

## **Sermon: Patiently Praying**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Sep. 29, 2024)

In May 2021, when archeologists detected what they believed to be 215 unmarked graves at the site of a former residential school near the town of Kamloops BC, it brought new attention to one of the most shameful chapters of our nation's history.

Starting in the 1880's and for much of the 20th century, more than 150,000 children from hundreds of indigenous communities across Canada were forcibly taken from their parents and sent to what were called residential schools. Organized and funded by the government and run by churches—mostly the Catholic Church, but the Anglican, the United, and the Presbyterian were involved as well—those schools were designed to assimilate and Christianize indigenous children by ripping them from their parents, heir culture and their community. The children were often referred to as savages and forbidden from speaking their languages or practicing their traditions. As a result, the PCC bears a collective responsibility to truth, healing and reconciliation.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the truth about abuses children suffered at residential schools began to be heard. Over the next decades, more truth about the pain and harm inflicted at the schools have become part of our common memory, in large part because of the courage of Survivors and intergenerational Survivors who are standing against a legacy of colonial violence and racism, seeking healing from their harmful and deadly impacts.

In 1994, The PCC offered a Confession for its participation in the residential school system, which set the church on a path of reconciliation. In learning to walk that path, the church has learned much about, and understands more deeply now, the harm it caused. In June 2024, through the tireless work of the National Indigenous Ministries Council, General Assembly of the PCC adopted an Apology for the church's role in colonization and in running the residential schools.

Allow me to read you an excerpt of this Apology (with the understanding this may be triggering, evoking trauma for some by surfacing memories of devastating experiences in residential schools. Should you wish to discuss with me more, I will be available after the service.)

We, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, humbly offer this apology to the generations of Indigenous people and communities harmed by the residential schools and day schools we operated.

We originally made a Confession in 1994 for our role in operating residential schools and colonization but we have realized the inadequacy of that Confession. We apologize for our slowness and the apathy of our response. We are deeply sorry.

We acknowledge the families whose children were taken to schools without telling their families where the children were being taken and who never returned, who remain lost today.

We acknowledge with grief the many unmarked graves that have been found and will be found, including at schools that we ran. We remember the children who never made it home. We apologize for the impact of the genocide of colonization, forced assimilation and racism to which we actively contributed.

Many Survivors and intergenerational Survivors have shared very personal and traumatic experiences in the context of Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings and within the congregations, committees and governing bodies of the church.

We acknowledge the strength and courage of Survivors for sharing your experiences in the schools and the heavy burdens you, your families and communities still bear. We acknowledge the pain and difficulty of sharing and reliving the truth of your lived experience.

We are sorry for how long it has taken for The Presbyterian Church in Canada to begin to understand the depth of harm we have caused, and we still have much to learn. For our complicity in colonization and the residential school system, we are deeply, deeply sorry.

I will pause here from the reading of this excerpt, and add my own take. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 8:19-22, speaks of the creation longing for the revealing of the sons of God, and groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. It aptly describes the current state of relationship in Canada, between the Indigenous communities, the Non-Indigenous communities and the Church. We are groaning together under the legacy of the residential schools, we feel this pains as in childbirth, we see the harms it has done, still doing, we try to face the truth of it all, but are still eagerly awaiting the revealing of the sons of God. Or if I may be so bold: the one, the only begotten Son of God, to be revealed, acknowledged, worshiped and loved. Meanwhile, for the followers of the Son, that is Christ Jesus, I

shall turn to James for instruction and advice, specifically chapter 5, verse 7: *“Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord.”*

For the past few weeks, I have been preaching from the Epistle of James, this lone wisdom literature of the New Testament. One of the major themes of this book is the contrast between the rich and the poor, and in chapter 5, James returns to this familiar subject, with a dire warning for the rich who systematically oppresses and profits off the back of the poor. For the Lord hears and have heard their cries. Justice will be dealt, will be meted out, in due time, in God’s time. Meanwhile, James counsels the righteous, the faithful to wait, patiently.

