

Pentecost 18 (Lectionary 26) Year B September 26, 2021  
Mark 9:38-50  
Epiphany, Winnipeg

1 In the late May days after unmarked graves at the Kamloops Residential School were discovered a memorial took shape on the grounds of the legislature. If you had been there during those days you would have seen thousands of shoes placed on the steps that lead up to the building, with some messages and some cards and some kids' toys here and there as well. To the north of the building in the big green area a gathering place came together, and people sat in a big circle – lawn chairs and blankets – and it looked like a whole lot of being together. A fire was kept burning in the middle of the circle. People told stories and laughed, there would have been tears at times. Someone would get up and go to a cooler or a food box to gather some things, then go around the circle offering bottles of water or a snack on a hot early summer day. It was a pretty relaxed space.

Every now and then someone would get a smudge going, and they would walk around the circle, giving everyone there the chance to pause and bathe in that smoke a bit. There was room in the circle for two passers by – settlers like most of us - to join in, pause, and pray for a moment.

In the days after the discovery of the graves there was so much grief poured out so intensely. There was so much anger too, as there should be. And in the middle of that there was so much urgency expressed – this need for us to come to terms with our past, this calling out for honesty, this frustration that so much in our relationships is still broken and needs to be fixed.... And so many people who felt that grief and that anger and that frustration and urgency still gathered in a circle, visited a bit, laughed and cried, sat quietly, passed around some water and snacks, smudged, and prayed... They were kind of settled in for the long haul. That gathering place was there for days.

A similar scene appeared in the runup to Canada Day, with its own mix of

poured out frustration and anger and urgency and quiet and stillness as people came together.

This coming Thursday is the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation; a day to honour lost children and survivors and their communities. We're called on to remember, to gather together to listen and learn, to wear orange, and to pause and commit ourselves to the sticky work of reconciliation. It's a quiet pause; an important piece of that sticky work.

Senator Murry Sinclair, who was the chief commissioner for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said this awhile back: "We will not achieve reconciliation in my lifetime. We will probably not achieve it in the lifetime of my children. We may not even achieve it in the lifetime of my grandchildren... But if we make a concerted effort ... then eventually we will be able, some day, to wake up and, to our surprise, find that we are treating each other in a way that was intended when contact was first made."

Reconciliation is long-haul work. It will take generations. And for generations there will always be, somewhere, quiet gatherings of people who talk a bit, maybe laugh or cry, maybe pray a bit too....

2 A few minutes ago we heard a reading from the letter of James, and there was talk upon talk of prayer. Remember? "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any sick? They should call on the elders to pray. The prayer of faith will revive the ones who are worn down, weary, at the end of their rope. Confess, and pray, and be healed. Pray, and the lost and wandering will be brought back. That letter of James, from start and almost to finish, is about action and responsibility and how the faithful are called to live out their days, and so much of it has to do with justice, and poverty, and rich and poor, and powerful

and weak. And then here at the end of the letter, it's about prayer. In the thick of the urgency and the calls to action, there's a call to the action of prayer.

So here are some wise words about prayer from three people I met this week.

The first one said "I'm not very good at praying. The best I can do is just remember peoples' names for a minute and then move on." That's enough, you know. Just remember them. And God receives that prayer.

The second one talked about going to a Bible study a few years ago. Her life was full of hurt just then and she had just run out of steam. The study leader said "we're not going to have Bible study. We're just going to pray for you." Prayer isn't theology studies or saying the right things: sometimes it's just how we care for someone who is hurting.

And the third one said, "My best moments of prayer are when there are no words, and I just sit quietly." Sometimes prayer is simply being still in the presence of God, who doesn't depend on us to keep the world turning.

During this week of Truth and Reconciliation I invite you to pray. Well, I invite you, and you can invite me too, to pray any week. We are invited to pray, and just remember this: To pray for a friend or an enemy or a stranger or a situation or a community or the land or the air or the nation is nothing more than to hand it all over to the God who is in this for the long haul, and whose long view and whose long promise is to heal the whole creation. It might just be a word or two we pray. Or no words at all. Or pouring out our hearts for each other with words that just can't stop. It's all prayer. Just handing it over to God.

To pray in these days is to pray for the world that God has made; the world that we share together. And as we pray, over generations and generations, we are being made into something by the God who hears our prayers. We are becoming a people whose lives are marked by forgiveness, by caring for those

who are worn down, by mending broken bridges, by finding our way together rather than driving each other apart.

Pay attention as we pray today. Pay attention to what we are becoming. When we pray for the creation, we become people who care for the gift of creation. When we pray for those who are sick or those who struggle, we slowly become, over days and weeks and years, over generation after generation, people who are committed to caring for those who are hurting. And when we pray for reconciliation we become people who are committed to reconciliation, even if it will take generations.

Because when we pray, we pray to the God of all the generations. We pray to the God who raised Jesus from death and poured out life and healing that covers all the generations that have been and all the generations yet to come. We pray to the God whose Spirit breathes among us, like a fire in the midst of a circle of prayer. God is in this for the long haul, to bring reconciliation to all...in action and activism, and in a quiet gathering of people who pass around some food and drink, and who pray. AMEN