

Growing in Wisdom: Back to School Sunday
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – August 29, 2021

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Proverbs 1:2-9

Hymns: VT 531 – Holy Presence, Holy Teacher, VT 196 - Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom

Deuteronomy 6:1-9:

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ² so that you and your children and your children’s children may [revere] the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all [the] decrees and commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Proverbs 1:2-9:

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
³ for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
⁴ to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
⁵ let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
⁶ to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.
⁸ Hear, my child, your father’s instruction,
and do not reject your mother’s teaching;
⁹ for they are a fair garland for your head,
and pendants for your neck.

Back to school has always been one of my very favourite times of the year. The crisp fall air, the crunch of leaves underfoot, the shiny new school supplies, and another year

of learning stretching out before me: what could be better than that for a bookish kid who loved school? After all, my parents still laugh when they remember that I declared in elementary school that my two favourite subjects were “reading” and “silent reading.” And I came by it honestly: I come from a family of educators and teachers and debaters and thinkers. These days, of course, it’s the next generation that’s heading off to school, so my excitement and joy at this time of year is vicarious, on behalf of the kids in my life!

But these days there is also a shadow cast over the usual excitement of back-to-school – or really, two shadows. One is, of course, the pandemic, which has turned the familiar routine of school upside-down for the last couple of years. When the schools shut down in March of 2020, that was a major clue that something very serious was going on, and for many of us with young children, our days became a blur of working from home and homeschooling. Last year, children could thankfully return to school in person, but I know for many parents, caregivers, teachers, and school staff, it was an anxious year of worrying about masking and outbreaks. And while we’d hoped to be finished with that, this year we are continuing with the masking and other precautions. Another shadow over our schools has been the confirmation this summer of unmarked graves at many former residential school sites, something Indigenous survivors had been speaking about for many years, including during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I know this has been on many of our hearts as we heard terribly high numbers – 215 at Tk’emlups te Secwepemc First Nation (Kamloops), then 751 at Cowessess First Nation closer to home, and so on. Though it has fallen out of the news cycle, the total number is now at 1,800 and counting.¹ This was named by a number of

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/onion-lake-cree-nation-residential-school-st-anthony-s-st-barnabas-unmarked-graves-1.6124235>

our worship leaders this summer as an item of prayer, as a sign that there is much work to be done to heal broken relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples here in this land.

In light of these two shadows that dim the joy of sending children off to learn, what are we to do as people of faith? What is the link between faith and education? This congregation, with its many years of support for Rosthern Junior College and other Mennonite schools, with its generous bursaries for students, and robust Adult Ed. and Sunday school programs, clearly believes in the value of education! And we certainly link education and faith. In our Scripture passages for today, we see confirmation that faith and teaching are tied together as far back as the Shema – the “Hear O Israel” passage from Deuteronomy. This is one of the oldest faith statements of Judaism, one that is still prayed every morning and evening in the Jewish tradition: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5). Importantly for us as Christians, this is also what Jesus points to when asked about the most important commandment, alongside loving your neighbour as yourself. These are the keys to being disciples of our teacher-rabbi, Jesus.

But notice that both before and after the Shema, the Israelites are instructed to teach the faith to the children in their midst. These are introduced as the commandments for the Israelites’ children and children’s children, and they are to “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (v. 6). So from the very beginning, our faith traditions were meant to be taught to the next generations; our faith was always

meant to be teachable, meaning that teaching and learning are inseparably part of faith. This is why it makes so much sense that churches are also places of learning – even life-long learning! – where curiosity and wonder about the wide and deep mystery of God in and beyond the world are encouraged and embraced.

But we know, sadly, that not all churches and church institutions function in this way. Certainly the residential schools which Indigenous children were forced to attend, most of which were run by churches, and some staffed by Mennonite teachers,² did not see faith and learning in this way. Instead, they weaponized faith and education to serve the colonial project of cultural genocide, separating children from their families and communities in a racist effort to stamp out whole cultures and languages. I know I find it really difficult to hear the stories of what went on at these schools, and the way so many of these children were treated – punished harshly for speaking Indigenous languages or for any kind of perceived disobedience, deprived of adequate food and protection from disease, abused in physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual ways. Donna and Irvin Driedger gave me a book compiled by her brother, Gordon Lobe, of stories from Indigenous elders in northern Saskatchewan, including first-hand stories from residential schools. Some of them recount humiliations, such as being made to stand in front of the other children with one's soiled sheets over one's head when one had wet the bed (remember, some of these children were as young as 3) or having one's head shaved when one had tried to run away, back home to one's family.³ And though we think of these as "schools," many recount that they really didn't learn much. Some barely learned to read before being pushed into learning "industrial skills" like

² For more details see this document: https://langleymennonite.ca/.../2012_MCCan_TRC_handout.pdf

³ "And they Told Us Their Stories," ed. Jack Funk and Gordon Lobe, Foreword by Chief Harry Lafond (Saskatoon: Office of the Treaty Commissioner, 2008, 2nd printing), 58.

blacksmithing, sewing, etc. Some students were even “loaned out” as unpaid servants in white people’s homes, though parents protested this practice and called for actual education for their children.⁴ Among the most troubling stories for me as a person of faith was the way that religion was used to hurt and shame these children. George Peequaquat and John PeeAce recount how they were forced into hours-long prayer sessions to an angry and violent God: “We had to kneel in the church with our hands pointed at the statue of this person hanging on a cross. We were confused because we had been taught at home not to hurt other people ... At Easter we used to have to pray for long periods of time. We often started at six o’clock in the morning, going straight through till eleven. Many of the children would faint. ... It was cruel. The priest wouldn’t listen and we didn’t understand his explanations. Our God was different, not so harsh, more loving and understanding, I never got that feeling about this new God.”⁵ It grieves me deeply to think of our faith being emptied of love and used to bolster self-hatred in the hearts and minds of little children. It’s this kind of spiritual abuse that leads Elaine Enns and Ched Myers to speak about our context as being “haunted” by the legacy of colonialism and the many years and layers of injustice against those of us who are Indigenous (their book is called *Healing Haunted Histories*).⁶ And let’s not forget that these were the stories of the children who made it out alive, not those who were buried secretly in unmarked graves.

