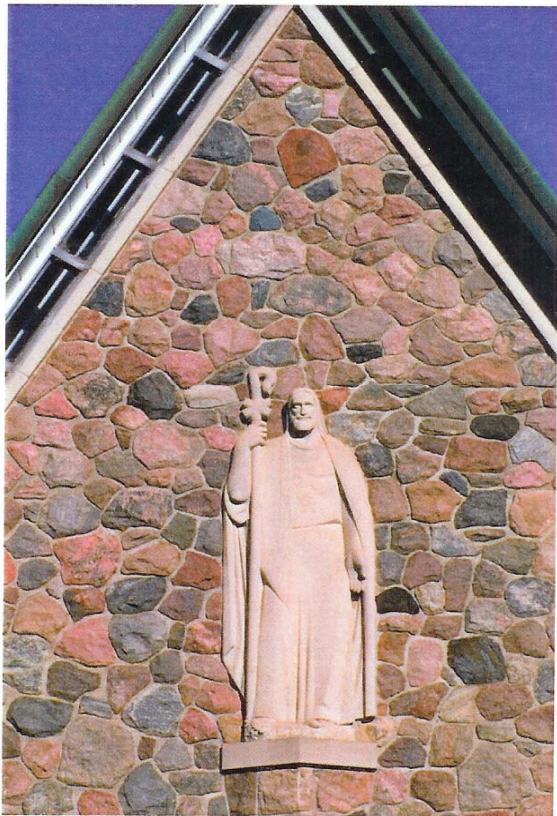


MEDITATIONS FROM ORIOLE – YORK MILLS UNITED CHURCH



First Peoples Service - A Tribute

by Reverend Chris T. Miller

This is one in a series of selected sermons and speeches given at Oriole – York Mills United Church. It features a combination of native readings and prayers which provide a context for Reverend Miller’s sermon titled “The Peaceful Kingdom”. It is offered as a public service in the spirit of sharing and strengthening our Christian faith and respect for all. We hope readers benefit from these meditations and the insights they provide.

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PRAYER TO THE GREAT SPIRIT

O Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds,
Whose breath gives life to all the world,
Hear me.

I come to you as one of your many children,
I need your strength and wisdom.
Let me walk in beauty, and let my eyes
Ever behold the red and purple sunset.
Let my hands respect the things you have made,
And let my ears be sharp to hear your voice.
Make me wise, so that I may understand
The things you have taught my people,
The lessons you have hidden in every leaf and
rock.

I ask for strength and wisdom
Not to be greater than my brother,
But to fight my greatest enemy - myself.

Make me always ready to come before you
With clean hands and a steady gaze,
So when life fades, as the fading sunset,
My spirit may come to you without shame.
An Ojibwa – Sioux Prayer

AS I WALK WITH BEAUTY

As I walk, as I walk

The universe is walking with me

In beauty it walks before me

In beauty it walks behind me

In beauty it walks below me

In beauty it walks above me

Beauty is on every side

As I walk, I walk with Beauty.

A Navajo Song

In The Spirit of Unity



The unity button is emblematic of the medicine wheel's teachings of harmony and balance (beauty) and the four directions as handed down by native elders. Elders teach about equality and respect for all the people of the four colours. The most important part of each button is its centre because this is where the spirits of the four colours meet in unity. People who wear this symbol are not only proclaiming pride in their own culture but respect for all cultures.

Each colour has a special meaning and position. With the colour white at the top, the colour yellow points to the east, the direction of new beginnings, of hope and renewal. The colour red points to the south, the direction of energy, determination and enthusiasm. To the west is the colour black, the place of thoughtfulness and gratitude. To the north is the colour white, the way of quietness, strength and endurance, the path of wisdom.

The Peaceful Kingdom Isaiah 11:1-11, 12:1-6

Ed Gilbreath, an African American church leader, tells the following personal story, adapted from his book *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity*. It describes the difficulty of racial reconciliation. Gilbreath says:

[One day] I got a call from a prominent white Christian leader, asking me to go to lunch with him. As we're sitting down to eat, all of a sudden this guy starts crying.... He explained that God had blessed him -- his children were healthy, he was known throughout the country. "But," he said, "I've had a hard time sleeping through the night."

And I was thinking to myself: *Why is he telling me this? I'm not a therapist.*

"I just came back from a conference," the man told me. "A bunch of us got together to discuss reconciliation and cross-cultural ministry. Usually, when black leaders come into the meeting, we make them feel right at home and let them be part of the decision-making process. But to be honest with you, the decisions are made before your leaders ever get there. I'm used to hearing the jokes and the use of the N-word. But this time, when the jokes were going on and people were saying things, it didn't sound right to me."

"How can I get over this?" the leader asked me, sobbing. "How can we be friends?"

I was silent for a moment, and then asked him, "Do you like football?" He seemed a little puzzled, but said yes. "I do, too," I told him. "I used to coach high school and college ball, and I have a lot of friends who play pro. I love a good game, and I love to cook out. So here's what we do: I need to get to know you, and you need to get to know me. Why don't you come over to my house?" I was the only black in my suburban neighborhood at the time. I said: "Bring your wife and meet my wife and we'll just sit and talk and get to know each other. I'll barbecue some steaks, and let's start there."

