

St James United Church

Message for September 27, 2026

Truth and Reconciliation Sunday



“Beyond Teeth Set On Edge” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; and Matthew 21:23-32

“The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.” Sometimes a verse in the Bible is too on the money. The proverb quoted in Ezekiel is just that, especially on this Orange Shirt Sunday as we reflect not just on the experiences of survivors of Indian Residential Schools but how their trauma impacts their children and grandchildren.

In this many of us consider the physical and sexual abuse that took place in the schools. There were many children who experienced that, and that is heartbreaking. But let's consider the school system more broadly, the impacts on every child, even those who spoke at the TRC hearings of so-called good experiences. They too were taken from their communities, not able to go home to their parents for months, even years, some away from home as young as four. As we heard in *When We Were Alone*, they were separated from opposite gender siblings. Clothes, a point of connection with home, like the orange shirt that gives the name to this day, were taken, replaced with uniforms, names changed too, even referred to by identity numbers. They were forbidden to speak their language, taught to look down on their culture, spiritual beliefs too. They lived in cramped, drafty quarters, often not given enough food, because the government underfunded the schools, working more hours than spent in class, again due to government underfunding. As a result, children got sick, some died, many not returned home. No wonder students risked their lives to run away. Wouldn't you?

Consider too the emotional, cultural, spiritual impact of those practices. Being without contact with siblings meant lost connection to family and community, to memory, a sense of belonging. Being sent away so young meant lost emotional security, loss of adult role models, not just of culture, the reason for the practice, but of parenting and so of how to love and care for future children. Loss of language meant a lost sense of place, a lost worldview. The feeling of being out of place was amplified on return to home. Many felt disconnected from their family's lifeways, often having internalized anti-Indigenous prejudice, self-hatred made worse when upon going to towns to look for work as “trained” to do they were subject to more of the same. Each practice left a soul wound, and no one experienced just one. Would you cope with all these traumas added together...? As you can imagine, all of this had a traumatic impact not just on individuals but passed down from one generation to the next. As I said, the proverb about children's teeth being set on edge reads uncomfortably true.

It hurts my heart thinking how anyone could justify this system. Government officials claimed they needed to fill the territory between Manitoba and BC with settlers to keep out the US. But beneath such rhetoric was racism, shaping assumptions about land and how it should be used. Indigenous nations were seen as obstacles, not possible partners. It was sinful. And I hate to say it but our church leaders signing up to run the schools feels more culpable to me, their motives framed around a desire to share the gospel. Shouldn't they have applied biblical teaching to this?

Take Ezekiel. In the section our reading omits, the prophet names ways to live God's teaching. Like caring for the poor, not robbing or defrauding others, showing respect for women, not falling into idolatry. How is giving meager food portions caring for the poor? How respectful of women is accepting children who are barely weaned? How are schools focused on assimilation not a way to rob land and defraud signatories of treaties? What deity is worshipped if we don't follow the core of the Bible by treating others as we wish to be treated? And that's applying just one chapter in one book. What of Jesus and his call to love enemies let alone neighbours, to bless children, to care for the least as if they're him? How does doing such harm square with that?

It doesn't, but we also need to be cautious because our ancestors in faith were like any of us, not worse, not more influenced by attitudes around them. We have prejudices that our descendants will shake their heads at too. Church leaders bought into the rhetoric of their age. And they also fell into another trap, convinced of their authority and trusting their interpretation of the gospel as they sought to "convert" the children under their care. In this they were like the religious leaders who questioned Jesus as they asked under whose authority he cleansed the Temple and preached as he did. Pushing back on their believed "rightness," Jesus told the story of the two sons, one who broke his promise and the other who had a change of heart. He wanted them to see as God saw and consider actions not just words. If church leaders had done as much, viewed Indigenous peoples with open eyes and hearts, perhaps they might have pushed back on government plans, even advocated for local schools, not focused on assimilating children but looked at their parents and grandparents and saw gospel lived in people cared for, women respected, land and other "property" shared, not a false god but the maker of heaven and earth worshipped. What if they'd talked about Jesus with reference to culture rather than against it, respected too if people chose not to convert? Alas they didn't and there are still children with teeth set on edge because of their parents' experiences.

Thankfully, that is not the end of the story. As we hear in Ezekiel, the proverb about sour grapes isn't what God wants. Everyone is responsible for their actions, capable too of a change of heart. Those of us who are settlers risk becoming paralyzed with guilt, our teeth set on edge albeit in a different way. We can also choose a different relationship with the First peoples of this land as we listen and learn about the lifeways that helped people live sustainably here, listen also to what's needed to repair the harm done, honour the treaties, affirm the reclamation of culture, including spiritual beliefs, see Indigenous peoples not as obstacles but partners. As we do, we help open space for traumas to be healed and so not to be passed on. This is our call not just as settlers but also as followers of Jesus. It's sharing gospel as he would, with respect and care. Then children's teeth will no longer be on edge. Instead, they'll be loved. Amen.