

“The Gift in Apology”

Sermon written by the Rev. James Scott, The United Church of Canada's General Council officer for Residential Schools

Most of us know how hard real apologies are to give. I say “real” because, as Muriel Duncan points out in her editorial in the February 2006 Observer, saying “sorry” over the smallest thing has become a commonplace event for most of us, so common that apology is in danger of losing all meaning.

But we have a much more difficult time with “real” apologies - those that come from the heart and stretch our capacity to “face the music”.

Think of your own life, of a time when you needed to reconcile with someone due to something harmful you did. Do you remember how hard it was? To look someone in the eyes and take full responsibility for the harm we have done. To know that if our apology is to be taken seriously, if we are to rebuild trust, restore relationships, that we need to prove that we mean it.

Taking responsibility is something we are tempted to avoid because we do not want to look bad or because we do not want to face consequences or change. Yet ironically, those who do take responsibility for the harm they have done often find that they engender respect rather than scorn from those they have hurt, the very ones whom they were afraid to face.

This has so often been our experience with First Nations people. Time after time, when church representatives acknowledge the role of the church in the residential school system, and show true remorse and a commitment to walk differently, we are encountered by acts of grace and generosity. Yes, there is often anger, there is always pain and sorrow, but the overriding experience is one of openness and grace.

Healing does occur, and as we gradually come into right relations with one another, we come into right relations with God. Apology is not the end of the encounter between two peoples but the beginning of a transformed way of being together. And it is the transformation of our relationship with those we have hurt, that we become whole. Reconciliation is the gift we bring to the altar, if you like.

Full reconciliation may not happen in our lifetime, but our faithfulness to walk this journey and the faithfulness of our children will determine whether the cairn is ever finished and more importantly it will determine whether we are able to arrive at the vision held out by Chief Bobby Joseph who said “We need to reach a place where we can reconcile, and at the end of the day, your children and mine may walk forward together, as equals. There are a lot of people in Aboriginal communities who are still very angry, but we have hope that little by little, heart by heart, we will begin to heal and learn to walk forward together”.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**