

## Sermon: With What Shall I Come Before the Lord

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 26, 2024)

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

In 1994, The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted a confession recognizing the church's role in operating residential schools and the harm those schools caused to Indigenous children, their families and communities. In all, twelve schools were operated under the Presbyterian Church, from 1880 through to 1969. In 1925, all but two of the schools that were still open were transferred to the United Church of Canada after the Church Union Movement.

The Confession acknowledges the Holy Spirit, speaking in and through the Scripture, calls on the Church to understand our mission and ministry, in radical new ways, based in part of the testimony of Aboriginal peoples. It acknowledges our own sins and shortcoming in failing to love our Aboriginal brothers and sisters. It acknowledges our role in co-operating in the stated policy of the Government of Canada to assimilate Aboriginal peoples to the dominant Western culture. It acknowledges the cultural arrogance of our own thinking that we know better, that “If they could be like us, they could think like us, talk like us, worship like us, sing like us, and work like us, they would know God and therefore would have life abundant.” It acknowledges our mistake in demanding more of the Aboriginal people than the Gospel requires, and have thus misrepresented Jesus Christ who loves all people with compassion, suffering love that all may come to God through him.

For the Church's presumption, the Confession moves us in asking for forgiveness. The 1994 Confession, now in its 30 years, has shaped and continues to shape the Presbyterian Church in Canada in many different ways. Thus forcing the Church in asking many difficult questions, including these two: **“With what shall I come before the Lord?”** and **“What does the Lord require of us?”**

These are not new questions. In fact, they were asked by the Prophet Amos and similarly by Prophet Micah in their time, about 8th to 7th century B.C. Micah prophesied mainly to Judah, the southern kingdom, whereas Amos prophesied mainly to Israel, the northern kingdom.

In today's reading, the passage on Amos 4 paints us a vivid picture of ethical abuses of the rich against the poor. It starts by calling out the 'cow of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria'. The region of Bashan, northeast across the Jordan river, was known for its excellent cattle. However, the prophet was not taking about cows, but the rich women of Samaria, the capital city of the kingdom of Israel. He accused them of oppressing the poor, of crushing the needy, all the while asking their husbands to 'bring something to drink'! Their incessant demands for luxuries drove their disregard for neighbours—the two go hand-in-hand.

For that the Lord swore by his holiness that they shall be punished by exile, and the manner of their punishment is liken to being taken away with fishhooks. Not coincidentally, the Assyrians who would eventually topple the northern kingdom of Israel, was notorious for exacting precisely such cruelty to captives, a fate that was excruciatingly painful and absolutely humiliating.

What is even more troubling is the Lord God sarcastically inviting the people to transgress, to sin and to rebel against God, by going to Bethel and Gilgal, two prominent and ancient sanctuaries, to offer sacrifices and tithes. It is as though God was telling them that even if they had sacrificed every morning and tithed even more regularly, something which the Israelites love to do, it would still not be enough to satisfy the Lord God.

The passage of Micah 6 starts out as a covenantal dispute that God initiates against God's people. Calling on mountains and hills as witnesses, the Lord God asks in exasperation, "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!" God then follows up with a long list of covenantal faithfulness, of bringing the people out of Egypt, of sending great leaders to deliver them, of thwarting evil schemes from enemies, and bringing the people eventually to the Promised Land. The faithfulness of God is not in question. But what of the people?

The prophet then, in what appears as a dramatic turn of this covenantal disputation, presents the voice of the people in also a question form: "With what shall I come before the Lord?" It is an aged-old existential question that has been asked, repeatedly, ever since the humanity's exile from Eden, even since our relationship with our creator was broken, shattered from a naive innocent. With what can I mend this broken relationship? With what can I reconcile the irreconcilable? With what can a sinful man appease a wrathful God?

Would a burnt offering of calves a year old, as stipulated in the Law, suffice? Perhaps quality in itself is not sufficient, what then of quantity, of thousands of rams and ten thousands of rivers of oil? The intensification of exaggeration reaches its shocking climax, with the offering one's firstborn. Let me be clear about this, the prophet is talking about child sacrifice—an act strictly forbidden in the Torah, yet was actually carried out by certain Israelites on more than one occasion (in 2 Kings 3, 16 and Isaiah 57).

None of it suffices! They are not what God desires? What then does the Lord require of us? Well, as Prophet Micah declares, the Lord God has already told us what is good: that is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Do justice, or *mishpat* in Hebrew, describes an ethical response to God that has a manifestation in social concerns for all. Love kindness, or *hesed* in Hebrew, is lovingkindness, goodness and faithfulness expressed in covenantal loyalty. Walking humbly means to live in conscious fellowship with God, exercising a spirit of humility with the Creator. The prophet was not indicating that sacrifice was completely ineffectual, or that a proper heart attitude to God would simply suffice. Rather, God has no interest in the multiplication of empty religious acts.

Let me also be clear, these ethical requirements do not constitute the way of salvation. Salvation is still primarily and only through faith in Jesus Christ. But in so far as the praxis or practice of the righteous faith, the ethical requirements of do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God are what would truly please God. Similarly as declared in James 2:17, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

The 1994 Confession of the Presbyterian Church in Canada sets in motion the works of the Church for the next thirty years. Much has changed, but much more is still to be done. Since 1994, our denomination has been quite intentional about supporting truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and communities. The Presbyterians Sharing provides funding for eight ministries that operate in and for Indigenous communities across Canada—

Anamiewigummig Fellowship Centre (Kenora, ON);  
Winnipeg Inner City Mission;  
Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry;  
Mistawasis Memorial Presbyterian Church;  
Place of Hope Indigenous Presbyterian Church (Winnipeg);

Edmonton Urban Native Ministry;  
Hummingbird Ministries (Vancouver);  
Cedar Tree Ministries (Duncan, BC).

These eight ministries now comprise the National Indigenous Ministries Council. Allow me to highlight two of these ministries through these short videos:

[Anamiewigummig Fellowship Centre – Kenora, ON]  
[Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry – Saskatoon, SK]

These videos are only a glimpse of what is happening on the ground of these eight ministries. At the next week's General Assembly, which I will be attending as a commissioner, there are a number of issues of healing & reconciliation with the Indigenous communities that will be discussed, including a renewed Apology to be issued by the denomination, an alternative educational pathway to ordination for Indigenous candidates for ministry, and a mechanism of sending Indigenous commissioners to future General Assemblies. Stay tune, as I will have more to say about these efforts after the Assembly.

Though the relationship between the Presbyterian Church in Canada and Indigenous peoples is wrought with history and pain, in part as a result of the Residential Schools, the church is committed to the ongoing process of healing and reconciliation. For that we give thanks to the Creator God,

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