

Reconciliation
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June, 21, 2009

June 21 is a significant day for Aboriginal people. Titled, “National Aboriginal Day”, it is a day of celebration for the people in my community. It is a day when First Nations, Inuit and Métis people can be publicly proud of their heritage. Ceremonies will be held across Canada today. People will wear their regalia, show off their dances, share their traditional teachings, and feast with their friends and families. If it was a week day, they would be given the day off work.

On a personal level, June 21 is an extra special day for me. It marks the day, 4 years ago, that I first set foot in All Saints’ Westboro Anglican church. I went there because I had been invited to drum for “National Aboriginal Day of Prayer”.

In her sermon that day, the priest, Rhondda MacKay offered a heartfelt apology to Aboriginal people for the abuse suffered at the hands of the Anglican Church. I was astounded. I did not expect to hear an apology that day, or ever. It wasn’t just a cursory apology. It was deep. It was accountable. It did not pass blame. I was so impressed by the apology and the welcome I received that I decided to return a month later. That day marked the beginning of my new-found spirituality and relationship to a new family within the Anglican Communion.

Last year, on June 11, 2008, another apology was offered to the Aboriginal people of Canada by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. I worked that day and so did not hear the apology in its entirety, only catching bits of it on the news later in the day. I did download the speech and read it though. The words in his apology rang insincere to me as I read them. I couldn’t help but wonder if it was just a political ploy. Regardless of how I read those words, I am certain that there were Aboriginal people who heard the apology and felt vindicated and heartened. I am certain that there were people in the Aboriginal communities who heard his words that day and were changed by them, the way I was changed by the apology I heard that day, 4 years ago, in church.

In the landmark case of Regina v. Gladue (1999) the Canadian court system acknowledged that the intergenerational impact of residential schools was directly responsible for the current dysfunction in the lives of Aboriginal people. This would include violence, sexual abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, lateral violence, poverty and marginalization. It was decided that incarceration does not work as a deterrent for Aboriginal people. What it does do, is punish an already overly punished people for acting out their oppression. The “Gladue” decision, therefore, put in place certain principles to ensure that that Aboriginal people would receive options for healing rather than incarceration for their crimes. While it is not always used, it is a step in the right direction towards acknowledging the need for healing in a dysfunctional community.

Last week, on Victoria Island, a sunrise ceremony was held to mark the remembrance of Stephen Harper’s apology to the Aboriginal people. A number of Anglican priests,

including Linda Privitera, and our Bishop John Chapman, attended the ceremonies. One of the Elders there was very upset to see clergy at the ceremony. She asked, “What are they doing here?”, and stated, “They have no right to be here!”

Personally, I am pleased that Anglican clergy attended the ceremony. Reconciliation cannot occur in one day and does not stem from one or two apologies. The anger of that grandmother, while well founded, is indicative of her need for healing. The ease with which one forgives one’s oppressor is rooted in faith and probably impacted by the amount of pain you suffered at the hands of your oppressor.

However, how do you forgive your oppressor, when after being apologized to, you continue to be oppressed. You only need to turn to the news to see how Aboriginal people continue to be marginalized and oppressed. Discrimination, poor living conditions, dirty drinking water, lack of education and housing, lack of jobs and the latest news report...the impact of the H1N1 virus on Aboriginal people being out of proportion in comparison to other ethnic groups because of the lack of funding for health care.

In a recent article by Catholic nun and author Joan Chittister, she recounts a hand-written letter by Grandmother Beatrice Long-Visitor Holy Dance of the Oglala Lakota Nation in S. Dakota to Pope Benedict the XVI. In the letter, the Grandmother requests that the Pope remove from being in effect, a 500-year-old Papal Bull which authorizes the conquest and slavery of Indigenous peoples worldwide. “To do so”, she says, “would create global healing of all of the injustices suffered by Indigenous people worldwide”.

Wow, just imagine! Global healing!

In the mean time, while we wait for more apologies which are sure to come, I ask you to pray for us. Pray for our angry Grandmothers and Grandfathers, that they will hear enough apologies in their lifetime so that their hearts will soften and their anger diminish. Pray that the clergy will continue to attend reconciliation ceremonies even when they don’t feel welcomed. Pray that all colonizers worldwide will continue to apologize....until their apologies are believed because they are backed up by action and above all else, please love us, despite our dysfunction.

Meegwetch Apocheh