

FIRST THINGS FIRST

by Elaine Poproski

Friday marked Canada's second annual National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. It's intended as a day set aside in honour of those children who never returned home and survivors of residential schools, as well as their families and communities.

In May of 2021, evidence of the remains of 215 Indigenous children were found at the site of one of Canada's residential schools in southern BC. As of May 24, this year, the National Registry has 4,130 confirmed names of children who died in residential schools. Thousands more are unidentified in unmarked graves and in graves that haven't been found. If we were to be silent for 1 second just for all the children whose names we know, we'd be silent for more than an hour. If we were silent for 1 second for all the children – those who died and those who survived the residential schools, we'd be silent for almost two days.

Canada's residential schools are one of our great evils as a country. There is no question that there was a genocidal intent behind the schools. And there is no question that Christians were behind it.

In the early 1500s, the French started moving into Canada. Over the course of 100 years, both the English and the French established colonies that gradually uprooted the indigenous people who'd lived here for thousands of years already. They made treaties and broke treaties, forcing relocation, limiting access to traditional hunting and fishing grounds. Millions died in the wars between the English and the French. Millions more died from diseases brought by the colonizers.

Here in Toronto, there was a rich, long history of indigenous life and trade. This area was home to the Huron-Wendat Nation, the Anishinaabee Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Their people spoke many languages, made alliances, and intermarried. All evidence suggests that those who gathered here were a sophisticated and cosmopolitan people well established since long before Europeans even knew this continent existed.

In 1787, a representative of the British crown claimed to have purchased a huge swath of land from Lake Ontario all the way up to Vaughan, and from Etobicoke in the west through the east end of Toronto. The deed that apparently documented the sale of the land to the British by the Mississaugas was blank, with no description of the land purchased and no signatures by the chiefs who'd apparently agreed to the sale. In 1805, nearly 20 years later, the Crown paid 10 shillings for the land. That's about \$27 in current Canadian dollars.

This is the land upon which our church was built less than a hundred years after those 10 shillings changed hands. At the same time as Walmer's founders were celebrating their beautiful new building that would accommodate more than 1,500 people, Indigenous parents were required by law to obtain passes to see their children at residential schools – something they were only allowed to do 4 times a year. Can you imagine?

This is our history as a country. A country colonized by Christian nations who believed in their divine right to exploit and subjugate indigenous peoples. A country that worked in partnership

with multiple denominations of Christians to willfully and intentionally commit cultural genocide over the course of more than 100 years through residential schools.

Let's take a moment to sit with that.

I'm going to read some of Psalm 130, after which we are invited into 215 seconds of silence to reflect and acknowledge not just the evil that was done, but that this evil was done in the name of the same God we have gathered here today to worship.

Reading from Psalm 130:

Out of the depths we cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear our voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of our supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

silence for 3 minutes, 35 seconds

One of the things that marked the western Christian world at the same time as Canada was being colonized, was a huge shift in our sense of what it meant to be human. Up until then, we understood that we live in God's world – that God is the primary actor – that everything is dependent on God. That understanding shaped everything about how we lived. We lived our lives within the conviction that our lives came from and were sustained by God. It wasn't that we were completely powerless, it was just that we understood our power to be subordinate to God's power.

But at some point that changed. At some point, it was like we began to think of ourselves as having come of age as a species – as having reached adulthood, as it were. We started believing that it was within our power to manage and control the world around us. Not only was it in our power, but it was our right to manage and control the world. We started thinking of ourselves as the creator and sustainer of things, and started thinking of God as little more than a useful resource we could tap into if or when we wanted.¹ Whether we named it as such or not, we began to believe that life could be lived just fine without God. And that belief shaped our lives. That belief empowered us to colonize Canada. That belief empowered us to run residential schools. That belief shaped our institutions, including the church.

There's an old saying: "If the Holy Spirit disappeared, at least 90 percent of what we're doing [as churches] would proceed without any changes."ⁱⁱ

Do you think that's true? Think about the various churches you've been part of in your life. If God wasn't present, what would change? Would the programs change? Would the preaching or the music change? Would the outreach events change? Would the meetings and the building maintenance change?

I know we're supposed to answer, "Of course everything would change! How can you be a church without God?"

But think about it practically. If the Holy Spirit disappeared – If God wasn't part of it – would anything about how we *do* church change?

Last Sunday we read about the time Jesus sent 72 of his disciples out to the surrounding towns and villages.ⁱⁱⁱ We read about how he told them to take nothing with them – no purse, no bag, not even an extra pair of shoes. And I made the point that this was about recognizing that what they were about was something new and that none of their old tools and experiences – none of the things they knew how to do – would work for this new thing. So they were to go empty-handed, dependent, vulnerable.

Have *we* gotten so good – so practiced – at *doing* church, that we don't need God to be part of it?