He was taken aback. He said, "You want me to come to your house?"

"Yes," I said. "If you want me to sit here and clear your conscience for all the crap you did, I can't do that.

Friendship is not cheap. It takes time and commitment." I gave him my home phone number and told him to give me a call.

I am telling this story because it illustrates for me what I am learning from our First Nations. These teachings are not new really but, when I listen to many of their prayers, songs and stories, this is what I hear:

That human beings are meant to be in a relationship of friendship with God -- the Great Spirit,
That human beings are meant to be in a relationship of friendship with God's creation,
That human beings are meant to be in a relationship of friendship with each other.

A significant phrase here is "a relationship of friendship." The opposite of being friends is being enemies or even worse,

perhaps, being indifferent, uninterested, apathetic. I thank the First Nations for reminding us of this key relationship of friendship and intimacy with each other, with the universe and with God. In their stories, prayers, songs and teachings, there is a deep desire to listen for the voice of God -- the Great Spirit -- through God's created universe and through each other's journey of joy *and* pain. It is listening that must contain profound respect for the other, whether that "other" is the Great Spirit, the created universe or another human being. And our Aboriginal Peoples expect to be listened to in return, especially from other human beings.

Ray Aldred is from the Cree Nation. While studying at seminary for his master's degree in divinity, he began to read the Gospel accounts through fresh eyes. In the May/June 2007 issue of *Faith Today* magazine, he says he asked himself:

"I wonder what it would be like if I read this like an Indian, if this were written by Cree people. Would it [sound] different?" I saw humour, anger, emotion that impacted me on the heart level. I heard it in my heart language for the first time. I began writing "This is a Native perspective."

Aldred went on to say,

I always found aboriginal values more realistic [than western values]. [Aboriginals] weren't afraid of saying "This is hard and this is painful" instead of a mad rush to avoid pain. The western church is concerned with solving problems. The aboriginal view is more to embrace what is there, which is closer to Christ's teachings."

Another insight for Aldred was realizing how much western culture bases significance on action and producing things. He found his aboriginal culture bases significance on relationships instead and that seems closer to Christ's teachings. "Relationships seldom get in the way of white culture," he noted. His accurate observation is "The Gospels emphasize relationships over productivity."

But you and I know that relationships are messy. And it doesn't matter the area – whether in relationship to God, to creation or with other human beings -- our relationships are damaged.

Our relationship with creation is damaged. In his film *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore has surely shown us the truth of this statement. So have others such as Donna Sinclair. Sinclair, a United Church member, has written a book with the intriguing title *The Spirituality of Gardens*. She writes, "Gardens are our connection to the land and to the One who created it." Sinclair asks us to listen to modern stewards of the land, such as the Aboriginal Peoples who nurture it and to voices that take us back to the first Garden in harmony with God and to the world around us. The reality is that all this is in danger. She writes further: "We humans can alter Earth's intricate rhythm of rain and sun. We can destroy the delicate soil-making creatures on which Earth's abundance depends. And then we would be orphaned."

And if we are tempted to take all this for granted, Rev. Stan MacKay, first Native moderator of the United Church, reminds us with this simple statement about the Earth: "This is the holy land."

But let me suggest a further thought. Our relationship with creation is damaged because our relationship with God is

broken. We human beings have this ruthless tendency to exploit. We refuse to accept that limits have been set for human behaviour and activity, either by God or by nature itself. One way to look at sin from a Christian or biblical point of view is that human beings desire to "be like God." Read Genesis, Chapter 3, and the story of Eve's encounter with the snake in the Garden for this truth. And, yet, at the same time human beings desire to "be like God" they also desire to be set free from all the restraints of being connected to God as their Creator.

I think Canada's Aboriginal Peoples would respond positively to the Christian belief that sin is the refusal to accept the limits placed upon humanity on account of our status as God's creatures. We are not God. We are God's creatures.

Our relationships with God and with creation are damaged. And our relationships with other human beings are also deeply injured. Ray Aldred understands the hurt of damaging relationships. While being the pastor of a small aboriginal church in Saskatchewan, he tried to implement changes to make the church more culturally sensitive. His ideas were not well accepted in his denomination or in the larger Christian community of which he was part. His family experienced isolation and exclusion. What to do? Ray and his wife Elaine decided, as he writes, to "embrace the situation. We figured there must be something we're supposed to learn." He started wondering: "What's so bad about being Indian that people are afraid of it? There must be something valuable about it. We started looking at our culture, our people. Mostly I listened and tried to hear people's pain and help them move through it."

"My wife and I thought," said Ray, "that maybe this is what it is to follow Christ: to honour Christ and the image of God

in people. He wants to fulfil people and make us who we were meant to be.”

Part of the hurt and damage may have to do with the way many Christians have traditionally viewed western culture and Christianity. This view sadly devalued Aboriginal Peoples and their culture by assuming that western values and Christianity were one and the same.

