

Sermon for the National Aboriginal Day of Prayer

St John the Evangelist Anglican Church, Ottawa

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Today we celebrate in the Anglican Church, the National Aboriginal Day of Prayer. This day was first brought into being in 1971 by General Synod, after the formal end of Anglican involvement in the Residential Schools and the ground-breaking Hendry Report. For many years, we did not do much of anything on this day. There were no prayers or readings and no encouragement from General Synod. The resolution that created this day of prayer lay forgotten for more than 25 years. It was in the 1990's when our Church was deep in the revelations of the depth of the abuses and I was working in Toronto at Church House, that while looking for references to Indigenous peoples in past Synod proceedings, that I found the resolution. It was, in keeping with the times, called a National Indian Day of Prayer and was meant to bring non-Indigenous and Indigenous people together in prayer as part of a new relationship. The resolution was reaffirmed in the General Synod of 1998 and this time, resources were created.

In this land that we live in, in this land that prepares to celebrate its 150th birthday, there was a time before the year 1867. There was a time when Chief Shingwauk of the Ojibway people near what we call Sault Ste Marie, walked from his territory to this city of Ottawa to ask the colonial government for a teaching wigwam for the children of his community. It was the 1830's and Chief Shingwauk saw a future of living together as First Nations and colonial peoples and believed in a need for reading, writing and math skills for his people. He also believed in the value of the survival skills and respect for the land that he was teaching to the colonists who lived near his people.

If we continue to look before 1867, before Chief Shingwauk and the 1830's, we come to the 1770's and the war chief Thyendanegea, also known as Joseph Brant. Thyendanegea was Mohawk and convinced his people to remain loyal to the British Crown during the American Revolutionary War. This reinforcement of the British Forces was critical in the British holding onto the lands we now call Canada.

As we continue to look back and peel back the years, we come to the Royal Proclamation of 1763 when the Crown defined where the colonists may settle, that only the Crown may negotiate the sale of Indigenous lands and that it must be done in a community gathering of the affected people and that Indigenous people were to be unmolested on their lands. This Royal Proclamation is still in effect today. Going further back, we can see examples of atrocities by the first Europeans to these lands but also examples of cooperation between explorers, fur traders and Aboriginal peoples.

So, if that's what we see when we peel back the layers of history, what happened? How did we end up here? How did we end up with Public Inquests into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls? How did we end up with the tragedies of Residential Schools, the High Arctic Relocations, the 60's Scoop? How did we end up with epidemic rates of suicide, diabetes, domestic violence and incarceration amongst Indigenous peoples? How did we end up with what is described as cultural genocide by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and by the United Nations? How have we been so blind? To be honest, growing up in southern Ontario as the child of a residential school survivor who did not speak of his experience, I did not know most of that history. Frankly, I believed we deserved to

be number one on the UN's standard of living index. I believed that old Roger Whittaker song that talked about Canada being a country full of love.

To be blunt, we forgot that we were "we".

During these past two years, I've been studying for a Masters in Counselling and Spirituality at Saint Paul University. During the first semester of first year, a huge amount of the focus is on encouraging the students to discover our "authentic selves", to break free of molds that others may have imposed on us and discover who we are meant to be. It's a beautiful exercise and one that I truly appreciated. It helped me to focus on what really mattered to me and let go of some irritating things that in truth, were really just "meh." In the words of my six-year-old daughter and Queen Elsa from Frozen, I learned to Let it Go.

Sometimes, however, in searching for our authentic selves before we are ready, we trample others in our efforts to declare ourselves. We don't understand our relationships and our community. We hurt people. Through the process of Confederation, the young country of Canada began to put into legislation Residential School policy, the Indian Act, policy towards the Inuit and Metis, and countless other legal steps aimed towards erasing the identity of Indigenous Peoples. Yet they are still here. We are still here. In this church today, we are not us and them. We are we.

The readings for today are the ones for this National Day of Prayer. In the Gospel of John we hear of a new beginning. A new chance. A new creation. How can we have new relations? We don't forget the past. We don't start treating everyone equally. Equal treatment assumes equal starting points and assumes that the end results will also be equal. This is not reconciliation. Within reconciliation there is a spirit of equity that looks for fairness and just relationships. Reconciliation acknowledges the hurt and seeks to search for the right point for the reset button. But in pushing a reset button on our relationships, it does not mean forgetting everything that happened.

How can we honour right relationships amongst the First Peoples and the more recent arrivals to this land? It is complicated.

Within academic circles, there is a term known as postcolonialism. While I really don't know why they chose that word, the term refers to a new way of being, of addressing the initial colonial approach of measuring the level of civilization of other people against the standards of one's own culture. There was an assumption that the colonial powers were the most "right" and everyone else deviated from that. The new approach focuses on acceptance of the other, of not measuring the other against one's self, of recognizing that there is value in diversity.

This is hard! This is not something that insecure or inexperienced people or cultures do easily. There is mystery in acceptance without judging, without assessing. However, as was in the first reading, "to whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? Says the Lord. Lift up your eyes on his and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing."

Our calling from the Creator is to recognize that we, all of us, are here in this land together. We are called to recognize the goodness of creation. To look around this land and recognize the beauty of the rocks, and sky, and sea. To recognize the abundance of trees, greenery, and the plants that sustain us. To celebrate the diversity of fish, birds and animals that inhabit this land. To rejoice in the

marvellous of the people around us. O Gitchi Manitou, chi meegwetch, chi meegwetch, chi meegwetch. Creator God, thank you, thank you, thank you.

In reconciliation, in new beginnings, when we position ourselves in thankfulness, in hope, we centre ourselves in a place where there is energy to address the pain of the past and to break open the cycles that perpetuate those injustices. We take ourselves out of the system. We stop being a cog in the wheel that acknowledges something is wrong but is too closely aligned to do anything about it.

For all of us to have a new future, to have the next 150 years to look different than the 150 years behind us, let us go backwards. Let us go back into the Gospel of John. Let us hear the words, “what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” and let us believe in the goodness and potential of everyone around us.