

Sermon: **A Mighty Shrub Indeed!**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, June 13, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A minister, a fisherman and a sailor go out on a boat, to fish in a lake. The boat is carefully anchored in good fishing ground, and the trio are preparing to have a good time. The fisherman, realizing he has inadvertently left a bucket of good baits on the shore, hops over the boat, tells the other two that “he will be right back”. He proceeds to walk on water towards the shore, picks up the bucket, and walks back onto the boat. The sailor, realizing that he has carelessly left a spare oar on the shore, also hops over the boat, tells the other two that ‘he will be right back’. He also walks on water to the shore, retrieves the item, and walks back onto the boat. Now the minister is utterly perplexed by this miraculous event, amazed at the faith demonstrated by the fisherman and the sailor. Not wanting to be outdone by the two laities, he also hops over the boat, and sank quickly into the water. The fisherman looks at the sailor, slightly amused and said, “Maybe we should’ve told him where the stepping stones are located?”

Jokes and parables operate in similar ways, usually at two levels: one explicit and seen, the other implicit and unseen. The power of a joke or a parable lies in its so-called ‘punchline’, revealing how the implicit might subvert the explicit, how the unseen might alter what is seen. A good joke should elicit a burst of laughter from hearers, whereas a good parable should bring about an ‘Ahah’ moment, where the hearers would come to a more profound understanding of the truth. If one has to explain a joke or a parable, then it kind of loses its moment.

I wonder when Jesus explained his parables to the disciples, did they get it? Were there “Ahah” moments amongst them? Did anyone clapped hands, exclaiming, “**A mighty shrub indeed!**”

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God”, asked Jesus, “or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs” (Mark 4:30-32)

Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven is a favourite subject of Jesus. He proclaimed of its coming, at the beginning of his ministry. He taught about it, often in cryptic parables. He brought it forth, by his last dying breath on the cross. By faith, we understand the Kingdom of God as both here and not yet. Comparing the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed, highlights its tremendous potential to grow, from humble beginning to large and extensive eventuality.

The use of the word ‘shrub’ (or garden plant, or herb in other English translations) is quite accurate, as mustard plants do grow more horizontally than vertically. What is so fascinating about this parable is the ‘punchline’ in the second half of verse 32, after the seed has grown to become the largest of all shrubs, it then *“puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”*

The use of this imagery harkens back to the book of Ezekiel, chapter 17, written in the time of the Babylonia exile. Through a complex allegory of two eagles, the prophet foretold a day when God will restore the Kingdom of Israel. God will take a tender twig from the lofty top of a cedar, and transplant it to the mountain height of Israel. A mighty tree, pointing to a mighty empire, shall grow, and *“under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind”*—signifying that every kind of nation and every kind of people will be sheltered by that mighty kingdom that is yet to come.

The parable of Jesus connects the Kingdom of God to the hope revealed in Ezekiel 17, with one main difference: the mighty tree will not be a tall, strong and proud cedar, but a short, laterally-growing, humble mustard. Its seeds are small, yet its branches are large, and it will be fruitful. The kingdom of God is far from what the Israelites had expected, it may have humble beginnings, yet its growth will be organic and dynamic. It will also be subversive—bringing low the high tree, making high the low tree. It will be a blessing to all nations and all people, not just to the chosen people of God.

I imagine those with eyes to see, with ears to hear, those who truly comprehend the parable, would also appreciate the humour of Jesus; not a cedar but a mustard—**a mighty shrub indeed!**

With that idea in mind, I like to turn your attention to the history of Indian residential schools, particularly to the 1994 Confession of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. You could find it, in its entirety, in this

week's bulletin insert. Alternatively, it is in a separate digital document on St Giles' website, under 'Worship Services'.

