

Just Race
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – October 17, 2021

Hymns: VT 11 – Mountain of God; VT 705 – For the Healing of the Nations, VT 409 – For We Are Strangers No More

Scripture:

Isaiah 2:2-4

In days to come

the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us [God's] ways
and that we may walk in [God's] paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ [God] shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Colossians 3:9-15

⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

“A few weeks ago a video went viral of a white [couple] challenging a Filipino man who was stencilling [the words] ‘Black Lives Matter’ onto his own garden wall. When he asked them if it would be ok if it was his own property, they lied and claimed that they

knew the person who lived there. He then invited them to call the police, which they did. The police arrived, recognised the man as the owner of the house and left without further ado.”¹

Perhaps unexpectedly, one of the issues that has risen to the surface during this pandemic is the issue of racism. The summer of 2020 saw the Black Lives Matter movement hold marches and vigils around the world, calling for police reform and speaking out against police brutality in the wake of George Floyd’s and Breonna Taylor’s murders at the hands of police. More of us are paying attention to issues of racism and the way it’s built into some of our systems, such as who gets pulled over and seen as “suspicious” by police, who is more likely to be hired for jobs or seen as leadership material. Because of this increased discussion of racism, our adult ed. committee decided to study the book, *Trouble I’ve Seen* on Zoom last winter, by self-described “Anablacktivist” (Anabaptist + Black + activist) theologian Drew Hart.

Fast forward to this summer, when unmarked graves were confirmed on the grounds of several former residential school sites – first 251 at Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc, then 751 at Cowessess First Nation, and many more. Kairos Canada has the current number at 6,128 graves in Canada and the US.² I will always remember where I was when I heard the news of how many graves had been confirmed at Cowessess. I was just leaving the Covid vaccine clinic hosted by the Saskatoon Tribal Council when I turned on the radio and heard the devastatingly high number: 751 little souls. Tears sprang to my eyes as I realized the terrible irony. I had just received my second dose of vaccine (and a box of free household cleaning supplies from Nihk, a

¹ John van de Laar, “Just Living: A Liturgical Guide to Everyday Justice,” (Boksburg, South Africa: Sacredise Publishing/sacredise.com, 2021), 19.

² Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, <https://www.facebook.com/kairosCEJI/posts/10159578173686686>

local Indigenous business) from the Tribal council, from my Indigenous neighbours. They had generously opened their vaccine clinic to anyone and everyone, contributing to keeping me and my children healthy and safe. This same kindness had clearly not been extended to their children for the generations during which residential schools were in operation. And then just a couple of weeks ago we celebrated the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a day to remember and honour the survivors of the residential school system – and those who did not survive the genocide.

As we turn to the Bible, we may not know where to start, partly because questions of race and racism are much more modern concepts than biblical times. As Drew Hart says, “race is not a natural biological category for human beings. ... [R]ace is a social construct. Racial categories ... were created, and not very long ago, given the length of human history.” They were created for a specific purpose, he continues: to justify the actions of white Europeans, who were beginning to dominate and enslave African peoples and to violently dispossess Indigenous peoples in various places around the world. So claims of white, Christian, European superiority over people of other skin tones, beliefs, and continents made chattel slavery and colonialism seem more acceptable, even noble as the propaganda spread ideas of supposedly “civilizing” other peoples and places. So made-up categories of race made the very real violence of racism possible.³

So if race had not yet been invented yet in biblical times, what does the Bible have to say to our theme of Just Race? Well, the Bible does talk about different nations or peoples, as in our Scripture passages for today. In some ways, the well-known story

³ Drew G.I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2016), 48-49.

of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) is in the background of these passages. You remember – the story of how humanity all had one language so they were building this great tower to heaven. But they were becoming too powerful, so God mixed up their languages and scattered them all over the world. In some ways, our two passages for today talk back to the Tower of Babel story, or reflect its opposite (and so does the story of Pentecost!). In Isaiah 2, we have a vision of peace that gathers up the scattered nations, bringing them together on the mountain of God:

In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us [God's] ways
and that we may walk in [God's] paths.

Here the differences between nations are transcended, and God's ways become a source of unity. And what are God's ways, specifically? The second part of the passage fleshes those out:

[God] shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Weapons of war are transformed into farming tools – what once was used to hurt and kill is used to grow food to feed hungry bodies, to sustain life. Nations do not even learn what war is anymore! Peace has come among the many nations and peoples. But notice that they remain diverse peoples and nations in the plural. This is not the

colonialist vision of one people made in the image of white Europeans. This is a unity-in-difference, a peace between nations which preserves their gifts and uniqueness. It's the difference between colonial policies of assimilation and international cooperation like the United Nations. So there is a celebration of diversity at the foot of the mountain of God in Isaiah's vision, as the nations come together to make peace instead of war.

