

September 29, 2024 – Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“The Orange Shirt” by Pastor Julio Romero

Gospel: Mark 9:38-50

In today’s Gospel the Lord Jesus said to his disciples “⁴¹*For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward*”.

I was intrigued by these words from our Lord Jesus. They made me ponder on the significance of a glass of water. I was wondering, what is behind the words of Jesus? Why did something so simple deserves a reward? And what reward did the Lord Jesus have in mind when He said that?

The message I get is that a simple ordinary act, a simple gesture of giving a glass of water to a thirsty person, doesn’t go unnoticed by God, and so it is with our wrong actions too. They don’t go unnoticed by God either.

What this tells me is that our individual lives must count for something, they cannot be wasted. This gift of life that God has given us must bear fruit, good fruit, because nothing, absolutely nothing, goes unnoticed by God, even the things that we want to hide from God or do in secret. God sees it.

Our Lord Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 6, reminds us that when we pray, when we fast, when we give alms or do any act of charity, we don’t have tell others, because our Heavenly Father knows what we do, and that is all that matters.

For God nothing goes unnoticed. Unfortunately, it is not the same for us. How many injustices in the world go unnoticed by us and by the entire world. Today we stand in solidarity with the indigenous people in Canada, we stand in solidarity and in prayer for the sins and injustices committed to our brothers and sisters in the name of God.

Our Bishop Michael, once said that the Lutheran Church to which we belong did not participate in the administration of the Residential Schools in Canada but that doesn’t exclude us or exempt us from the injustice done to our First Nation Peoples, because the injustice done was committed using the Christian symbols of the Cross, the Bible, the Bread and the Wine.

We know now that the psychological, physical, spiritual abuse and the emotional impact of family separation that many aboriginal children were subjected to in those schools went unnoticed for years and years, unnoticed by those in power and the rest of society.

The very people who were called to produce good fruit, to make their lives count for something noble and kind, turned a blind eye on those children.

The church failed to give the glass of hope, the glass of love, the glass of genuine Christian care and of God's promises to those children; the church failed to be what the Lord Jesus calls us to be. But today, we stand in solidarity with them, this is why we are wearing this orange shirt.

Why Orange? This is the story behind the orange shirt:

Phyllis Jack Webstad from the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation went to St. Joseph Mission Residential School. On her first day of school, Phyllis wore an orange shirt that her grandmother had given her. It was immediately taken away, and that marked the beginning of Phyllis's long separation from her family and community, a separation caused by actions of the church and federal government.

The following is Phyllis' story in her own words:

"I went to the Mission for one school year in 1973/1974. I had just turned 6 years old. I lived with my grandmother on the Dog Creek reserve. We never had very much money, but somehow my granny managed to buy me a new outfit to go to the Mission school. I remember going to Robinson's store and picking out a shiny orange shirt. It had string laced up in front and was so bright and exciting – just like I felt to be going to school!

When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! I never wore it again. I didn't understand why they wouldn't give it back to me, it was mine! The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying and no one cared.

I was 13 years old and in grade 8 when my son Jeremy was born. Because my grandmother and mother both attended residential school for 10 years each, I never knew what a parent was supposed to be like. With the help of my aunt, Agness Jack, I was able to raise my son and have him know me as his mother.

I went to a treatment centre for healing when I was 27 and have been on this healing journey since then. I finally get it, that the feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years. Even now, when I know nothing could be further than the truth, I still sometimes feel that I don't matter. Even with all the work I've done!

I am honored to be able to tell my story so that others may benefit and understand, and maybe other survivors will feel comfortable enough to share their stories”

On the webpage of the United Church in Canada I found this information, information I want to share with you this morning, it says:

“On September 30, people all across Canada will wear orange shirts to remember and honour Indigenous children who were taken from their communities and families to residential institutions.

Indigenous communities across the country continue to share the truth they have always known: that many of the children who never returned home remain on the grounds of those institutions in unmarked burial sites. These communities are now seeking to honour the missing children.

On Orange Shirt Day we also observe the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. For non-Indigenous Christians in particular, this is a time to reflect on their role in colonialism and the ongoing responsibility to make reparations”

Yes, this is a time for reflection, a reflection in which we acknowledge that the sins committed against our indigenous brothers and sisters no longer go unnoticed, and that the efforts to bring healing, peace, truth, reparation and reconciliation will be blessed by the Spirit of the Creator, who tells us that the gift of a glass of water is a symbol of the goodness found in each of us. Let's cultivate that goodness planted in our hearts by our Creator since the beginning and let's bless others with it. *Amen.*