

“Making Wolf”

Date: 27 May 2018

Text: Matthew 5: 21 – 24, 2 Corinthians 5: 16 - 21

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I live six minutes' walk from the Tsuu T'ina reserve. I take my pop cans to their bottle depot. Three or four times I bought gravel from their pit. Sometimes I get my gas there. When I can I like to support them economically but I don't have many avenues for doing so. And my life path rarely crosses theirs...even though we are close neighbours. As I think about our denomination's priority for healing and reconciliation with our land's indigenous peoples, and think about the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I can find myself feeling a bit lost about what I can do, personally. But I still feel that need. After all, the Tsuut'ina's are my neighbours, only six minutes' walk away. But in reality it can feel like a whole world away.

Lee Crowchild is chief of the Tsuut'ina nation. In a recent interview he said that he believed the way forward was through their traditional ceremony called “making wolf.” Historically skirmishes and battles took place between different tribal groups and making wolf was a way to formally conclude the conflict. Leaders from both sides would meet. A person from one side of the conflict might say “this is what I did: I killed two of your people.” For those on the other side those two people could be an uncle or a brother and they would say “yes you did this.” Then those on the other side of the conflict would share their war deeds. Chief Crowchild said, “when you make wolf, you get to this point: we validate what happened.” Then you choose to move beyond the conflict and think about the future. This morning in a one-sided way we will make wolf and speak the truth of what we did.

In 1994 our General Assembly adopted a confession regarding our historic actions in our relationship with the indigenous peoples of Canada. It opens by saying “This confession is our response to the word of God. We understand our mission and ministry in new ways in part because of the testimony of Aboriginal peoples...and our awareness of our own sin and shortcomings.” What did we confess along with other denominations?

We confessed our complicity in the colonializing priority to assimilate indigenous peoples. Assimilate means “to make like us.” Our 1994 confession focuses particularly around the legacy of our involvement in residential schools. At one time we had 11 such schools, but after the United Church was formed we were left with two that we managed until 1969. The late lead singer of the Tragically Hip, Gordon Downie, recently made famous the story of Chanie Wenjack. Chanie was born three years before me. At the age of 9 he was sent to the Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School managed by our denomination. At the age of 12 he ran away from the school and died of exposure six days later while following the train tracks trying to get home—over 500 km away. While in those days the goals behind residential schools may have appeared to be the right thing to do, the tragic death of Chanie Wenjack shines a different kind of light on our endeavours...and in that one moment stands in judgement of them all.

But let's shift back to looking at this as Calgarians. Treaty 7 was signed in 1877 and six years later the Tsuut'ina people had mostly settled Reserve #145. Eight years after that the local Anglican Diocese opened the St. Barnabas Residential School on the Tsuut'ina reserve. The federal government built a new school in 1914 that could accommodate 35 residents. Thankfully it meant the children were at least very close to home. But when the St. Barnabas school was closed in 1922 children were sent to the Old Sun residential school in Gleichen on the Siksika reserve. As our confession confesses, “because of our insensitivity to Aboriginal cultures, we have demanded more of the Aboriginal people than the Gospel requires, and have thus misrepresented Jesus Christ who loves all peoples with compassionate, suffering love that all may come to

God through him. For the Church's presumption we ask forgiveness." As we make wolf, we say this is what we did.

Part of our presumption related to their spirituality. As it says in our 2015 statement, "First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, before any encounter with Christianity, found meaning, spiritual benefit and the presence of the creator through life-giving indigenous spiritual practices that have deeply rooted traditions. Through the churches' participation in the residential school system, The Presbyterian Church in Canada contributed to the banning of those traditions. The Presbyterian Church in Canada presumed to know better." Indigenous children in our schools were obliged to attend Christian worship and participate in Christian religious training. As Presbyterians we value the idea that faith is a gift from God that we freely choose to receive, and yet when it came to residential school students it was imposed. As we make wolf, we say this is what we did. Our 2015 statement extends the focus of our 1994 confession, acknowledging our humility today as we walk alongside indigenous people in their spiritual beliefs and practices with deep respect of their traditions.

