# The Gift in Apology

This sermon, written by the Rev. James Scott, The United Church of Canada's General Council Officer for Residential Schools, is available for use in services marking the 20th anniversary of the United Church's 1986 Apology to First Nations Peoples.

Scripture: Micah 6:1-2, 6-8; Matthew 5:21-26.

## Introduction

It is my pleasure to join with you in worship this morning to reflect with you on the significance of the church's 1986 Apology to Native people. This anniversary gives us the opportunity to take stock of how well we have lived out the words and intentions of the apology over the past two decades.

Now some may be tempted to ask: "Didn't we already deal with this issue? Why do we need to revisit it?" Others in the church say: "The wrongs were done a long time ago. What does it have to do with me here and now"?

Living out the apology is critical, in my view, because the journey we embarked on as a denomination in 1986 is, I believe, profoundly important for our church. It is a journey that reflects the state of our own spiritual health. It is an issue that reveals who we really are, and our understanding of the gospel when we are not the "good guys." It is an opportunity to discover the gospel call of Jesus Christ for our time.

As such, I believe that the apology is a **priceless gift** in disguise.

## The Scripture

The gospel lesson this morning is quite simple and straightforward. In this passage on conflict, Jesus says that "when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother of sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

There are key characteristics of this teaching that I would like us to note. First, we are to be **proactive**. Jesus says, if you remember someone has something against you, go! Take the initiative! Don't wait for a lawyer's letter or until you are dragged into court, although if you are not proactive, that may very well happen. Be proactive in dealing with broken situations when you become aware of them!

Second, Jesus says we are to **reconcile** with our neighbour. The dictionary defines reconcile as to restore to friendship or harmony. Reconciling, particularly in the case of serious harm, is more than merely saying "I'm sorry." There is a relationship to be restored, a friendship to be rebuilt, a living together to be harmonized.

Third, Jesus indicates that we should offer our gift at the altar after the reconciling has been done. There is a connection between being in right relationship with our neighbour and being in right relationship with God. Harmony with God depends on harmony with the neighbour. They are, in fact, **interconnected**.

How do these factors instruct us about the 1986 Apology?

## The 1986 Apology

Twenty years ago this summer at the 31st General Council, the United Church became acutely aware that its Aboriginal brothers and sisters had something against it. Alberta Billy stood up and expressed the need in her heart for an apology from the United Church for what the church had done to Aboriginal people.

Twenty years ago this summer, then-Moderator Bob Smith offered that apology, acknowledging the church's own legacy of attitudes of cultural and spiritual superiority, our own blindness to the values and gifts of native people and their spirituality, our own complicity in the destruction of Aboriginal culture.

Two years later, Edith Memnook responded on behalf of the Native community. In the wisdom of the Elders, the apology was received and acknowledged but it would not be accepted until it was lived out in action. The church was being challenged to "walk the talk," to move from acknowledgement to the work of reconciling. A stone cairn was erected on the site of the apology but left unfinished to symbolize that more work on "reconciling" remained to be done.

## Real Apologies Are Hard to Give

Most of us know how hard real apologies are to give. I say "real" because, as Muriel Duncan points out in her editorial in the February 2006 Observer, saying "sorry" over the smallest thing has become a commonplace event for most of us, so common that apology is in danger of losing all meaning.

But we have a much more difficult time with "real" apologies-those that come from the heart and stretch our capacity to "face the music".

Think of your own life, of a time when you needed to reconcile with someone due to something harmful you did. Do you remember how hard it was? To look someone in the eyes and take full responsibility for the harm we have done. To know that if our apology is to be taken seriously, if we are to rebuild trust, restore relationship, that we need to prove that we mean it.

Real apologies that are sincere and authentic are difficult to give because they accept responsibility and carry a commitment not to continue to harm. So it was an important thing that our church did 20 years ago, to admit that, "We did not hear you... We imposed our civilization... We tried to make you be like us... We helped destroy the vision that made you what you were."

That's tough to face and tough to admit. In the 1986 Apology, our church went to those who had something against us and admitted our wrong. It was a good start, but as the Elders knew, an apology is only the beginning. It is not reconciliation. The hard work of reconciling lies in the living out of the apology.

## Real Apologies Have to Be Lived Out

Have we been faithful to that apology over the past two decades? Have we taken steps forward on that journey of reconciliation?

I believe that our church has made efforts to give substance to its words. Aboriginal people within the church acknowledged this last summer at the Aboriginal Consultation when they cemented more stones into the cairn to signify that progress has been made.