It can be hard to know how to respond to these stories and this great grief. For those who are teachers or parents or grandparents, or aunts or uncles, maybe you’re

⁴ “*And they Told Us Their Stories*,” 55, 49. See also Neil Funk Unrau, “Toward the Canadianization and Indigenization of Peace Studies,” *Peace Research* Vol. 47, No. 1/2 (2015): 29-45.

⁵ “*And they Told Us Their Stories*,” 63.

⁶ Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization*, The Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 10-11.

wondering how to talk about this to the children in your life. This is a moment when we are reminded of the specific kind of teaching and learning that faith involves: namely, wisdom. In the Shema, we are called to love God with our whole selves, heart, soul, mind, and strength. Similarly, in Proverbs 1, we are reminded that the wisdom of faith is not simply abstract, intellectual knowledge, but wisdom about how to live well and in right relationship, about what our faith requires of us here and now. We are told that wisdom is about “righteousness, justice, and equity,” and to teach “knowledge and prudence to the young,” to acquire the skills to live and discern well (vv. 3-5). And wisdom is called a beautiful thing, “a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck” (v. 9).

So what is the wise thing to do at this moment of our collective haunting? First, it is to listen to and join the grief over these little lives taken too soon and denied a proper burial and resting place. I think many of us want to jump ahead to the reconciliation part and want to skip over the pain of the truth part of the Truth and Reconciliation process. But the fact that so many of us were surprised at the news of these unmarked graves when survivors had been speaking about them throughout the TRC shows that we haven't yet grappled with that truth. The involvement of the Mennonite church which sent Conscientious Objectors to teach in residential schools during World War II is also a surprise to some of us, and needs to be recognized and grieved. Over the summer, many have hung orange shirts in their windows and porches in response to the news of the unmarked graves, as a sign that every child matters (connected to Orange Shirt Day

at the end of September).⁷ I see this as an encouraging sign that we are listening and grieving together.

Secondly, we need to undertake what Ched and Elaine call “re-schooling” – learning from those who are on the ground, in the midst of decolonizing work.⁸ For me, that has meant reading books and articles by Indigenous authors like Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum, Cree/nehiyaw lawyer who co-founded the Idle No More movement and explains so well the Cree understanding of treaties as adoption into one family;⁹ or the former chair of the TRC, judge, and senator Murray Sinclair, who wants to emphasize the truth of the injustices against Indigenous peoples in this land as well as “the resilience of our people.”¹⁰ It means celebrating the cultural renaissance or revitalization of Indigenous languages, ceremonies, and artistic expression of artists like Jeremy Dutcher and Kent Monkman. All of these are ways of re-schooling ourselves – teaching ourselves a deeper, wider, more complex truth about the history and significance of these lands and the peoples who share them.

And it means recognizing that this will all take time – that reconciliation between Indigenous and settler peoples will likely not be realized in our lifetimes, or maybe even our children’s or grandchildren’s lifetimes. So it’s up to us to teach them the wisdom they need to take up their leg of the journey. A whole bunch of children’s books on residential schools have been published recently, including one of my favourites, *When We Were Alone*, a picture book by Swampy Cree author David A. Robertson, which talks about the pain of residential schools but also the ways Indigenous peoples are

⁷ For more information about Orange Shirt Day, see: <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsCBC2/the-feed/what-is-orange-shirt-day>

⁸ Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories*, 243.

⁹ Sylvia McAdam, *Nationhood Interrupted: Revitalizing nêhiyaw Legal Systems* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), 24.

¹⁰ See this recent interview with former Senator Sinclair: <https://www.macleans.ca/longforms/murray-sinclair-on-reconciliation-anger-unmarked-graves-and-a-headline-for-this-story/>

reclaiming their once forbidden languages and once outlawed cultural and spiritual ceremonies, all in an age-appropriate way with beautiful illustrations by Julie Flett. (I'll share a list of books if you're interested.)¹¹ This is one way to start these difficult but necessary conversations, and to model wisdom for the next generations.

So as we look to another school year and another year of educational programs of our church community, let's remember our calling to wisdom. Wisdom that works for the health and well-being of all of us, even if that means wearing an uncomfortable mask all day or adapting how we do things for what feels like the tenth time. Wisdom that does not turn away from hard truths, but takes up the re-schooling that's needed to address them. May we remember that the God of wonder and curiosity, justice and peace goes with us, giving us the courage to learn new things and face new challenges, to fail and to get up again, to move forward – however slowly – toward healing and reconciliation. And in that spirit, let's remember the wisdom of the Jewish Talmud:

**Do not be daunted
by the enormity
of the world's grief.
Do justly, now.
Love mercy, now.
Walk humbly, now.
You are not obligated
to complete the work,
but neither are you free
to abandon it.**

- the Talmud

AMEN

¹¹ For a list of books on residential schools for different ages, see: <https://www.savvymom.ca/article/books-about-residential-schools-for-kids-of-all-ages/?fbclid=IwAR0B-WcS6-TBy5jEA5RMyGMdT-lyl0qxvxFe40WgxveUGcslq16HIEeAeds>