
United? Uniting? Church of Canada
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
June 14, 2020

by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Matthew 28:16-20

Thanks so much Jacquie for that sharing that very long reading from Genesis with us. I think it's good to read the entire story from time to time. Of course it's even more fun if we also read the other creation story that comes right after it, but that's a different sermon. Tradition dictates that our reading from Genesis is called a creation story, but it sort of lacks life. Nothing is dirty or messy. God somehow separates land from water without ever having to deal with mud. God creates by speaking, not by shovelling. The story - even though we say it is about creation - seems somehow sterile. Of course, the story is a paraphrase of the much older "Enuma Elish" story from Babylon so perhaps the Hebrew writers are not to blame. But why is it that the creation story seems to be so lacking in the chaos that always comes with life?

Actually, if you browse online you will see that many people have issues with this creation story. For example, people criticize the story because it violates the second law of thermodynamics - but I'm sure you all knew that. Personally I always wonder if we would have been better off - overall - if God had stopped after day 5. Or if perhaps God should have put in 1 day of overtime and made things just a little better.

When I read the story myself, the words that I trip on are these, "God saw everything that was made, and indeed, it was very good." I struggle with those words. I struggle with those words because I just cannot wrap my head around the idea that creation is - or ever was - or ever could be - only good. For me, that is far too simplistic. Instead, I believe that creation is a mix of good and evil. How do I know that creation is a mix of good and evil? Simple. I myself am part of this creation, and I just need to look in my own heart to realize that I myself am a mix of good and evil. Creation cannot only be good, or else I don't belong here.

Do you remember the TV show *Star Trek* - I mean the original Star Trek with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock? Now I know that most episodes involved meeting "aliens" made of plastic and ended with a fist fight where Kirk got his shirt ripped open. Oh - and

there was always a crew member who beamed down to a planet in a red shirt and never came back. It was not the perfect show, but some of the episodes were very thoughtful.

In the episode called *The Enemy Within*, Captain Kirk beams up from a planet and moments later the transporter beams up a second Captain Kirk. It takes very little time for us to realize that the transporter has created two Kirks - one is Kirk's good side and the other is his evil side. The evil Kirk is very easy to spot. He is irrational. He drinks from a bottle while he staggers down a hallway. He tries to rape Yeoman Rand. He is rude. It doesn't take long for Spock to lock him in the brig.

But it takes practically the whole episode for us to understand the good Kirk. The good Kirk is pleasant, he is rational, he is not aggressive. He is not rude. The good Kirk seems to be better than the original Kirk. At least - until near the very end of the episode - when a crisis with the Klingons that had been building all along comes to a head. It turns out that the good Kirk is indecisive, he can't make difficult decisions. The good Kirk cannot weight up pros and cons. He is docile and useless as a commander.

And so in the final minutes of the episode we come to realize that the good Kirk is not better than the original Kirk. Kirk's ability to command came from the balance of good and evil within him, and from the way that he managed that balance. The real creation called "James T Kirk" was a mix of good and evil, and it was only in that balance that he was truly himself. Creation is a mix of good and evil. And therefore, as humans we are all a mix of good and evil too. Thanks be to God.

Today we celebrate the official anniversary of the United Church of Canada (which was actually on June 10) which is why we have included a prayer from 1925 in our service today. And next week is called Indigenous Sunday, a time to both affirm our spiritual connections with Canadian indigenous peoples, and also a time to remember the ways that people in the United Church abused and dehumanized indigenous people in the past - particularly by forcing indigenous children into residential schools where they were stripped of their language and culture.

And as you probably know, the United Church - proving itself to be a mix of good and evil - co-created the TRC - the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" to sit and listen intentionally. The TRC spent 6 years listening to any and all stories from victims,

perpetrators, and survivors of the Residential Schools that operated in Canada from the 1840's to 1996. While most indigenous students in Canada attended day schools, approximately 150,000 students went through the residential school system, which meant removing children from their families - often forcibly - and preventing them from following their own traditions and using their own languages. The stories shared by people who had been harmed by the residential school system are numerous and painful. But the TRC was committed to listening to those stories and has made those stories publicly accessible at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg, as well as through other channels.

