

**Sermon: Listening Indigenous Prayer Sabbath June 20, 2021  
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev. Steve Clifton**

A few weeks ago Canadians learned of 215 unmarked graves on the grounds of the Kamloops Residential School. Discovered were 215 unmarked graves, for 215 unnamed children, whose deaths were not recognized or acknowledged by the Canadian society that had placed these children in the school.

Collectively we were shocked and shamed at this news that brought the terrible legacy of the Canadian Residential school system into clear, plain view.

That there were children lying unacknowledged in unmarked graves at the Kamloops School was something that the local Indigenous community had long claimed. They had remembered, and shared. And in other communities other unmarked graves are spoken of near other Residential schools. But we settlers thought it an exaggeration. We did not listen.

One of the lessons of the Kamloops School is the need to listen again to our Indigenous peoples. Even when it's hard we need to listen to the stories they would tell.

I wonder if I might share two stories that I have heard with you. Both of these stories were shared by Indigenous residential school survivors and both stories left an impression on me.

The first story comes from a presentation shared by an Akwesasne Mohawk elder at a Church regional meeting in Cornwall some years ago. He spoke of the legacy of residential school in his community of Akwesasne.

Most of us learn to love in families he said. That was true in Mohawk culture too. Parents, children, grandparents, elders, aunties, uncles and cousins, all grow and live together and in that essential grouping of relationships we learn to love and to be family to one another.

But...the Residential School system tore children from their families. And when that happened, the lessons of love learned in family were lost. People raised in institutions do not learn to be parents, are not loved as children are in family, do not learn and draw from the connectedness of family ties.

So the next generation does not know how to live and love in family. They have no knowledge of it. And the generation that follows still is removed from the basic lessons of family life,

So the residential schools system took something irreplaceable and invaluable from whole communities of people and what is lost is lost for generations. The harm perpetrated on Indigenous people in one generation in Residential Schools is passed on for many generations to come.

So... the elder shared, in Akwesasne they were doing the hard work of trying to reclaim what was taken from them. They were learning to love and to be family again.

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The second story was heard a few years ago on an exchange trip. I had the privilege to accompany a group of United Church young people from Ottawa as we journeyed to the shores of the Great Slave Lake in the NWT, in the cold and snow of winter.

We visited the Dene and Metis community of Fort Resolution. There we tried snow shoeing, rode dog sleds, dried moose meat and ate roast bison, learned from elders about hunting and trapping and the traditions needed to live on the land even at 40 below...

Fort Resolution was once home to a Residential School that long dominated local life. With children taken from parents and elders, traditional language was lost, along much indigenous tradition.

The Deninu School in Ft Resolution worked hard to reclaim some of what was lost. The Chipewyan language was being learned again. The language was forbidden in the Residential School and so few people remember it.

A great highlight of our trip was our meeting with Elder Violet Beaulieu.

She was one of the 3 Residential School survivors still residing in Ft. Resolution when we were there.

She shared with us her story.

She and her 2 siblings were taken from their father when her mother died. Her father was far away working in the fur trade when her mother died. She and her siblings were taken to the Residential School. Her father came home and tried to reclaim his children from the school but he was denied access to his children. He stood by the fence line of the school, calling to his children for many days, but they did not go to him because they told not to and were afraid to...In time he left the North a heartbroken man.

Violet lived in the school from age 8 until age 21 when she entered an arranged marriage with an older man that she had never met before. Her marriage was her release from the school.

Life in the school was regulated and controlled. She lived with rules and restrictions and with fear. The school cost Violet her connection to her father and her brother. She never saw either again. She lost family connection, language and culture. She did not lose her faith in God and still prayed - but she could not enter the Church in town as it held too much painful memory. Hearing Violet's story was a great gift. She passed away 2 years ago.

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On our denomination's crest there are some words in Mohawk placed there in 2012 as a recognition of our need as a church to honor Indigenous spirituality, ceremony and tradition. The words express Mohawk spirituality and in English they mean: *All my relations*. It's an

expression of the Indigenous understanding, that all Creation and all God`s creatures are related. We are all connected, more intimately than we know.

May we go forward with hearts open to all our relations. May we listen. Even when it is hard, may we hear the stories Indigenous sisters and brothers might share with us. May God lead us to listen and to listen more...

