

SERMON FOR JULY 2, 2017

Last month I spent a day at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg. It was a profoundly moving experience. If you have the opportunity to go, you should. It will change your life and, I believe, that you, in turn, will change the world. I have been thinking deeply about what I saw, trying to get clear on what moved me. There was a lot that affected me deeply, but one display stays with me. It was the museum's version of the red dress project.

This project is not new. It was begun by a Winnipeg Metis artist whose name is Jaime Black. It was 2010 and she wanted to respond to the growing crisis of 1000 missing or murdered indigenous women. She put out the call for red dresses and collected about 600. The dresses started appearing in public places, hanging from trees in parks, at universities and colleges, in public squares, and along roadways. There were no pictures or commentaries with the dresses; they were empty and just hanging there, blowing in the breeze. Of course, any viewer is aware of what s/he sees, a wardrobe of red dresses. And any viewer is aware of what s/he does not see-the face of the woman who should have been wearing those dresses.

In the CMHR display, the dresses were blood red-not scarlet, not true red, not orange red or pinky red. They were blood red, simple in design, all similar but not the same. The symbolism of the colour was not lost on me. Later I learned that Jaime Black chose the colour red because red is the only colour that the spirits can see. Spirit can see those dresses empty of life and spirit calls

anyone who can share the seeing to make justice and help those women who are still alive, get back home.

The number of missing and murdered indigenous women stands at over 1200 now, 200 more than when the red dress project started. When will it stop? And where is the energy and the will to stop it? I think of those red dresses today, on this Canada Day weekend.

We are celebrating our nation, our home and native land. We are celebrating our national pride and our patriotism. We are celebrating our history as a welcoming country, a peace-making country. We are celebrating our values of tolerance, of respect for the other, of the need to preserve human dignity. We are celebrating 150 years of good government and we are celebrating a hopeful and compassionate future. I am glad that I was born here and I am glad that I raised my son here. On this Canada Day, I am profoundly thankful.

And yet, the red dresses are drifting in my “O Canada” imagination. In spite of my national pride at Canada 150, I am heart-sick that 1200 women have been lost or murdered, and I am more heart-sick that we seem to be taking a long time to take hold of this outrage and to act. We need to bring some energy and vision to this situation and we find both in the scripture set before us.

We are given many clear instructions through scripture about how to treat one another. And letting injustice against another go unaddressed is not one of them. For me, the stories by Jesus and about Jesus are my starting place for

understanding. I turn to these stories first for direction and guidance. I believe that wholeness is held in these stories. They become our way. And we need a “way” as long as the red dresses are blowing in the wind.

Today, we find Jesus and the disciples as they begin a new chapter in their common life. The 12 are being prepared for their first healing-teaching practicum. Jesus is instructing them on how to behave with others whom they do not know. It is really a lesson on how to determine the other’s vulnerability and how not to take advantage of it.

The disciples have gifts to offer, but like any gift, they need to be received for there to be any value to the giving. So, teaches Jesus, pay attention to whom you find and honour that person. The disciples need welcome if they are to heal, to honour, and to teach. If there is welcome, then the disciples will be able to speak the truth about the realm of the holy, will be able to establish right (read righteous) relationship, and will be able to share compassion. Without welcome, a mutual openness, then there is emptiness. Just like the emptiness of a bunch of red dresses blowing in the wind.

On this Canada Day, it is no secret that the settlers are celebrating the creation of this fabulous country. That means that most of us are celebrating. Most of us have origins somewhere else in the world. Most of us have family that came here for opportunity, for freedom, for peace. And most of us have found what our forebears were looking for. That is worth a party!

A party for the majority, that is. About 95% of Canada's population come from settler stock. That leaves 5% who are Aboriginal, the peoples who were here at least 13,000 years before Confederation, whose land became settlers' land and who, by and large, have lost a way of life, a culture, and a language. This is not the same celebration for them. We need to face up to that fact. And the red dresses, symbols of sexist and racialized violence, help us face what is unavoidable in our history. We did not seek the right welcome from First People. We did what Jesus told his friends not to do. We did not offer the compassionate cup of cold water to the people who had less power than we. And if we do not redress that injustice, we are in danger of losing our reward, a peaceful and just homeland.

Damage has been done, but justice is still possible. That justice begins with us. Like the disciples, we are sent out to offer hospitality and welcome. Surely that is part of being an affirming congregation. We are invited to reach across difference and to treat others with dignity and respect. We are called into right relationship and to hear deeply the stories of pain and hope that are all around us. And we are called to help end the pain of others and share what we have been given-new beginnings out of old sorrow, new hope out of old despair, new love out of old prejudice and bias.

I get the logic in calling this Canada Day "Canada 150." Would that we had been able to acknowledge that, for some of us, Canada did not begin with the Fathers of Confederation. Would that we were able to name and honour the

experience of the first Canadians with as much enthusiasm as we honour our own history. Maybe then, this would be an inclusive Canada Day and there would be no need for any red dresses.