

Who Am I? WHO ARE YOU?

CBWOQ continues its response to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This is the third in a series of articles on Indigenous Peoples, the issues they face, and our collective, biblical response.

THERE'S ONLY ONE PHOTOGRAPH I've seen of my Navajo father when he was young. It's a black and white faded photo where he sits in a high chair next to an old dresser and bunk beds. He's smiling and his cheeks fill his face with the brightness of his smile. The space looks unfamiliar to me because it's somewhere different than my grandparents' house on the reservation, but I knew it was out there somewhere.

The Navajo (Diné) are Indigenous people of the southwest region of the North American continent. The Navajo Nation sits between the four sacred mountains in what is known in the United States as the states of Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico. Like all Indigenous peoples, the Diné have a way of life, a knowledge system and a history that precedes European contact.

Christianity and Indigenous peoples have a dark and complicated history, yet I was raised as both Navajo and Christian—it is my worldview. In college, I took a course titled American Indian Images in Film. It was the first Native Studies course I'd taken, mostly because the idea of taking a Native Studies course seemed silly to me due to the fact that the whole Native Studies department, except for one professor, were white.

One class period, we watched *Unseen Tears*, a film about the residential boarding schools in Haudenosaunee territory. I listened as the gruesome

◀ *Heart-shaped opening in Antelope Canyon in the Grand Canyon, heart of the Navajo Nation territory.*

words came from the mouths of Native children: “One little, two little, three little Indians, four little, five little, six little Indians . . .” This song is traditionally about slaughtering Native people and keeping count through a song. In the movie, the children, who couldn’t have been older than five or six, sang along as demanded by their teachers.

A heaviness settled in my chest. Those children looked exactly like my dad in that old photograph. Except they were not smiling. They had been taken away from their homes, their families, and their ways of life . . . in the name of Christianity. Eyes watering, a thought kept repeating in my head: “This is my dad. They are my dad. Those children are my dad.” My family is only one generation removed from the boarding school era, and in that moment, I felt the weight of that legacy.

Exploring the complexity of being an adult Navajo Christian—having an adult Indigenous identity as well as being a Christian—is nothing short of challenging, contradictory, and amidst the splits and divisions in academic thought, traumatizing.

And so I often took this contradiction to God in prayer asking, “God, why? I refuse to be like the Christians who colonized my Native family and relatives . . . I know you’re good. But, who am I in this contradiction? Who are you?”

One evening, the Lord spoke to me through the story of the Samaritan woman.

The Samaritan woman belonged to a place-based tribal group who had been cast aside and degraded (its women in particular). Her ethnic group’s religious beliefs both contradicted and merged with Jewish tradition.

The longest recorded conversation with anyone in the New Testament is Jesus’ with this woman who loves God but who juggles paralyzing contradictions about theology, the coming of Christ, and the racial/ethnic influences of her identity.

Her conflict is a conflict of place (of indigeneity and colonization) brought about by her tribal ancestry. She speaks first of the mountain where her ancestors worship and to the greatness of Jacob, their people’s father. Next, she exclaims that her

people worship on that mountain yet Jews claim that worship must be in Jerusalem.

When she raises these questions, Jesus does not tell her that her ancestors were wrong, but gently reminds her that true worshippers will worship the Father in the spirit and truth. He lovingly tells her that truth and living water will never fail and that they come to her . . . in the relationship with the Christ who stands before her.

This Samaritan woman, perhaps as devalued as Indigenous women in contemporary life, speaks to some of the most tenuous political/spatial contradictions of her time. And though Jesus does not offer her a concrete protocol for decolonization, she finds and ministers living water to her people; a living water which has come through her relationship with a living God *in her own land*.

Jesus wanted to have a conversation with someone He loved.

I had experienced Jesus as a healer, not as a converter or priest; not as a nun or a boarding school affiliate. I had experienced Jesus as One who loves relationships. Yet, as a Navajo, I knew that for so long Indigenous peoples had been told that they were wrong, Christianity was right. And I knew that had been used as a justification to steal the land that sustains Indigenous identity.

In this story though, I realized that Jesus had this intentional conversation with the Samaritan woman to show that He (the living God) had entered her land . . . not to take it, nor to tell her that her people were wrong . . . but to have a conversation and a relationship with someone He loved.

I have always longed for a clear-cut answer to the contradiction in me—Navajo and Christian—but instead, in this story, the Lord said to me, “I love Native people.”

I don’t understand when Jesus draws hard lines and when He doesn’t—when He loves instead. I see

myself as that Samaritan woman, as someone whose people had endured colonization and who, because of that history, was and is committed to justice that comes from knowing the Creator. But perhaps I (and other Christians too) have drawn hard lines in all the wrong places, using them to name what/who is right or wrong, without focusing on what it means to love, and love through *relationship*.

All wrongs do not fade away without being surfaced. In reconciliation there is pain that emerges alongside the call for justice. For Indigenous communities, justice has not been met and scarcely even named. As Christians, it is our job to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery, teach about the legacy of colonization and residential schools in seminaries, and to examine and build new theologies which do not facilitate or reflect colonization.

This change is uncomfortable because the old ways must go. We must *listen* and *learn* from Indigenous peoples because an Indigenous worldview is about relationships. We must partner with them to heal from colonization, revive Indigenous languages, fight for tribal sovereignty, honour creation, and relate to one another in a good way because Jesus *loves everything* about Indigenous peoples. ■

by Kelsey Dayle John

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Immeasurably More | A Day of Prayer

praying the issues with sisters

Saturday, November 5, 2016

Mississauga Chinese Baptist Church, Mississauga

Theme speaker: Rev. Leanne Friesen

8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Join women of all ages to pray, worship and learn at this one-day CBWOQ conference.

Ask God to do immeasurably more than you can ask, while connecting deeply and intentionally with Him and with your sisters.

Pray for local and global women's issues during worship, at creative prayer stations and in break-out workshops.

Registration costs and full details: Watch your inbox or mail box for your summer E-LINK. In July, visit baptistwomen.com/events. And visit our Facebook group page.

We encourage you to bring a donation towards NABWU's World Day of Prayer 2016 projects.