He then provides three examples to emulate. First is the farmer waiting for patiently for the early and the late rains. In Israel / Palestine, wheat harvest ran from mid-April through the end of May. This crop was valuable; farmers’ lives depended heavily on good harvest, which depended heavily on plentiful rains. The early rains come in October and November soon after the grain is sown, and the latter rains come in April and May as the grain is maturing. Both rainy seasons are necessary for a successful crop.

Such agricultural metaphor speaks of the farmer’s total dependence on rains—both early and late—which is considered as part of God’s domain, as part of God’s blessing. As the farmer waits patiently for rains, so should we wait patiently for the day of judgement, the day of the Lord.

Meanwhile, we are cautioned against grumbling against one another. This verb ‘to grumble’ refers to the ‘sigh’, the ‘groan’, the inner distress one finds, the feeling of bitterness accumulated, the smothered resentment that expresses itself in all sorts of un-Godly ways. For such grumbling will only bring judgement upon oneself, and see, as in verse 9, the Judge is standing at the doors!

Another example of patient suffering, which James refers to are ‘the prophets’ as a group. Though not explicitly named, Jeremiah certainly stands out as one in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, who endured mistreatment with patience. He was put in the stocks (Jer. 20:2), thrown into prison (32:2), cast into a miry dungeon (38:6); yet he persisted in his ministry without bitterness or recrimination. For Jeremiah knew, and the psalmist echos in Psalm 124: *“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—let the people of God now say—if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive...Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey*

*to their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the hunters; the snare is broken, and we have escaped...Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."*

The last example James cited is Job, more specifically the endurance, the perseverance of Job. Despite the popular phrase 'the patience of Job', I would argue he hardly exemplified that quality. Undoubtedly, for those who had studied the Book of Job with me not so long ago, you would understand why.

Job, however, is an outstanding example of perseverance in the most trying situation. Even when all his earthly blessings were taken away as a test, a bet between God and the accuser, Job remains steadfast, refusing to sin, insisting on an audience with God.

In his stubbornness of faith, Job gave us a glimpse of that rare Old Testament Christology, in this declaration in chapter 19, verse 25, "*For I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.*" Job may not have fully appreciated what he had declared, what the later generations would read in his declaration. For in this declaration, Christ Jesus lives and stands and is praised, most worthily and triumphantly, upon the earth, in the end.

Meanwhile, James counsels us to wait patiently, but he gives us two practical actions to do: that is to anoint the sick with oil, and to pray. Now there is some evidences that oil is used in the Bible for medicinal purpose. Isaiah speaks of softening wounds with oil; the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 bandages the wounded man with oil and wine. However, by and large, oil was used in Ancient Israel to anoint and consecrate priests or rulers. It was actually Jesus and his followers, in the story of the sending out of the Twelve in Mark 6, who had combined the dual-use, anointing the sick with oil as a symbol of the power of the Spirit of God.

It is a practice that continued through the early church, and passed down through the century to us now as a gift. It is there in the Presbyterian Book of Worship, a service of healing by the anointing with oil. It is a power vested not just with the minister, but with all elders of the church. The gesture is not a magical cure. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that God heals and God saves.

Lastly, James counsels us to pray. What can I say about prayer, but to do so patiently and fervently. James cited Elijah as an example, who prayed for drought and later for rain. God answered both of his requests, for the prayer of the righteous is indeed powerful and effective.

Nevertheless, I should add, when it comes to prayer, one must acknowledge, as Job did, that the Lord gives, the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

Allow me to conclude this meditation with the following five fundamental commitments that PCC as a denomination has made in its Apology:

We will continue to listen and learn from Indigenous people, leaders, Elders and Knowledge Keepers, welcoming and engaging voices from both within and beyond The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

We will continue the work of reconciliation, responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action and the work of reparation that we have begun.

We will respect traditional Indigenous spiritual practices.

We will listen to and tell the truth about the past.

We will work to support Indigenous led healing and wellness initiatives and be in solidarity with Indigenous people and communities.

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