But this preservation – even celebration – of diversity is not quite so clear in our passage from Colossians 3. There we read that “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” At first glance, it seems that these differences are erased or done away with. This imagery of taking off the old self and putting on a new one comes from baptism practices in the early church, which involved taking off one's old garment and being redressed in a new one upon emerging from the waters of baptism.⁴ The imagery of clothing is a metaphor here for this baptism practice, and the newness of self that it brings. Now it can be tempting to think that Christ gives us an easy out here for issues of racism and irreconcilable difference. Doesn't this mean that in Christ we are all the same? Is this the Bible's way of telling us that we can now be “colourblind” when it comes to racial differences? In short, no. Our worship resources compare this approach to the response that has often been leveled at the Black Lives Matter or Indigenous Lives Matter movement. “All Lives Matter” has become a kind of counter-slogan that takes issue with singling out Black or Indigenous or other people of colour. But the problem with this approach “is that it blinds us to the patterns of abuse, oppression, poverty, and injustice that affect people of colour more than white people.”⁵ A helpful

⁴ <https://directionjournal.org/33/1/baptism-among-early-christians.html>

⁵ van de Laar, 19.

comparison is that of a house being on fire. We could walk around saying that all houses matter, or we could address the crisis of this one house being on fire! Black Lives Matter became a movement because too often, Black people are treated like their lives don't matter, or matter less; that's the crisis. That's where the fire is. Similarly, we can't pretend that 400 years of colonialism simply didn't happen, or don't affect Indigenous-settler relationships in our context today. We are still feeling the aftershocks of those centuries of racial violence. Though the grass has grown over them, those thousands of child-sized graves still exist, and still haunt us. And of course they haunt the survivors, especially those who struggle with addictions, homelessness, and post-traumatic stress in our community, as well as being disproportionately more affected by the current pandemic.

So what is Colossians trying to get at, then, if not a reduction of all of us to a uniformity and sameness? Well, the letter to the Colossians "offers a radical message which seeks to cut across racial and cultural divides." The issue is not that we're different from one another; it's what we do with those differences. Colossians celebrates the unity offered by Christ – a unity which breaks us out of closed ethnic and family circles to embrace each other as a diverse family. "Our differences are a gift. There is tremendous beauty, joy, and creativity in the diversity of our world, and of the human race." Peace and unity do not come from sameness, then, but from seeking to be in relationship with one another across our differences. This is how our faith serves God's vision of, in the words of Desmond Tutu, "a rainbow world."⁶

⁶ van de Laar, 20.

But maybe I'm making this sound too easy. There is so much harm that needs to be healed and it can be hard to know where to begin. But I think Chief Cadmus Delorme of Cowessess First Nation said it really well:

"WE ALL INHERITED THIS. NOBODY TODAY CREATED RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS, NOBODY TODAY CREATED THE INDIAN ACT, NOBODY TODAY CREATED THE '60S SCOOP BUT WE ALL INHERITED IT AND WE JUST HAVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT PEOPLE ARE HEALING (AND) PEOPLE ARE HURTING. LET'S DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT." CHIEF DELORME
COWESSESS FIRST NATION



Having a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation is a step in the right direction. On that day, I took my kids in their orange shirts to Wanuskewin Heritage Park to learn and to listen. They learned about the Cree teachings of the tipi, about the ancient history of bison hunting at that sacred site. We hiked out to see the small but growing herd of bison. These are not our cultural or spiritual traditions, and we weren't there to appropriate them. But we were there to learn about and honour our neighbours and their traditions, and to recognize that we are the guests in this land they have stewarded for thousands of years. And we can celebrate with them the return of bison to that site

and other small signs of cultural and spiritual revitalization after many years of repression and injustice. We can celebrate together these glimpses of peace with justice.

And what about here, in our congregation? I am encouraged by the ways our new hymnal, *Voices Together*, is helping us work through some of this, in everything from the extended land acknowledgment we have been using in worship services to the many cultures represented in the songs, reflecting our rainbow church and the ways that we belong to one another precisely in our differences. (And please join us in our Adult ed. series on Zoom if you'd like to talk about that more!). In this way we are taking on what Sarah Augustine calls our "mandate from Jesus to seek justice regardless of how I'm feeling and regardless of the outcome. It's not my job to dismantle the structures [of racism] single-handedly," she says, "just to continue to seek justice."⁷

So as we go from this place, let's continue to seek God's peace – a peace that does not erase our diversity, nor even just tolerate it, but celebrates it as the image of God, the Three-in-One, who knits together diversity into true unity. That is the peace of Christ for which Colossians calls us to be thankful. But it also goes by other names. Richard Wagamese says, "... I find peace, because the truth is that we are one body moving through time together."⁸ Poet Naomi Shihab Nye puts it this way, in her beautiful poem, "Shoulders":⁹

A man crosses the street in rain,
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

⁷ Paraphrased from a Zoom talk with Sarah Augustine and Mark MacDonald hosted by Mennonite Church Canada this past week: <https://youtu.be/SmqxcMNeW0>

⁸ Richard Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations* (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2016).

⁹ Naomi Shihab Nye, "Shoulders" (1994), <https://poets.org/poem/shoulders>

No car must splash him.
No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo
but he's not marked.
Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,
HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing.
He hears the hum of a boy's dream
deep inside him.

We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what he's doing
with one another.

The road will only be wide.
The rain will never stop falling.

AMEN