I think 500 years of western human history, during which we got pretty comfortable with the idea of our own power, our own independence, during which we got pretty practiced at doing things ourselves and only tapping into God when or if we wanted that extra little bit of support, *has* to have bled into the church. It *has* to have bled into all our institutions.

In the book we're reading, *How to Revive Evangelism*, the author lists a whole bunch of questions with regard to inviting people to know Jesus, that I think get at this same question of whether we really need God to be part of what we're doing. This is what the author writes (it's a bit of a lengthy quote; if you have your book and you want to follow, it's on page 25):

As Christians, most of us can connect with the hope that many will come to know Jesus. We look around at the world, at all the things that seem to be going wrong, and we want Jesus to enter into those situations and change everything for the good. We cross paths with hurting people and, because we have experienced the transformation that Christ can bring, we want them to experience it too. We spend time with people we love and wish they could experience God in new and amazing ways.

Please, God, we pray, make a difference in the lives of the people around me, draw them to yourself, Jesus!

The next natural step is to start asking ourselves how we can make this happen. *What are the things we can do? What should we say? What books can we give them? What inspiring videos do they need to see? What meme or truth-telling photo can I share on Facebook or Instagram which will transform them this instant?*^{iv}

Did you catch that? We say a quick prayer and then we get on with figuring out for ourselves what we can do to answer the prayer ourselves.

If the Holy Spirit wasn't part of the church, would anything about how we do church change?

Let me ask you another question. If the Holy Spirit wasn't part of your life, would anything about how you live your life change?

The Christian life is supposed to be a life lived in relationship with God. It's supposed to be a life of friendship with God. It's supposed to be a life of dependence and submission to God. Everything we do must come from that foundation.

This is what Jesus was talking about in John 15. Listen, just to what he said in verse 5: I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Apart from me you can do nothing.

Even if we convince ourselves we're doing everything right. Even if we convince ourselves we know what to do and how to do it. The truth of the matter is that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. Jesus said, "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." Do you hear the order of things there? FIRST, we abide in Jesus, and he abides in us. THEN we bear fruit.

I think the reason I first appreciated the book we're reading is because of where he begins. He's talking about evangelism – about sharing our faith. And the first thing he says is, "stop doing it and start focusing on Jesus." Stop looking outward and start looking inward. It sounds so counterintuitive, doesn't it? Jesus told his disciples, right before he left them for the last time, to "Go out and make disciples of all nations."^v Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing?

Yes. That *is* what we're supposed to be doing. But first, we abide in Jesus. First, we take whatever time we need to be with God so that our relationship with God will be right. So that we will stop thinking of ourselves as self-sufficient, independent, fine-on-our own, and start thinking (or remember) that we are dependent on God, and God is the one who is sovereign, not us.

Last winter I introduced the practice of Dwelling in the Word at the beginning of our worship services. I did this because of exactly all the things I've been talking about this morning. In a little booklet I have that introduces the concept of Dwelling in the Word, we read this:

We believe God is the active agent in the transforming work our churches need. It is not up to us to 'get things done' or 'get things right,' but to participate with what God is already doing. This means that learning again to listen to God with a fresh spirit of humility is one of the key practices we need in living into God's future.^{vi}

At the beginning of our service today, we focused on Psalm 63 for our Dwelling exercise. I'd like us to take some more time with that psalm.

As I read it, where do you stop?

Are there words, phrases, or ideas that grab you?

How do you think the Holy Spirit might be nudging you this morning?

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirst for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Silence

Repeat (including the questions)

Is anyone willing to share with the group?

Back in January, I preached a number of sermons on the idea of friendship with God – of being God’s friend. At that time, I talked, similarly, about how you can’t be friends with someone you don’t spend time with. And I can’t help wondering if the Christians of Europe 500 years ago had thought that maybe they did need God – that they did need to be in relationship with God, had spent the time and energy to sit with God, to abide in Christ – I can’t help thinking that maybe the evils of a colonized world and residential schools maybe couldn’t have happened.

What ties all of this together for me is this: if we don't start at that place of abiding in Christ, if we don't start at that place of being solidly rooted in our foundation of relationship with God, who is our Father, who has adopted us, who loves us, and we just go out there, assuming we already have everything we need to do whatever it is we're going to do, so we don't need to bother God with it, the damage that we can cause might not be on the scale of residential schools, but it's damage nonetheless. We need God to be the one doing it. We need to be joining God in what he's doing, not just going about our business, asking God to bless what we're doing.

This is where everything starts. It's where our church revitalization starts. It's where our own faith starts. That's where everything begins – in this place of abiding in God.

ⁱ Mark Lau Branson and Alan J. Roxburgh. *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), 35.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 41.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 10:1 – 11.

^{iv} Craig Springer. *How to Revive Evangelism*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 25.

^v Matthew 28:19.

^{vi} The Missional Network. *Dwelling in the Word Together*. 2016. (<https://www.themissionalnetwork.com/>)