The term 'Confession' has a dual meaning—both as an apology of a historical wrong and as a faithful proclamation of our denomination. It starts with *"The Holy Spirit, speaking in and through Scripture, calls The Presbyterian Church in Canada to confession. This confession is our response to the word of God. We understand our mission and ministry in new ways in part because of the testimony of Aboriginal peoples."*

The history of the Indian residential school system is long and complex. I've touched on it briefly in last week's sermon. As I mentioned before, Presbyterian came late to the scene. Historian J.S Moir, in his book *Enduring Witness*, had this to say, "... *Presbyterianism in all its branches and in all the colonies was, for a communion of its size and wealth, tardy in taking up the task of missionary work among the native peoples of North America.*"

In 1866, James Nisbet began missionary work to Aboriginal peoples. Although instructions given to him were to "itinerate on the plains", he soon decided that systematic schooling via settlement was the preferred option especially since many native people sought out the mission. In those early days, Nisbet's approach was actually fairly co-operative. He sought out respectful dialogues with native elders, was welcomed and invited to establish mission schools. He provided useful instructions to students, both religious and secular, notably in farming.

By 1876, the Women's Foreign Mission Society (WFMS) began its work among Indian women and children. Lucy Baker was appointed in 1878 as the first woman missionary to Indians for educational work. Many others would soon follow, day schools replaced by residential. Well before the end of the century, WFMS and WMS was contributing approximately two-thirds of the church's Indian budget.

Such acknowledge is important, in third clause of the Confession, *"We recognize that there were many members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada who, in good faith, gave unstintingly of themselves in love and compassion for their Aboriginal brothers and sisters. We acknowledge their devotion and commend them for their work."*

Yet, historical accounts preserved through such missionary work were often one-sided, lacking perspective, particularly from survivors of the residential school system.

The 1994 report that accompanied the Confession contained a personal account from Rose Pratt; it was actually an extract from a television interview. In it, Rose described in painful and shameful details of a beating she received from the principal of the Birtle School, sixty lashes in all from “belly band of the horse's harness”, while she was stripped naked from bottom down, in plain view of many others. Rose remembered while in class the very next day, she was unable to sit due to her fresh wounds. The principal came, put his hands on her shoulders and forced her to sit. She recounted, *“There was blood running down the front, down the sides, down the back, and I couldn't speak. And he says, look at the dirty rotten filthy mess that you have made of this wonderful desk that's provided for you to learn education and as I sat there the pain was so much that I couldn't move. And I knew that blood was running down the back of my legs. And students were looking at me, and as they turned around, they looked at me, they started to cry. I couldn't cry, there were no tears. It was just pain beyond expression.”*

There would later be many other similar accounts of disciplines and abuses, both physical and sexual, reported by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in 2015, and recorded in a 244-page volume, *“The Survivors Speak”*

What is interesting about Rose Pratt's account, is there existed a corresponding account from the principal of the Birtle School, on February 6, 1956. In it, the unnamed principal described catching Rose and two other ‘bad girls’ who were running away from the School. He wrote nonchalantly, *“Rose is only sixteen, she is engaged to this lad and it was to Ottawa to his people she was headed for. There are many other things involved that could hardly be written on paper. At present she is behaving well and I hope will continue to do so.”*

What was said and left unsaid, spoke painfully and truthfully of the reality of the entire Indian residential school system. The 1994 report and Confession of this denomination deconstructed the mirage of that reality. The reported and unreported abuses existed due to an Euro-Canadian mindset of cultural superiority, such mindset was reinforced by the official government's policy to assimilate the Aboriginal peoples to the dominant culture. Such a policy was left unchallenged by the Church because faithful Christians failed to understand the parable of Jesus in describing the Kingdom of God; failed to make real that kingdom reality in their own generations.

It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds; yet it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs; and it puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. **The Kingdom of God shelters, not assimilates.**

Through the 1994 Confession, the once tall and proud tree of the Presbyterian Church in Canada was brought low. Yet in humility, we learned again the path towards the Kingdom of God through the ministry of healing and reconciliation. Next week, I will share with you what our denomination has been doing in that regard.

I will leave with you the words of then Justice Murray Sinclair, on the use of the word 'survivor', in the Preface section of *"The Survivors Speak"*. *"A Survivor is a person who persevered against and overcame adversity. The word came to mean someone who emerged victorious, though not unscathed, whose head was "bloody but unbowed." It referred to someone who had taken all that could be thrown at them and remained standing at the end. It came to mean someone who could legitimately say "I am still here!" For that achievement, Survivors deserve our highest respect. But, for that achievement, we also own them the debt of doing the right thing. Reconciliation is the right thing to do, coming out of this history."*

Praise be to God, who brings low the high tree, who makes high the low tree; who enable all trees to flourish. **A mighty shrub indeed!**

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.