

Transcript

Ms. Melanie Delva

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<http://ww2.anglican.ca/kat/video/christ-sightings-of-a-recovering-racist/>

Title: Christ-sightings of a recovering racist

Summary:

Archivist Melanie Delva saw her views on Indigenous people change while collecting records for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Today, she says, the church cannot claim to have pursued reconciliation unless it also addresses current issues of Indigenous justice and self-determination.

Hi, my name is Melanie and I'm a recovering racist. Thank you, thank you. Hi. That's a pretty vulnerable thing to say, but it needs to be said. First of all, because it's true, and second of all, because I know that I'm not alone in the Church. I grew up in rural Manitoba. As you can see, I am white. I am not just a little bit white; I am very white. In fact, I am so white that my brothers tease me that I glow in the dark.

Growing up in my family, I was taught from a young age lessons about indigenous people. The lessons that I was taught was that at best, indigenous people are lazy, they're drunk most of the time, they're unintelligent, and they are not worthy of our time and attention. At worst, their lives are disposable.

I didn't like growing up that way but I learned my lessons well. When I went off to university and got a bit more life experience, I knew that I didn't want to think this way, but I didn't really know how else to think. I didn't know any indigenous people. I changed my attitude, or attempted to. What happened was that my attitude changed from kind of a really overt racism to something that I now see as much more dangerous. I think it's much more dangerous because it's not immediately identifiable as racism. It's called pity.

Instead, I began to think about these indigenous people with their water that needs to be boiled, and they don't have their languages, they don't have their culture. Isn't that horrible? But if we privileged, intelligent, compassionate Christian people could just lend them a helping hand, maybe we could help them out of whatever they're mired in.

In 2005 I was hired to be the archivist of the Dioceses of New Westminster and the Provincial Synod of B.C. and Yukon. Three months after I was hired, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement was signed. Out of that was created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. My first job as

archivist was to gather all of the records about residential schools in our holdings and prepare them for handover to the TRC.

Now, I was not excited about this work. I was a new archivist, and as new graduates always are, I was really excited about these ideas that I had, these programs that I wanted to implement. Instead, I had to do this TRC thing. But, I thought, as an intelligent, well educated, compassionate Christian, wouldn't it be wonderful if I did this work and helped to get indigenous people out of the mire. They could move on and we could all move forward together.

Ugh, I still feel yucky when I say it. Sorry. Oh man. That was all decimated when I read a file of correspondence. I reviewed all of the files in our archives before they were handed over to the TRC. This particular file of correspondence was between the principal of St. George's Indian Residential School in Lytton, the governmental Indian agent who was in charge of that area, and the family of a boy who died. I'm going to call him Michael.

Michael contracted influenza in the school during one of the many outbreaks. When it became clear that he was going to die, his parents wrote to the Indian agent and the principal begging that he be sent home so that he could die at home. They denied this request. Michael died in the school and his body was buried on the school ground. The family wrote to the Indian agent and the principal again asking that his body be exhumed and sent back to his community for a traditional burial. The file of correspondence shows the principal and the Indian agent going back and forth about whether or not they were going to do this and who was going to cover the \$21 cost to exhume the body.

In the end, they wrote to the family and told them that if they wanted the body of their eight year old son, they could pay the exhumation and transport costs. I was devastated. I closed the file. I put it back in the box. I vomited in my garbage can and then I pulled out the next file, file after file, box after box, and I was devastated. I was devastated by what my country that I'd always been so proud of had done. I was devastated by what our church had participated in. More than both of those, I was devastated by the realization that I as a human being had the same capacity to see other human beings as less.

Now, one of the themes for tonight was Choosing Christ. I'd like to say that my story through racism has a happy ending because I chose Christ, and because I chose Christ it all turned out fantastic. That would not be the truth. Because the truth of the matter is that Christ showed up despite me. Lay theologian William Stringfellow has written a lot about what he calls the expectancy of encounter. His argument is that so much of what goes wrong in our institutional church, in our relationships, the violence, the dissension, is about our failure to expect an encounter with Christ in every person, in every interaction, in the very land on which we stand.

I didn't expect Christ to show up the way Christ showed up. Christ showed up in the survivors of the residential school. The survivors entrusted me with their stories, racist me. They entrusted me with their stories. They explained to me with a patience I did not deserve how their abuse and their attempted extermination had affected them personally, had affected their families and their communities. They were so patient with me when I said and did all kinds of weird things that were born

out of my intense shame and guilt. They literally took me in their arms when I broke, devastated by what I was seeing. They now welcome me into their communities and they call me daughter. How else could Christ show up?

In May I was in Ottawa for the closing events of the TRC. It was an intense experience. It was an inspiring and it was an incredibly moving experience. I came away incredibly inspired and I came away worried. I am worried that our church will stop here. I'm worried that we will congratulate ourselves on this great work that we have done in the TRC and we will go back to doing what we have always done. I have come to believe, and believe very strongly, that we as a church cannot claim that we have pursued reconciliation with indigenous people while separating ourselves from current issues of indigenous justice and self-determination.

I want to see an expectancy of encounter. We've been given a roadmap in the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, and in the 94 calls to action that we got from the commission. My dream is that every diocese, every parish, maybe even every Anglican would adopt one of the calls to action, wrestle with it, look at it, and then act on it. Because it's a call to action, not just a recommendation.

I believe that if we as a church stop here, we are the same as the hands that hold up a sponge of vinegar to a man dying on the cross and tell him it's thirst-quenching. We have an opportunity. We have an opportunity to do better not because indigenous people need us to, but because we need to, because we are broken and we are ill, and it's only in reconciliation that the body is made whole.

We say that we are an Easter people and that Christ's death on the cross, that symbol of anger and hatred and everything that was wrong, we say that that is just the beginning of something beautiful. I believe that to be the same about where we are at this time in the history of our country and our church. That the end of this is just the beginning. Whether we choose Christ or not, Christ is going to show up. The end, my friends, is just the beginning. Thank you.