It should also be a part of our confession that we inadvertently caused the decline of the Tsuut'ina population through epidemics. First it was Small Pox. Then it was the flu epidemic of 1918 and 1919 was followed by a particularly virulent TB epidemic to which they were especially susceptible. The surveyor and explorer John Palliser estimated that the Tsuut'ina population was around 1,400 people in the 1850's. By the time they moved onto the reserve in 1883 the population had declined to 450 persons. By 1992 it was 140 people. The Tsuut'ina population declined by 90% over 70 years. The population was so small and ill in 1922 that St. Barnabas' School was closed and the building repurposed as a TB hospital. As we make wolf, we say this is what we did.

Our Christian faith compels us to make such confession. Reconciliation resides at the very core of our faith. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "God reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." To minister is to provide aid. So a ministry of reconciliation is an act of helping reconciliation happen. This ministry of reconciliation takes different forms but the one most applicable in our reflection today comes from Jesus' sermon on the mount...and here Jesus was essentially saying that the ministry of reconciliation becomes even more urgent if we ourselves are in a broken relationship. The premise of the teaching is a recognition that relationships do and will get broken. And what Jesus said here is that restoring our broken relationships must be a top priority. "Even if you are on your way to worship God" Jesus said, "and you remember that someone has something against you, stop what you are doing and become reconciled with that person. Then go to worship." In other words, reconciling broken relationships should be even more urgent for us than the worship of God! The text says "make peace with that person." A few verses earlier in the Sermon on the Mount we hear Jesus saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." God the Father has made peace with us through Jesus Christ the Son. If we follow in our Father's ways in being peacemakers ourselves we can be seen and known as children of God.

This text from the Sermon on the Mount is specifically concerned about relationships within a faith community, but the calling to have a ministry of reconciliation extends far beyond that. We read in John's Gospel, "For God so loved the world that he sent his son." In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself. So as children of God our ministry of reconciliation extends beyond the limits of the faith community. So when we exercise this ministry as ones who are party to the broken relationship with the indigenous people of Canada, as we pursue that ministry in pursuing peace in that relationship, then we are living as the children of God. And peacemakers are blessed.

That reconciliation happens in part by making wolf—acknowledging what we've done—which we do today. But it also happens in the work these two communities can do together to forge a better future. And what does that look like? Perhaps we can learn something from the pages of history and Chief Lee Crowchild's great-grandfather David Crowchild. David Crowchild born on the reserve in 1899 and attended the St.

Barnabas residential school until he was 17. He came to local fame at the Calgary Stampede where for over 20 years he participated in bronc riding and chuckwagon racing. He said, "I never became a champion or won great awards, but the great sportsmen who did were my friends and we shared and travelled the old trail with mutual respect." But his real importance and impact emerged as a Tsuut'ina chief and political activist. He was a founding member of the Indian Association of Alberta. He appeared before a parliamentary committee that was revising the Indian Act. His efforts helped his people attain old age assistance benefits. In those days the secretary of the Indian Association of Alberta was a teacher from Crescent Heights School named John Laurie. Laurie's contributions included helping the indigenous people of Canada receive the right to vote and to help dissuade the Canadian government from implementing laws that would increase segregation in Canada. Through working in this common cause the two became fast friends—David Crowchild even adopted John Laurie as his brother. Later in life Chief David Crowchild became a Christian and attended a church downtown. On Saturdays he walked from the reserve all the way downtown. The firemen at station #1 would provide a cot for him to sleep over Saturday night, and they frequently gave him a ride back to the reserve after church.

David Crowchild's memory lives on in Calgary in many ways. Each year since 1986 the city has presented the Chief David Crowchild Memorial Award to a deserving recipient. The honour goes to a person who promotes cross-cultural understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures. Calgary's first expressway was also named after him. In accepting that honour on opening day, September 6th 1968, Chief David Crowchild said, "I have never been a warrior, but all my life I have tried to stand up for what was right and just - not only for my own people - but for those just conditions and laws which affect us all." John Laurie did the same. Then, when Crowchild cut the ribbon, he said, "May this be a symbol of cutting all barriers between all peoples for all times to come."

It is fitting that Crowchild Trail and John Laurie Blvd in Calgary run parallel to each other for many kilometers. May our paths do the same, today and in the coming days, working for a new future as did David Crowchild and John Laurie. To paraphrase Crowchild's words, may we share and travel a new trail with mutual respect.