With each step in our attempt to "walk the talk," however, we see more clearly what will be required to "reconcile." We are only now coming to understand the depth of the harm done, the length of the healing road before us, and how profound a change is required of us. For instance:

* *We have made some institutional changes*. We have created an Aboriginal Conference, Native theological schools, and staff positions within the church to support Native ministries. Yet we see that there needs to be much more structural change, much more power sharing, for the Aboriginal voice to become an equal partner in this denomination.
* *We have examined our true history*. Listening to the voices of survivors of the residential schools, we are learning how deeply this public policy tool of assimilation damaged individuals, families, and communities. We have produced educational resources so that congregations can learn about the impact of colonialism and the legacy of residential schools. We sent a special mailing to congregations with study resources on the 20th anniversary. Yet we know how few congregations use these materials, how few see these issues as having any relevance for them.
* *We have built relationships*. We have developed good working relationships with national Aboriginal organizations and added our voice to theirs in calling for just solutions to the many outstanding Aboriginal justice issues. Yet, we must also admit that few United Church congregations know their Aboriginal neighbours, and fewer still develop ongoing or twinning relationships with them.
* *We have broadened our sense of the spiritual*. We are learning about Native spirituality and sacred ceremony. They are finding a place in our denomination. Yet we know that in some Aboriginal congregations, the teaching of Christian practice and the denigration of Aboriginal spirituality has been so thorough that those who try to reintroduce Native spirituality into congregational worship are shunned and ostracized by their own people.
* *We have sought to settle abuse claims quickly and fairly*. We have pushed for non-adversarial ways of settling claims. We have been a party to the recent negotiation of a comprehensive Settlement Agreement for all survivors. We send a representative to all settlement hearings to offer words of apology and respect. Yet we know that money alone will not heal emotional and psychological damage, nor by itself will it bring about reconciliation.

We have accomplished much in 20 years. But with each step, we can see more clearly the breadth and depth and width of the task that remains before us.

## Real Apologies Can Be Gifts

So, if "real" apologies are difficult to give, and even harder to live out, how can I call the 1986 Apology a gift?

**It is a gift because it is changing the way we see ourselves.**

Living out the apology is not just about healing for Aboriginal peoples. It involves our own healing as well. Lila Watson, an Australian Aborigine once said: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you recognize that your liberation and mine are bound together, we can walk together."

If I could use an analogy to Alcoholics Anonymous, the apology challenges our church to move out of denial and begin its **journey of recovery**. Moving out of denial requires that we face new realities about ourselves. It requires honest self-reflection, humility, and a willingness to change. What are we in recovery from?

As a United Church member, I am challenged to face my own racism. My parents did not raise me with overtly negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people. But, like many of you, I was raised in a church and in a society that reflected the colonial attitudes of cultural and spiritual superiority that were common to the day, and remain common for many people today. As a dominant culture, those attitudes permeated our world so deeply that we didn't even recognize them as racist. They give rise to the kind of statement made to the media recently by a resident of Caledonia who said of the Native protesters: "They say they are not Canadian. If they are *not* Canadian then they are terrorists. If they are Canadian then they are criminals because they are taking land that isn't theirs."

Our racism is often more subtle than that and thus harder to recognize and own. The apology has helped strip away our individual and collective presumptions of the "rightness" of *our* culture, *our* values, *our* religion, from a dominant and exclusive theology that sees only one path to God, only one form of worship, only one sacred writing, only one way of imaging the Great Spirit, so that we begin to see the image of God in others. By recognizing our blindness, we can begin to recover our sight, we begin to heal!

This is not a guilt trip. This is recovery! And it is a gift!

**The Apology is a gift because it is changing the way we see others.**

When we open ourselves in apology, we see not only ourselves more clearly but also the other. The other, who has so often been shrouded in stereotype, diminished by assumptions, rendered invisible by distance and estrangement, perhaps even fear. Real apology offers us the opportunity to leave the prison of our own preconceived ideas and become enriched by encounter with those whose ways and wisdom are different from our own.

The 1986 Apology names a different vision of Aboriginal people. "Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured."

Over 20 years, we have begun to appreciate the gifts of our Native brothers and sisters, their culture and spirituality. They bring gifts of commitment to relationship, to family, and to community. We are beginning to appreciate the groundedness of the smudge, the sacred bundle, and the four directions. We have begun to value the life lessons of the sacred teachings, of the Aboriginal connection to the land and respect for the environment, and for the oneness and interdependence of all creation. We have discovered that the circle is often better than the square or the pyramid or the straight line. And we may yet learn the value of multigenerational thinking.

This is healing! This is recovery! And it is a gift!

**Lastly, the Apology Is a Gift Because It Occasions Grace**

Taking responsibility is something we are tempted to avoid because we do not want to look bad or because we do not want to face consequences or change. Yet ironically, those who do take responsibility for the harm they have done often find that they engender respect rather than scorn from those they have hurt, the very ones whom they were afraid to face.

This has so often been our experience with First Nations people. Time after time, when church representatives acknowledge the role of the church in the residential school system, and show true remorse and a commitment to walk differently, we are encountered by acts of grace and generosity. Yes, there is often anger, there is always pain and sorrow, but the over-riding experience is one of openness and grace.

Healing does occur, and as we gradually come into right relations with one another, we come into right relations with God. Apology is not the end of the encounter between two peoples but the beginning of a transformed way of being together. And it is in the transformation of our relationship with those we have hurt, that we become whole. Reconciliation is the gift we bring to the altar, if you like.

## Conclusion

Full reconciliation may not happen in my lifetime or in yours. But our faithfulness to walk this journey and the faithfulness of our children will determine whether the cairn is ever finished-and more importantly it will determine whether we are able to arrive at the vision held out by Chief Bobby Joseph who said, "We need to reach a place where we can reconcile, and at the end of the day, your children and mine can walk forward together, as equals. There are a lot of people in Aboriginal communities who are still very angry. But I have hope that little by little, heart by heart, we will begin to heal and learn to walk forward together."

May it be so. Thanks be to God. **Amen**.