

Sermon: “Indigenous Wisdom” Rev. Felicia Urbanski (January 28, 2024)

Wisdom, discernment, and upsetting. These are all themes that the two readings we heard today from our scriptures explore. What insights might they offer us at this particular time in history?

Before we get into reflecting on these scriptures, I want to share with you a quote from Richard Wagamese, a prolific author of books and poetry, who is Anishnabe from Northern Ontario. He is one who values silence. Here is what he says:

“I am constantly surrounded by noise: TV, texts, the internet, music, meaningless small talk, my thinking. All of it blocks my consciousness, my ability to hear the ME that exists beneath the cacophony. I am my consciousness, my awareness of my circumstance, my presence in every moment. So I cultivate silence every morning. I sit in it, bask in it, wrap it around myself, and hear and feel me. Then, wherever the day takes me, the people I meet are the beneficiaries of my having taken that time—they get the real me, not someone shaped and altered by the noise around me. Silence is the stuff of life.”

I resonate with this, don't you? In fact, when I worked as a hospital chaplain, I visited a patient who didn't say a word. I didn't either. We just sat in each others' presence, and this gave him the gift of another human being with him, without all the small talk. Sometimes we just need that time of silence.

Here is another quote from Richard Wagamese:

“We feel pushed to achieve, to do, to become, to control, and those actions and compulsions are physical ones; they are not of the spirit. Instead, they are of the mind, because we think we should be taking action to be and to do and to have. We need to be industrious, we say, we need to do the things that are necessary so that we can have the things that will make us happy. The whole of human history has been built on this thinking and it has caused great harm to the planet. That thought pattern asks us to move beyond humility into the realm of thought and thus, that of ego and, ultimately, of fear - the fear of not having enough, of judgment, of failure... We get so busy trying to be a certain way that we tend to forget what we essentially are at any given moment. We are alive. We are part of Creation. We exist on one Sacred Breath. We are Sacred. We are all one energy.

We are all one soul - and the degree to which we forget this is the precise degree of separation that divides us.”

I could go on quoting this very insightful Indigenous man, who had quite a hard life living in several foster homes, then dealing with addictions to substances, then coming out the other side to find that his love of reading and writing gave him a reason to live. He experienced new beginnings, and shared them through his writings. Through Richard Wagamese, I think we also find a deep spirituality which enriches those of us from the non-Indigenous culture and church. I know I do.

As Melville United Church and The United Church of Canada experiences a time of transition and change, we need to look inside of ourselves, similar to what this author has done in his own life. The scripture readings from today’s readings are good ones to take a look at and ask an important question: What insights might they offer us during such a time of new beginnings?

I found some good perspective through the writings of one of our United Church worship resources, written by a woman by the name of Debbie Hubbard, whose thoughts I would like to share and reflect upon today.

I imagine that most of us have experienced new beginnings in our lives, whether it is a new job, a new relationship, a new home, or a new neighbour.

These new beginnings can be filled with joy and excitement. However, they’re frequently accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, and sometimes even fear.

And so it is with the readings this morning.

Our gospel reading from Matthew is about a young man who comes to Jesus seeking the answer to how he might have “a perfect” and “eternal” life. Jesus’ instructions are pretty explicit to him: “Go and sell your possessions, give your money to those who are poor, and then come follow me.” Sounds simple enough! In other words, to build a new life, this young man must give up what is familiar and comforting to him. Not so easy. I suspect that Jesus’s answer “upsets” him. This new path means letting go of the young man’s current identity and his significant wealth. The reading tells us that he walked away from Jesus grieving,

for he had many possessions. It appeared that for him the lure of a new life was not enough compensation for the sacrifices he would have to make.

And then there is Solomon in our reading from 1 Kings. At a very young age, Solomon finds himself in a leadership role as the new king. He's feeling quite anxious about how to follow in the footsteps of his famous father, King David.

One night, he has a dream where he meets up with God and he asks God for wisdom and understanding. Solomon at that time is seeking wisdom because he wants so much to be a good leader and to make the best possible decisions for the people whom he is leading.

Perhaps Solomon and the rich young man might serve as metaphors for us, given this time in our own history and story as The United Church of Canada. We are indeed in somewhat "upsetting" and "interesting" times that involve letting go and opening up to new possibilities.

Here is some background:

In 2022, the 44th General Council of the United Church gathered. At that gathering, the National Indigenous Council proposed that the church identify and remove any structural barriers that would prevent developing and sustaining an autonomous National Indigenous Organization within The United Church of Canada.

Now when there is a requested change in church structure that alters the Basis of Union of *The Manual*, something called a "remit" is required. The 44th General Council authorized the remit to test the will of the church on this requested change. The remit requires a vote by every regional council and each pastoral charge's governing body. So, for Melville, this means that your elected Church Council is asked to vote yes or no on the remit, as it does not have to be a whole congregational vote. Also, if a regional council or a church council does not turn in a vote, it is an automatic "no" vote.

So let's look at how this happens. If the remit is passed, it will, first of all, enable the Indigenous Church to determine its place and organizational structure while remaining within The United Church of Canada. I myself had not even realized that the Indigenous Church couldn't already do this! In other words, passing this remit could open up opportunities for self-determination.

Secondly, if this remit is passed, it will enable the creation of an autonomous National Indigenous Organization within The United Church of Canada.

Let's now see and hear why the members of the Indigenous Church want this to happen. We have another video to show you today, one that has all Indigenous people speaking. It's only 6 minutes long, so let's look and listen together to this now:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhiQZWcfZzw>

I hope seeing this has been helpful.

Indigenous Peoples' rights to their own spiritual identities and to self-determination would be acknowledged by the passing of the remit and actually would be consistent with two other important documents. One is entitled the [Calls to the Church](#) from 2017, which I feel paved the way for this remit to happen. The other is the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2016](#).

So, like the young man in the story from Matthew, all sorts of new possibilities and opportunities are in right front of us, accompanied as well by uncertainty and questions.

Here are some of the questions which might be arising at this time:

- Are we willing to sacrifice what is familiar to us for the possibility of a new story?
- Are we prepared to create space and time for the Indigenous Church to discern their own story?
- Are we willing to dismantle the structure of the church as we know it and await the birthing of something new?
- What will that new structure look like?

Now today, unlike the rich young man, we don't have Jesus telling us what our options are. The path to our new beginning is less obvious and a less certain. Will we accept this invitation to a new life, or will we be like the young man and walk away?

Like Solomon, we need to seek wisdom and understanding. Maybe this is a *kairos* moment for us—a time for us to contemplate and invite renewal not only for the

Indigenous Church but for us as well. Maybe this is the time for us to trust that there will be uncertainty, but collectively we believe we can forge a new future. We proclaim to be a church with a commitment to seek justice. Perhaps this is one more invitation to live into that commitment.

May we be unlike that wealthy young man. May we respond more like Solomon. May we be wise and understanding people of faith with hearts open to the uncertainty of change. Whatever unfolds in the future, we welcome the promise of new possibilities and trust that we will find our way. Amen.