

**CELEBRATING FIRST NATIONS DAY**  
**“Right Relations”**  
**Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson**  
**St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia**  
**June 28, 2009**

**Scripture Readings: Matthew 5:21-24**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Church’s apology to First Nations people back in 2006 – James Scott – The United Church’s General Council Officer for Residential Schools, wrote a sermon, available for use, called “The Gift of Apology.”

He begins by noting that “living out the apology is critical, in [his] view because the journey we embarked on as a denomination in 1986 is, [he] believes, profoundly important for our Church. It is a journey that reflects the state of our own spiritual health. It is an issue that reveals who we are; and our understanding of the gospel – when *we* are not “the good guys.”

It is an opportunity to discover the gospel call of Jesus Christ for our time ...  
and therefore is a gift.

Scott unpacks the Gospel reading this morning saying:

The gospel lesson is quite simple and straight forward. In this passage on conflict, Jesus says “when you are offering your gift at the altar – if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go – first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and *then* come and offer your gift.”

Key characteristics of this teaching include:

First – we are to be proactive – go – and take the initiative – be proactive in dealing with broken situations when you become aware of them.

Secondly – the teaching says we are to reconcile with our neighbour – which is more than saying “I’m sorry” – there is a relationship to restore.

Third – after reconciliation, we are *then* to offer our gift at the altar.

So there is a connection between being in right relationship with our neighbour – and being in right relationship with God. Harmony with God depends on harmony with our neighbour – the

two are interconnected. And when we realize that in aboriginal spirituality – all of creation is considered to be our relations (not just two-legged ones), then being in harmony with God – means being in harmony with *all* creation – not just other humans.

The apology in 1986 ends saying,

“We ask you to forgive us and walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ  
-- so that our peoples may be blessed *and* God’s creation healed.”

In response to the apology, the answer was clear – that it will take time to see if the apology is more than words. Real apologies have to be lived out. James Scot observes that, “with each step in our attempt to ‘walk the talk’ we see more clearly what will be required to ‘reconcile’.” Back in 2006, James noted that “we are only now coming to understand the depth of the harm done, the length of the healing road before us, and how profound a change is required of us.”

Some of the steps we had taken by 2006 (and there have been more since then – including the consultation on Right Relations that happened out in Winnipeg, and that one of the few programs in Toronto Conference that will continue to receive conference funding – even after most of the funds have been diverted to the work of the four new Presbyteries so that our funds are closer to the primary mission units of the congregations – but one of the few projects that is still funded is a circle to build relationships between Aboriginal people and others in the Conference).

Some of the steps we have taken since 1986 include:

- 1) institutional changes such as creating an Aboriginal Conference within the United Church, Native theological schools and staffing positions, though more is needed for a more equal partnership.
- 2) we have delved more honestly into our history and listened to the voices of survivors of residential schools.
- 3) we have broadened our sense of the spiritual by learning about native spirituality.
- 4) we have sought to settle abuse claims quickly and fairly in a non-adversarial way.

Scott notes that “living out the apology is not just about healing Aboriginal peoples. It involves our own healing as well.” Lila Watson, an Australian-Aboriginal once said,

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you recognize that your liberation and mine are bound together, we can walk together.”

Scott also reflects that:

“When we open ourselves to apology, we see not only ourselves more clearly but also the other. The other has too often been shrouded in stereotype, diminished by assumptions, rendered invisible by distance, estrangement and fear. Real apology offers us the opportunity to leave the prison of our own preconceived ideas and become enriched by encounter with those whose ways and wisdom are different from our own.”

In the apology,  
we acknowledged that we all lost because of our denial of the spirituality  
of our native brothers and sisters.  
One of the great gifts we lost was an appreciation, love of and respect for the land  
... and as a result of all the losses, the apology says that,  
“the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred,  
and we are not what we are meant by God to be.”

This weekend a few of us from this community, including Carley and Charles Wortman,  
Susan Clarke and myself, went to hear Cosmologist Brian Swimme  
who worked with Thomas Berry  
(who died two weeks ago – the person associated with the development of eco-spirituality).

