance and trust resulted in a smooth decision to allow TUMC pastors to marry LGBTQ couples. Many remember that reaching consensus on this was a holy worship-filled moment. Indeed, former pastor Gary reflected recently that “in the end, we all came to the realisation that our worship of God through Jesus was more basic and more important than were our differences and disagreements ... no matter how upset we were with each other. Our worship held us together when our theology and our reading of the Bible didn't.”

However, we must acknowledge that these most recent segments of our journey of reconciliation were not without pain. There were harsh words, misunderstandings, and mistrust. Not all congregants experienced reconciliation. I personally still grieve this....

Last year, rainbow identifiers were attached to TUMC outdoor signage and the congregation wholeheartedly celebrated Pride Sunday in a moving worship service led by LGBTQ congregants. Tears of sorrow and repentance flowed as we recognised in worship the rejection, pain and suffering LGBTQ persons have suffered in society, in the church, and even at TUMC. Then recently, healing and reconciliation reached a pinnacle in a membership ceremony where three long-time congregants, now assured that our LGBTQ welcome and inclusion was without conditions, formally became members.

So in summary, after acknowledging our pain and division, we rebuilt trust and developed forbearance as we forgave and healed. Then both patience and persistence prevailed as we learned to listen more carefully, more prayerful. Former pastor Marilyn described this as “listening, listening and more listening ... to every single voice ... honouring resistance as well as affirmation.” Thus, God’s mission as reconciliation became a vital expression of TUMC’s lived faith as expressed in our worship. Weekly worship has indeed undergirded our entire journey.

In recent years, we as TUMC have embarked on a new journey toward healing and reconciliation – with the indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. Through the witness of involved

congregants and of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we became aware of the urgency of reconciliation, that "indigenous peoples in every part of the world ... are demanding recognition **of** and compensation **for** the damage done by settler populations to their traditional ways of life and their cultures." Yes, God has given us the message of reconciliation, but that message becomes relevant only when the church acts. Courageously. Prophetically. Relentlessly. God's message is a verb, not a noun. While we are not guilty of what earlier settlers and governments did, we ARE responsible for addressing and acting on the horrific legacy of racism and genocide in Canada; we ARE responsible for making things right so that healing and reconciliation can follow. For as one indigenous leader has insisted "there can be no reconciliation before justice."⁴

Just as we as a congregation named our pain in worship along with the suffering of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers, we are also called to name in worship Christian complicity in the cultural genocide of Turtle Island's indigenous people through Indian Residential Schools. We need also to name the truth that we settlers have benefited greatly from stolen land and from Canada's overarching settler system that has maintained many indigenous peoples impoverished and marginalised. Naming these truths have political engagement implications, but that's a different sermon. It strikes me also that there are implications for the leadership of Mennonite organisations.

For this new journey, our earlier journey of reconciliation offers us several guideposts, or shall we say inukshuks.

First of all, let us remember that reconciliation requires a spirituality more than a strategy.⁵ Reconciliation is ultimately the work of God and her mission. So this spirituality will be shaped by deep and prayerful listening to those who've suffered. Then truth telling, lamentation and repentance can follow with significant steps of justice. This spirituality will also

⁴ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: a Theology of Mission for Today*, Orbis Books, 2004., Marilyn Legge, "Negotiating Mission: A Canadian Stance," *International Review of Mission*, January 2004, 119-130.

⁵ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Orbis Books, 2011. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*.

be rooted in our congregational worship where we weekly celebrate and perform God's message and mission of reconciliation.

Secondly, we need to remember that carefully crafted processes will not ensure reconciliation, but rather a dependence on the Spirit of the resurrected Christ to guide us. In this, both patience and persistence will be essential. As before, forbearance and gentleness will be vital. And again, we will need to strengthen this journey in worship, because in worship our identity as a reconciling people is shaped and given life. Apology and repentance ought to be in our worship, along with our commitment to pursuing justice and reconciliation in action. And do let's celebrate in worship our steps along this journey.

Lastly, we must continue to listen deeply and prayerfully to indigenous voices as together we explore what justice and reconciliation entails. "Listening, listening and more listening" was vital in our earlier journey; let us now listen to indigenous leaders who cry out "until Canada gives Indigenous people their land back, there can never be reconciliation"⁶ Are we open to prayerfully listening to these wounded and prophetic voices?

I answer YES, a resounding YES. = Because in Christ, there is a new creation!

For God has given us the message and ministry of reconciliation!

In worship, we are formed into God's new creation. In word and deed we are the embodiment of God's reconciliation.

Ten days ago, our Good Friday evening service ended with singing "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" while images of these sins were projected on the screen. Images of human misery and suffering due to war, racism, violence and marginalisation. Realities that cry out for God's ministry of reconciliation. Following Jesus after Easter means reconciling all people to each other and to God. This is taking away the sins of the world. This is reconciliation. This is the post-resurrection gospel.

So come. Join in. Let's throw ourselves into God's resurrection reconciliation movement for the world. Now. Today.

⁶ <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/views-expressed/2017/01/until-canada-gives-indigenous-people-their-land-back-there-ca>