

## Residential Schools: When Theology Goes Awry

When the news broke a couple of weeks ago concerning the discovery of 215 bodies of children buried at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in Kamloops, B.C., I, like the rest of you, was shocked, disappointed, angry, embarrassed, saddened (and the adjectives go on). While I am still processing the magnitude of this tragedy, I just feel I have to say *something* knowing full well that this *something* will always be inadequate. I want to try, nonetheless.

Blaise Pascal, the great French thinker who lived some 450 years ago, once said: "God made man (and women) in his own image and man returned the compliment." It has always been more convenient to try and turn God into us than to attempt to live as children of God. In other words, we have always had a hard time letting God be God on God's own terms. It takes a lot of resistance, prayer, discernment, and spiritual maturity to allow God to be God and stop trying to fashion God into our own image. (Some of us are still trying to make our husbands, wives, children, and parishioners into our own image, never quite accepting them as the images of God that they are). Whenever we, individually or collectively, try to make God in our own image, we are doomed to failure at best and violence at worst. Once we whittle God down, and place God in a well-defined box, the next step is that we have to defend that image against all other images. From there we are not too far from promoting a god who justifies our words and actions, after all, we are the "righteous" ones. If we have gotten it "right," everyone who disagrees with us must have gotten it "wrong." And if they have gotten it wrong, then my sacred duty impels me to straighten them out and save them from their sinful ways. So goes the twisted logic. Something of that twisted theology was surely at play when we tried to beat the Indian out of our First Nation brothers and sisters in residential schools. Self-righteousness, then and now, will tolerate no competition.

When I was in seminary (late 80s/early 90s), I remember a staff member telling us seminarians that 95% of all the problems people will share with us, as future priests, will stem from either a false image of God or a poor image of self. At the time, I thought that was an exaggeration. I do not think that anymore. I am convinced the number is closer to 99%. What kind of an image of God did those who ran the residential schools adhere to? Chances are it was a god of dos and don'ts, law and order, discipline and punishment, anger and vengeance. Faith was reduced to a set of rules that must be obeyed or punishment would be meted out both in this world and in the next.

I recall a conversation I had with a now-deceased priest of our diocese when I first arrived in Moncton back in 1996. He said, and I paraphrase: "Phil, I wish I could do all my theology over again like when you did yours in the 80s and 90s. For us (he was formed in the 50s), seminary was nothing less than bootcamp. The entire point of seminary was about learning the rules, obeying the rules and defending the true faith against the falsehood of Protestantism." He went on to say, "We learned nothing about the love and mercy of God. We were not allowed to go home in the summertime unless one of our parents or siblings died. Even then, it was with special permission only. You were to 'suck it up' like a soldier. If we questioned anything at all, our very calling to the priesthood was the thing called into question. After all, how would we be able—with such an attitude—to pledge a vow of obedience to a bishop once ordained?"

This was the kind of "cookie cutter" priest many people grew up with. Through no fault of their own, they were expected to suspend their emotions (the work of the devil) and live in their head, the land of rules and blind obedience. This was supposed to create a unified Church. Ordination was reserved not for young men who showed the ability to lead but only for those who could follow.

When I think of this debilitating theology and the suffering inflicted at the residential schools, it reminds me of a classic story from the Hebrew Testament (Old Testament). It is a short but powerful passage from

the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Genesis. It recalls the story of humans in their rebellious pride wanting to build a tower to the heavens. Wanting to “make a name” for themselves, humans could boast about what they made without the help of God. The plan failed and Tower of Babel collapsed. An old Jewish riddle asks, “Why did the Tower of Babel crumble?” The answer is because the leaders of the project were more interested in the work than they were in the workers. When a brick would fall to the earth and break, the owners would be upset and bewail the loss of a brick. But when a worker fell to the earth out of exhaustion, they just ignored him and pressed someone else to the task. So, God destroyed the tower not because they were trying to reach heaven, but because they were more interested in the bricks than in the bricklayers.

The painful residential school saga is, to me, a clear indication of Church and government being more concerned about law, order, and institutions (bricks) than people. Like broken bricks, the children of these schools were neglected, abused, and discarded. Rules and obedience took precedence over love and mercy. How did the Gospel of Jesus, which we have been preaching in our churches for 2000 years, have been so completely ignored, twisted, and adulterated (used for a purpose it was never meant to)? Like those who bewailed the loss of a broken brick, we as Church bewailed the loss of our reputation. What we didn't bewail was the loss of the Gospel nor the loss of innocent children. What a shame that we have learned so little in 2000 years. We cannot chalk it up to, “Well, it was a different era.” We must take ownership of it, acknowledge our culpability in the pain it caused, seek forgiveness, change our attitudes towards our First Nations people, and simply do better.

A personal and collective conversion is needed. Conversion is never a one-off experience. Rather, it is what we are called to every day of our lives as Christians. Conversion is daily work. I am not in control of how, or if, conversion happens in the lives of other people. However, I am totally in control of whether I choose conversion or self-righteousness in my own life. While I would like to think that I am part of the solution, I know that I am always part of the problem. That's the honest truth. That truth is the only thing that can keep me humble. I do not have the luxury of changing others until, and when, I change myself. Without such change, I'm only part of the problem, and violence emerges effortlessly.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, Lutheran minister and writer, summarizes much of my reasons why I cannot give up on the Church when she writes: “If the Gospel is where we find healing from the harm done to us by the messages of the Church, then it must also be where we find freedom. Meaning that even if it is the last thing I want to do, I absolutely have to believe the Gospel is powerful enough, transgressive enough, beautiful enough, to heal not only the ones who have been hurt but also those who have done the hurting” (Shameless, p. 188).

*J.P.*

*K.B. '16*