Aldred’s thoughts are very revealing at this point: “In Canada when I was growing up, people had a negative attitude about Aboriginal Peoples – they were a problem to be solved. If we have a negative attitude about [people], how can we think they have anything to offer us or how can we see any value in them?”

So part of bridging the divide between Aboriginal People and non-aboriginal people will require a change of heart, won’t it? Aldred says: “You can’t move together until you recognize the validity of the other. We’re in the process.”

The Scripture reading from Isaiah, chapters 11 and 12, was chosen today for a reason. It describes a day that is coming when all things will be “renewed,” even as Jesus also said. When there will be full healing and wholeness in every area of life -- with God, with one another and with God’s creation. A day is coming when the song of walking in beauty will resonate throughout the universe. A day is coming when the fight with our greatest enemy – ourselves – will be no more. A day is coming when we will fully recognize the validity of each other. A day is coming when wolves and sheep will live together in peace, and leopards will lie down with young goats. A day is coming when calves and lion cubs will feed together, and little children will take care of them. A day is coming when cows and bears will eat

together, and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace. A day is coming when lions will eat straw as cattle do. A day is coming when a baby will not be harmed when playing near a poisonous snake. A day is coming for God’s world when there will be nothing harmful or evil in all God’s creation. A day is coming when, as the prophet Isaiah called out for the peaceful kingdom, “the land will be as full of the knowledge of the LORD as the seas are full of water.”



Peaceable Kingdom, ca. 1848

Edward Hicks, 1780-1849

The *Good News Bible* titles Isaiah 11 “The Peaceful Kingdom.” This peaceful kingdom will come to pass, Isaiah said, because a new King will come. This new King is ultimately identified as God’s Anointed -- as the Messiah -- who is to come as the Healer and the ultimate Peace-giver. Isaiah said the Messiah will bring in the peaceful kingdom (verses 6-11). And the new King or Messiah about whom Isaiah prophesized and looked for did come, we believe, in Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah -- for “Christ” (in Greek) carries the same meaning as “Messiah” (in Hebrew).

According to Isaiah, the Messiah will be endowed with the fullness of God’s Spirit -- wisdom and understanding, counsel and power, the knowledge and fear of the Lord -- and He will delight in doing God’s will.

This new King will not judge by appearances, for He will understand people’s hearts. He will not rely on hearsay, because He will know the truth firsthand. He will find in favour of those who are poor and in need. He will rule with the authority of His word. Even the divided realm of animals and humans will find peace and harmony together under His government.

We know the fullness of the peaceful kingdom has not arrived -- yet. It ultimately depends upon God’s final return in Jesus the Christ -- when Jesus comes again as He promised. But we are in that time of waiting and also at a time of realizing our relationships with God, with creation and with each other are damaged. But there are steps *we* can take, choices *we* can make now to allow God, the Great Spirit, to allow Christ Jesus to heal our brokenness.

Remember my first story about a white church leader who wanted to be reconciled with Ed Gilbreath, the African American

leader. The white Christian recognized part of his sinfulness in the ways he was relating to African Americans through the use of language and in the methods of making decisions in the church. I didn’t tell you the ending of that true story. Remember what African American Ed said to the white leader: “**Friendship is not cheap. It takes time and commitment.**” So Ed gave the white Christian his phone number to call and plan when they would have a meal together. The rest of the story? Ed never heard from him again.

What is the conclusion to our story with First Nations peoples? I hope we haven’t begun to believe we are anywhere near an ending. Because we are just beginning. I want to call First Nations people friends, but I hunch that may be presumptuous -- because friendship is a relationship that takes time and commitment. We have taken a significant step, I believe, with this service. Let us pray that God – the Great Spirit – will give us insight to determine our next step. Let us pray that God – the Great Spirit – will give us wisdom and strength to walk in beauty with all those made in God’s image and with all God’s creatures who share the Earth with us. Amen.

Rev. Chris Miller
June 10, 2007

O Great Spirit,
Whose voice we hear in the winds,
Whose breath gives life to all the world,
Hear us.
We need your strength and wisdom.
May we walk in beauty. Amen.

EARTH, TEACH ME

Earth teach me quiet

- as the grasses are still with new light.

Earth teach me suffering

- as old stones suffer with memory.

Earth teach me humility

- as blossoms are humble with beginning.

Earth teach me caring

- as mothers nurture their young.

Earth teach me courage

- as the tree that stands alone.

Earth teach me limitation

- as the ant that crawls on the ground.

Earth teach me freedom

- as the eagle that soars in the sky.

Earth teach me acceptance

- as the leaves that die each fall.

Earth teach me renewal

- as the seed that rises in the spring.

Earth teach me to forget myself

- as melted snow forgets its life.

Earth teach me to remember kindness

- as dry fields weep with rain.

O God, Creator of all

- thank you for your teachings. Amen.

An Ute Prayer

Cherokee Blessing

May the warm winds of heaven

Blow softly upon your house.

May the Great Spirit

Bless all who enter there.

May your moccasins

Make happy tracks in many snows,

And may the rainbow

Always touch your shoulder.

