

Sermon: No Partiality

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 4, 2023)

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

Can Christians, here I am referring to the Canadian Presbyterian variety, accept that Indigenous Spirituality is, in its own right, a valid form of worship equal to our own?

That was the question put to the 142nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 2016, in the form of an extensive overture (Overture #14), crafted by the Presbytery of Montreal, which I had a hand, a small hand, in drafting. That overture puts into question a number of Indigenous spiritual practices on the spotlight, practices such as smudging, drumming, sweat lodge, wisdom teachings and others. As our denomination continues to repent from harms done to Indigenous communities due to our historical participation in the Residential Schools, and continues to journey with Indigenous communities through healing and reconciliation. As some local congregations began to incorporate Indigenous spirituality into their worship, the question that naturally arises: Are we doing so based on shaky or solid theological ground?

For instance, can a Christian congregation baptize an individual in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, by pouring water on the head and smudging the body with smoke from sage, at the same time? Can a Christian congregation observe the Holy Communion, partaking in the elements of bread and wine while Aboriginal chants and drums play in the background?

The Assembly Council of our denomination certainly thought so, via a statement it had produced prior to the 2016 General Assembly, that included the controversial clause 'a valid form of worship equal to our own'. The overture #14 from the Presbytery of Montreal, as carefully and extensively crafted, was simply a mechanism in our denominational polity, asking: Wait a minute! Could we have learned theologians, in the Committee of Church Doctrines, take a look at this? Are we treading on shaky or solid theological ground?

Unfortunately, that debate never happened in that General Assembly. The Committee on Bills and Overture had initially recommended that

Overture #14 be referred to both the Church Doctrine and to Life and Mission Agency. But when that recommendation reached the floor of the GA, it was amended to as 'not be received', and the amended recommendation was adopted. The debate was thus killed, with no reason given, or at least recored. Having participated personally at that General Assembly, I recall feeling somewhat disappointed, knowing that my question would not be answered, at least not in the forum or the way I hoped. But God has another way.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this first Sunday of June, which is designated by the Government of Canada as the National Indigenous History Month, I like to invite you to reflect on how or if at all we should incorporate Indigenous Spirituality into Christian worship. I believe the Scripture passage of Acts 10 is helpful to our reflection.

Acts 10 begins with a dream and a vision. The dream came to Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort. He was a powerful man, with Roman Legion at his disposal, yet he was a man with his household who feared God. He also gave alms generously to the poor, and prayed constantly to God. In his dream, an angel of the Lord came to him, and beckoned him to send for a certain man named Simon Peter, who was residing in the costal town of Joppa. Without asking why, Cornelius complied.

Meanwhile, Peter was on a certain rooftop in Joppa, praying to God. He became hungry, then a fantastical vision came to him. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down in four corners touching the ground. In the sheet were all kinds of four-footed creatures, reptiles and birds of the air. Then Peter heard a voice from heaven instructing him to 'kill and eat'.

One has to understand that an observant Jew would follow a strict dietary code of Kosher, of what could be eaten and what could not—certain four-footed creatures or birds of the air are allowed, but certainly not reptiles. So naturally Peter objected, saying, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean!" However, the voice commanded him again, a second time then a third, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

While Peter was puzzling over what he saw and heard, men sent by Cornelius came to him. Realizing that God had sent them, Peter accepted their invitation to visit Cornelius. They met, explained to each other what they had saw in their respective dream and the vision. That is when Peter

declared in verse 34-35, *“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him”*.

God shows no partiality! Though we like to talk about being chosen, like to see ourselves as the elect. Here is a theological truth that in the grand scheme of things, the Spirit of God speaks to all and is at work in all. For all who fear God and practice righteousness in their conducts and thoughts are acceptable and find favour in God.

But Peter was the perhaps the most favoured disciples of Jesus, the stone on which God is building the Church. Peter is the one who spoke during the Pentecost, preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ, and three thousands and more were saved that day. Peter the great evangelist couldn't help himself but to preach Christ, not wanting to waste the opportunity to convert Cornelius. Just as Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word, as even the gentiles, who were not part of the covenantal community of Israel, were speaking in tongues and extolling God. Peter was astonished, realizing that God was baptizing Cornelius and his household with the Holy Spirit in plain sight, thus he ordered them to be baptized on the spot, with water, in the name of Jesus Christ.

One should not miss out on the true importance of Acts 10. On that particular day, Cornelius wasn't that one that was 'saved', Peter was. The great evangelist was himself evangelized that day. What Peter had learned on that day, would have a profound impact on the Church. God's salvation, that is the reconciliation between God and all created beings, either through Good News of Jesus Christ or perhaps through other means, is no longer the exclusive privilege of a select few, but good news to be shared with all—**for God shows no partiality**.

It is a lesson that the Church needs to learn and re-learn, time and time again, as Ross Kane notes (he is a professor at Virginia Theological Seminary and the author of Syncretism and Christian Tradition) that the word 'syncretism', describing mixing the Christian faith with local cultures or spiritual traditions, was largely a positive word for much of the past two thousands years. It really wasn't until the late 19th century and early 20th century does that word began to take on a negative connotation.

Kane astutely wrote, “At the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, for example, missionaries spoke of modern syncretism only in Japan, Africa, and India. At the 1928 World Missionary Conference,

delegates expressed concern about syncretism among “younger churches” but not European ones. In many years of studying how Christians used the word *syncretism* during this era, I’ve struggled to find places where White Christians used it about themselves.”

My own thinking on incorporating Indigenous spiritual practices into Christian worship has changed over time. I think this statement published on the website of our denomination is worthy of our attention: “Some of our congregations have been blessed with experiencing various traditional Aboriginal practices when Aboriginal elders, Aboriginal members of our church and indigenous people visited our congregations as guests, and graciously shared some of these practices and the traditions that give rise to them.

These practices are received as gifts and serve to enrich our congregations. Ceremonies and traditions such as smudging, the circle/ medicine wheel, drum songs and drumming, and indigenous wisdom teachings have been some of the practices our church has experienced as gifts from Aboriginal brothers and sisters.

We acknowledge and respect both Aboriginal members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada who wish to bring traditional practices into their congregations and those Aboriginal members who are not comfortable or willing to do so. **The church must be a community where all are valued and respected.”**

Perhaps one day, God may send us a right partner, a liaison who could connect St. Giles with a nearby Indigenous community. Perhaps one day, we might be welcoming Aboriginal brothers and sisters as brothers and sisters in Christ, as partners in mission, in building the Church, in building the Kingdom of God. Perhaps one day, we may yet to see a smudging ceremony performed or Indigenous wisdom teachings taught, right here in this sanctuary. Perhaps one day, when God is willing.

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