The stories of the damage caused by the residential schools included two types of abuses. The existence of the system itself constituted a systemic abuse that amounted to an attempted cultural genocide. Additionally, many individual students suffered specific abuses from particular workers and teachers, including physical assault, sexual assault, rape, and what can only be called torture. At its peak, there were 80 residential schools operating in Canada, funded by the Canadian Government, and operated by churches. The federal government provided facilities and maintenance, and the churches provided teachers and education. The United Church of Canada opened 1 school in Saskatchewan in 1928, but inherited other residential schools from both the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Churches at the time of Church Union in 1925.

[slide: TRC report] The TRC formally finished its work in May of 2015, and I went to Ottawa to be a witness. The ceremonies in Ottawa included speeches, dancing, drumming, and singing. The speeches were very inspirational. Murray Sinclair - the Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - spoke, and he referred to the then recent revelation that the whole residential schools activity was a cultural genocide. And when he said that, everybody cheered, and we all nodded assent. Even me. Mind you, inside, I was reminding myself that that was not news at all. Being from Saskatchewan I had known the reality of residential schools for a long time. But I was happy to be complicit with the masses and pretend that yes, this really was a new and helpful way of understanding the history of residential schools in Canada.

Similarly, when survivors of residential schools spoke - and a few did - they

always ended their talk by saying that they were sharing their story so that these sorts of things would never happen again. And again, I cheered along with everybody else, knowing full well not only that these things will happen in the future, they are already happening in the present, and in truth, have never stopped at any point in our past either. Yes, the residential schools are closed, but that does not mean that Canadian society accepts indigenous people as ... people. The history of the United Church - our history - is a mix of good and evil. Being part of creation what else would be expect?

How did you feel listening to the gospel today? How are we to hear these words, often known as the “great commission” in light of the cultural genocide inflicted on indigenous Canadians? Matthew’s Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”

[slide: looking into jesus] Isn’t that exactly what we as Canadians are apologizing for right now?

[slide: praying]

Imposing our own cultures and religions on other people?

Our history is a mix of good and evil. Being part of creation, what else would we expect? In Genesis - but only in Genesis - water and soil can be separated without dealing with mud. In the real world, we live with a lot of mud. Good and evil cannot be cleanly separated.

[slide: ucc crest]

My sense is that we do want to move forward with reconciliation - both as the term applies to our indigenous brothers and sisters and also with all racialized communities, including the black community. Sometimes, it’s hard to see a path forward. The path forward is muddy, because we don’t just need to reconcile in some theoretical sense. We need to reconcile in reality. And reality is a mix of good and evil.

I hope we are all familiar with the evil side. We know that leading figures in Canadian politics did their best to eliminate what has been called the “Indian problem” by eliminating the people themselves. I was looking for a telling quote from John A. MacDonald, but when I found some, I realized I don’t even want to speak them out loud.

They are truly evil expressions of racism. There is no doubt that our government adopted a broad policy of genocide towards indigenous people.

But some of the evil was not intentional. As one example, although some teachers in residential schools were psychotic and wanted to satisfy their own perversions at the expense of children, the majority of the teachers were simply trying to build a better future. Those teachers realized that a new Canada was being built, and that this “new Canada” would be inaccessible to illiterate and uneducated people. They worked so that indigenous children could be included in that new Canada. The TRC heard stories about the care and love some students received at residential schools as well as stories of abuse. And Matthew, or Jesus, or the early church - whoever wrote the great commission - did not mean to cause damage by pushing their religion inappropriately as happened during the conquest of North America. Matthew did not have a vision for a global church expansion - he would not have even understood that concept.

All of this muddiness makes reconciliation harder - and more important. As a community of faith we need to accept that reconciliation won't be an event, it must be a lifestyle. And even our attempts to find healing will be a mix of good and evil. On Friday the CBC had an article about how employees are subject to terrible racism at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg.

The gift of the United Church is not that it was perfect when it was created in 1925. The gift of the United Church is that it is - usually - humble enough to see itself as a continuing work in progress. Our imperfections are an invitation to do better, not an excuse to give up.

From *A Song of Faith*: God forgives, and calls all of us to confess our fears and failings with honesty and humility. God reconciles, and calls us to repent the part we have played in damaging our world, ourselves, and each other. God transforms, and calls us to protect the vulnerable, to pray for deliverance from evil, to work with God for the healing of the world, that all might have abundant life. We sing of grace.

We are not just the United Church. We must be the Uniting Church. Thanks be to God.

Amen.