Brian and Thomas wrote, *The Universe Story* together  
– the 13.7 billion year story of how the universe evolved.  
Brian gave us a glimpse into some of his work including how we can look at the gifts  
of the universe and trust that the gifts we see out there are in us as well  
... because we all come from the same source  
... so like the sun, we are capable of incredible self-giving and generosity,  
and like the universe, we have a capacity within us for emergence  
that fills us with a restlessness until we give birth to the potential  
that is longing to come into being

... and like the universe we too have synergy within us,  
which fills us with confidence and hope in our ability to recognize  
and move into activation potential

– which requires connection between the appropriate parts so that the potential can come to life.

Synergy – it's in the universe, it's in us.

Brian began the workshop by asking the question, 'What does it take to fall in love – what does it take to fall in love with the earth, with the universe?'

Our aboriginal brothers' and sisters' spirituality  
knows how to love and honour all creation  
-- how do we learn to do that?

Brian suggests that the first thing we need to do  
is to remove the obstacles we have to loving creation  
- all the obstacles we have to loving the earth and all creation are created by humans  
so we can untangle ourselves from them.

A key underlying assumption that we have from our industrial consciousness  
that is an obstacle to us loving the earth is that we think of the earth and all that it is filled with  
as resources – *here* for us to use.

When we think of the earth as stuff, it's neutral.  
We were taught at an early age that it is like we are living in a big hardware store,  
with all sorts of stuff just waiting to be used.

Brian told the story of how his wife, Denise, who is a grade one teacher,  
desperately wanted her students to experience connection to nature, to the earth  
so she arranged for some piglets to be brought to her school.

The kids were mesmerized and filled with wonder.

Then the farmer began to tell them how important pigs are  
-- beginning with how the hides of pigs are used to make erasers ....  
the children had just begun this magical relationship with the pigs  
and were horrified to make the connection that they would be killed  
.... to make erasers.

Our industrial consciousness takes the glory of the universe that floods us with light  
... and we shrink it down to a resource – *there* for us to use.

At the end of Brian's talk, he spoke of how we have accumulated so much knowledge  
(that we've been able to store outside of us through the written word)  
that we now have incredible power – planetary power – we are impacting life  
on this planet in huge ways including the extinction of species at a beyond-alarming rate.  
He suggests we've done that because we've had this planetary power thorough our accumulated  
knowledge but we have dealt with it through psyches that are too small  
-- we've used this planetary power with minds that have looked at life  
with a shrunken perspective, through the eyes of local concern only  
-- rather than realizing that we are all connected  
and what happens to one part of creation,  
one part of the universe –  
happens to us all.

But because these obstacles are created by humans, we can choose to see differently,  
we can choose to seek reconciliation with the earth of which we are part  
... and begin to see the universe and all its wonders – with new eyes  
-- with eyes of love and responsibility and creativity  
that see it not as stuff, not as resource,  
but as source of life.

And so a second step to help us to fall in love with creation is:  
to follow again the wisdom of the heritage of our aboriginal brothers and sisters  
which is to spend time with your beloved,  
get to know the earth, the universe, Gaia –  
and all the amazing wondrous, awe-inspiring reality of this universe we live in  
-- that by its very emergence, shares a story of incredible hope with us.

... A prayer from the Aboriginal community gives us a taste of some wisdom we lost when we squashed native spirituality – a perspective that we need to make us whole:

A prayer of longing and intention,

*We come with thanksgiving*

- *for our very breath, the warmth of sun, and the sustaining waters*
- *for life all around us: the plants, soft grasses, and sheltering trees*
  - *for the ones that crawl, those that swim, and those that fly*
    - *for the four-legged and the two-legged*
    - *all our relations!*

*We celebrate the diversity in creation as reflected in the four winds from the four directions.*

*We especially honour the many peoples with their many gifts*

*for understanding our shared life on the earth.*

*We strive to live out the seven sacred teachings:*

*Respect*

*Love*

*Honesty*

*Courage*

*Humility*

*Wisdom*

*Truth.*

*These teachings enable us to live in harmony with ourselves,*

*with our neighbours, and all the created earth.*

May it be so in our lives. Amen.