

Settlers, Judgement and Sin—Matthew 13: 14a-17
June 20, 2021—Indigenous Sunday

We don't like judgement and sin in the United Church. They are tainted words for us. We associate them with a toxic kind of religion that puts up barriers to love and inclusion, the tools of a Christianity rooted in moralism, literalism, and self-satisfied power used to bludgeon people on the margins of society—women, lgbtq2s folks, non-Christians and more. We've worked hard to lift up Jesus' life and message of radical love, acceptance and mercy. We've been right to do so.

But judgement and sin do have a place in our faith, especially for people of power and privilege. It's the witness of scripture. Matthew attributes to Jesus this teaching today. It's a response to the question of why he speaks in parables. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah¹, in which Isaiah receives instructions from God on his role as prophet to a people that is straying from justice and mercy. God instructs Isaiah that he is to speak in such a way that the people neither understand nor perceive God's ways. Jesus says that is also his purpose in speaking in parables, to confront people with their ignorance in the face of God's message of love. Our unknowing is our judgement and our sin.

When prophetic words of love are spoken, when words that invite a response of love and mercy are spoken and we don't understand them as such, that is sin. When we fail to hear when God is speaking and where God is calling because our hearts are hardened, our ears stopped up, our eyes averted or covered because of our fear of losing power, because of our egos, our certainty, our greed and more—proclaiming that as sin is righteous judgment. God's truth, the way of love confounds and baffles many of the values that drive our affluent, white, western societies. Societies built on individualism, accruing maxim profit, seeing creation solely as a resource for wealth extraction and more. As the prophet says, our hearts have grown dull. For people of power and privilege sitting in the pain of judgement and sin is a necessary step on the way to healing and communion with God. It's something from which we must not run.

We mustn't run from the pain of the revelation that the remains of 215 children were discovered on the grounds of a residential school in Kamloops B.C. There's evidence that maybe we won't. How did the news hit you? A common experience and one that I share is surprise at the depth of feeling this news has evoked in so many settler people. After all we've known about children dying at these schools and never returning home for a while now. For some reason, this time when I heard the news about the unmarked graves of children I thought of Bosnia, Rwanda and even Nazi Germany. I know there are differences, but the casual disregard and even enmity for human life based on ethnic and religious superiority is the same. I ponder, why now? The late Ojibwe writer Richard Wagamese in a collection of his writings shares a dialogue between himself and an elder he refers to as "Old Woman", it goes like this;

¹ 6: 9-10

Richard: You always repeat things three times.

Old Woman: Just the important things.

Richard: Why? I hear you the first time.

Old Woman: No. You listen the first time. You hear the second time. And you feel the third time.

Richard: I don't get it.

Old Woman: When you listen, you become aware. That's for your head. When you hear, you awaken. That's for your heart. When you feel, it becomes a part of you. That's for your spirit. Three times. It's so you learn to listen with your whole being. That's how you learn.²

It seems that maybe many of us were ready to feel. Maybe we're finally learning with our whole being. And part of that learning for settler people is to sit in the judgment, to experience the full emotional weight of the judgement of sin. The sin of the arrogance that we knew and know best because of the supposed superiority of our culture and religion. The sin of the overt crimes against the children and the casual disregard for their lives. The sin that we didn't listen with our whole being earlier, that it's taken this long for some of us and still some of us haven't listened at all. We mustn't run from this. A faithful response to these horrors demands our steadfastness, to sit with this discomfort, this pain, this guilt when the privilege for many of us of our settler roots affords us the choice to ignore, to move on, to hold on to the crumbling myths of our nation's founding and our Church's benevolence.

This pain has a purpose. Pain tells us there is something wrong. Pain can be the precursor to new life. The purpose of sitting in the pain of judgment and sin and the discomfort that goes with it is to feel with our whole being our distance from God. It is to create a hunger for communion with God, knowing that God is waiting to satisfy us when we're hungry enough. It is to be weary of rushing to say and do things that make us feel better but don't actually change the lives of Indigenous people. To not be satisfied with nibbling at God's feast of love because we're still so full of ourselves. But, to feast because we've emptied ourselves of our egos and made room for the food that is life-giving, that energizes us in the direction of transformative love that leads to reconciliation and right relations.

If people of power and privilege aren't willing to sit in the pain of judgement and sin you get what's happening in the evangelical Christianity of the United States that is full of itself, refusing to sit at God's table, taking no responsibility for the sins of slavery and racism and continuing to inflict harm on black people. If people of power and privilege don't sit in the pain of judgement and sin long enough you get what's happening in Canada, a little bit of hunger that leads us to nibble at God's banquet. An apology here, a few dollars there, but undrinkable water continues to be a problem, land claims go

² Richard Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*.

ignored, fundamental structures remain unchanged. If people of power and privilege do sit in the pain of judgement and sin you get what happened in Germany after the second world war, a deep hunger to atone for the sin of anti-Semitism that guided the post war reconstruction period. Especially their education system where Germans don't flinch from teaching children the truth of their history.

I wonder if some of the hunger for communion is influencing what we do at Parkminster. This week Council passed a motion on the recommendation of the Inclusive Ministries Committee that as we consider the possibility of re-developing the church property in our work with the property arm of the national Church that we hold consultations with local Indigenous communities on how the property might serve the work of reconciliation and right relations.

May we have the patience, may we accept and offer the mutual support, may we have the faith that allows us to sit in the pain of judgement and the truth of our sin. May our actions be driven by a deep hunger for communion that empties us of our fears and egos and allows us to feast at God's banquet of love. Then we might be worthy of the blessing offered by Jesus; "...blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." The judgment of God is not a pointed finger but an outstretched hand inviting us out of fear and separation to a banquet of love with all God's people where all may be fed.

Rev. Joe Gaspar