

Sermon
National Indigenous Day of Prayer
Sunday, June 22nd, 2025
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: Isaiah 40:25-31; Psalm 19; Philippians 4:4-9; John 1:1-18

In her book “An Altar in the World”, Barbara Brown Taylor wonders when she became convinced that “...church bodies and buildings were the safest and most reliable places to encounter the living God?”

She goes on to say this:

“...Somewhere along the line we bought—or were sold—the idea that God is chiefly interested in religion. We believed that God’s home was the church, that God’s people knew who they were, and that the world was a barren place full of lost souls in need of all the help they could get...”

She says “...The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do.”

Today we’re celebrating National Indigenous Day of Prayer. Terrible damage has been done in the name of religion in this country. The repercussions of misguided attitudes and mistakes made continue to reverberate in this country. The Anglican Church of Canada has made two apologies to our Indigenous siblings in this country. In 1993, Archbishop Michael Peers expressed remorse that the Anglican Church of Canada had tried to remake the Indigenous Peoples of this country in our own image. This acknowledged a failure to have seen God in the First Peoples of this country. A second apology was made in 2019, and Archbishop Fred Hiltz, on behalf of our Church, confessed to spiritual arrogance, and a failure to acknowledge the relationship First Peoples had with the Creator.

In the final report from the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, Commissioner Michele Audette said this: “Today is the first day of the Canada of tomorrow. We cannot change the past, but we can work together to shape a better future...”

That Inquiry also called for us to “...learn about and celebrate Indigenous Peoples' history, cultures, pride, and diversity, acknowledging the land you live on and its importance to local Indigenous communities, both historically and today.”

Indigenous culture and spirituality has much to offer us. It is rooted in creation, making connections everywhere. It is steeped in empathy. It resonates with the seven sacred teachings: Love. Respect. Courage. Honesty. Wisdom. Humility. Truth. There is wisdom in this way!

The Gospel passage appointed for this day is John 1:1-18, and we heard the First Nations translation of it. It's a beautiful translation of these verses. Jesus is “Creator Sets Free” - I love this!

With its mystical language, made even more poetic in the First Nations translation, this passage moves us away from spiritual arrogance. It lifts us out of a perspective that has us see God only in church buildings, and that has us making assumptions about how God sees the world. It asks us to acknowledge that there is always more going on in this world, and in our humanity, than meets the eye. It asks us to be open to relationship, and to both giving and receiving.

The mystery and poetry in this passage touches something deep in our humanity - a longing, a searching. These verses of John's Gospel speak about the grace and gift of Jesus. Sometimes, in our humanity, there is a temptation to cling to grace and gift when it finds us. Fear can convince us that others have to be wrong so that we can be right. Fear can convince us that whatever grace we experience might be all there is, so we'd better keep it.

Jesus came to show us that we don't have to cling to being right, we don't have to cling to grace and gift when we receive it. We can let that grace and gift fill us, and then overflow from us to others and into our world.

We heard this, this morning:

“Creator’s Word became a flesh-and-blood human being and pitched his sacred tent among us, living as one of us. We looked upon his great beauty and saw how honorable he was, the kind of honor held only by this one Son who fully represents his Father—full of his great kindness and truth.”

And:

“No one has ever seen the Great Spirit, but the one Son, who is himself the Great Spirit and closest to the Father’s heart, has shown us what he is like.”

Jesus has shown us what God is like. God is not angry and distant. Not cruel and judgemental. God is full of great kindness and truth. And we are invited to be full of great kindness and truth with God in the world. We are invited to participate in this world not with fear or arrogance, but with compassion and connection. We are invited to freely receive God’s grace and gifts, and to freely give that grace and gift to others and to our world. Freely giving and receiving has us move away from “us and them” living, and step into a creation-wide “us” that sees connections everywhere, and that honours those connections. Freely giving and receiving has us remember that God is interested in more than religion, and that God’s home is all of creation.

You received a little twist of seeds at the beginning of the service this morning. At that time, I invited you to hold it as a symbol of God’s grace and gift. After the Prayers of the People this morning, we’ll share in a ritual. You’ll be invited to make your way to the front of the church to our planter of earth. You’ll untwist those seeds, and scatter them on the earth, freely giving over that gift. What will take root and grow? We’ll have to wait and see! Will it be grass, flowers? Just as when we freely - and unconditionally - share our gifts and graces with each other and in our world, we don’t know what will come of it, but we trust that because we are participating with a God of great kindness and truth, there is potential and possibility for great goodness!

What would it have been like if settlers had shared the good news of Jesus in this country with this mindset? What if the good news of Jesus had been sown with trust that what would take root in the existing culture and traditions of the First Peoples of Canada would be good, and true and beautiful?

We cannot change the past, but we can work together for a better future. God's grace and gift is part of that better future, but not without our participation - not without our receiving that grace and gift, that good news, and then spreading it freely - lovingly, kindly, compassionately - in the world, trusting that God is present in what takes root.

May we feel - receive, breathe, taste and touch - God's grace and gifts in our worship this morning. May the grace and gift made known in Jesus, and at work in the Spirit, saturate our hearts and souls, and then, may we leave here with fresh resolve to work with God toward a better future here in this country through all of creation, in Jesus name. Amen.