

***DISCLAIMER: This message refers to sensitive subject matter, including suicide***

**[VIDEO: Becoming Good Relatives team sharing how they became aware of the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in Canada]**

## **Becoming Good Relatives – Hope Lives Week 4**

*November 24, 2024*

Nate Dirks

When I was in university, two decades ago, I was studying in Toronto and I was invited by some of the other students who I played hockey with to spend a week up in Attawapiskat in northern Ontario to help run a hockey clinic. Attawapiskat is a reserve, an Indigenous community of 1,500 Mushkegowuk people. **[IMAGE ON SCREEN - Attawapiskat]** It's WAY up north, just west of James Bay (you know, that body of water that's at the bottom of Hudson's Bay). Just to get there we drove twenty-four hours to Moose Factory, then our van was loaded onto a train which we took overnight to Moosonee. You can't actually DRIVE into Attawapiskat in the summer, but it was January and so from Moosonee we drove on a long and winding river that was frozen 4 FEET THICK for a couple hundred kilometers. We slept in the community centre at night, and ran the coaching clinics on the rink with local teenagers BEFORE school and then again AFTER school each day. It was like minus-30 all week, the roads between the houses were just icy snow, snowmobiles were the main form of transportation, and there were packs of somewhat feral huskies roaming EVERYWHERE.

These teenagers were FANTASTIC at hockey, they had so much fun on the ice and played with such a JOY (despite the fact that it was the absolute COLDEST rink I've ever been in, just a metal box without insulation in those crazy temperatures), and they welcomed us in during that week with OPENNESS and KINDNESS.

Now, the residents of Attawapiskat face challenges that we probably don't equate with FELLOW RESIDENTS of our province. Food is expensive for US these days, but the cost of food in Attawapiskat has ALWAYS been ASTRONOMICAL: before prices went up these past few years, when milk in Niagara cost

\$5, in Attawapiskat it cost \$11. \$10 ground beef here was \$20 there. And a case of water bottles that we could buy for \$3? \$37 in their community!

Now, the water bottles in particular are significant, because Attawapiskat, like MANY reserves, has problems with accessing clean water. A few years ago they were forced to declare a state of emergency because of the quality of their water. Not like, 'the water tastes funny', or even 'it looks a bit brown coming out of the taps'. In fact, it wasn't even *SIMPLY* a problem with being DRINKABLE. Their water hadn't actually been drinkable for YEARS. It had gotten SO bad that people were being advised that they shouldn't *BATHE* in it for more than THREE minutes, and to not bathe in hot water AT ALL because it would open their pores and the chemicals would harm them more easily. And either way, the water emitted harmful chemical VAPOURS into the air, making the AIR in people's houses toxic as WELL.

We HEARD about various challenges facing the community while we were up there for the hockey clinic. We all expressed CONCERN and SADNESS, offered our SYMPATHIES...and played hockey as our contribution...and went home and showed our pictures of our adventure.

For me, I'm ashamed to say, I generally forgot about Attawapiskat...Until about ten years later. I was living overseas, but little Attawapiskat was in the news. And it wasn't because of the impossible situation with their water. It was because of a crisis of suicides and suicide attempts by young community members. About 100 attempts over the course of a few months in this small community. You might remember that being in the news. I remember having a moment after reading about this where I had a mental image like I was looking at the globe on Google Maps and it zoomed around from where I was at the time to show Canada. **[IMAGE ON SCREEN – Canada]** It was like I'd never seen it before. And I pictured the vastness of the country, and tiny Attawapiskat with the faces of the incredible boys that I'd gotten to know for a few short days before carrying on with my life. And I couldn't *fathom* what they were facing, and the despair that they were clearly feeling, and which I'd begun to understand was common among a disproportionate number of Indigenous youth. And as I observed my

country as if for the first time, I thought, I haven't actually been SEEING. I haven't been seeing what the Indigenous Peoples, and specific Indigenous people, are experiencing right in the country that I've assumed I fully understood. And I haven't recognized MY role, my history, in that experience.

Now, before we continue, let's take a time out for a moment: we have been sharing stories and histories in this series, as we've been looking at God's vision for the healing of the nations as Tom shared with us in the first week. Two weeks ago, Laurie and Adrian shared with us about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the ways that we haven't lived into God's vision. The exposing of the tragedy of the residential school system that the Church in Canada ran in the name of Jesus, and the devastating truths of what was done to Indigenous families and children for generations. Last week, Jeff led us into a discussion about the Doctrine of Discovery, the legal and theological framework of dehumanizing Indigenous Peoples for the EXPRESS purpose of taking their land. That allowed and encouraged systems like the residential schools to exist and flourish as a Christian MISSION. A framework that has practical implications to this day.

As we're slowly learning, the harms and the brokenness in this history has unfolded over a LONG time. And there's a LOT there, and it can feel overwhelming. But earlier this month, Adrian Jacobs said that "indigenous people are not trying to make somebody feel guilty" even as he then said, with a bit of a wry smile, that western Christians often feel guilty enough as it is. Instead, he said, the point of knowing all of this is "to be honest about things and to call people into a responsible healing relationship." So, I hope that you've been hearing the stories and teachings in this series, NOT as an attempt to inspire feelings of SHAME. Rather, as an invitation to the freedom, as Jesus calls it, of truth. That's something that's worth saying at the end, but it's also worth saying right now. If you're hearing all of this and it's only inspiring shame, please RELEASE that, because Jesus actually offers release of shame, not a compounding of it. Instead hear the invitation to a FREEDOM that you may not have even known that you were invited to experience on the other side of RESPONDING to these truths. End of timeout.

One of the most significant moments in the history of *CANADA* is actually the creation of the Treaty of *NIAGARA*. This agreement was at the start of the formal relationship between the British and the First Nations of Canada, and it laid out the foundation-building principles of how these nations (the nation of the European settlers, and the different First Nations, Indigenous communities) would behave towards each other. **[IMAGE ON SCREEN – Treaty of Niagara]** The formation of this treaty happened in 1764, over one-hundred years before Canada even existed, right at the lands at the mouth of the Niagara River where it spills into Lake Ontario. It took place over the course of a month, and there were over 2,000 delegates from twenty-four different First Nations that joined the British there. Together, assurances were made that the British would respect Indigenous sovereignty and territory. No settlements would be made without permission from Indigenous communities. There were literal **BOATLOADS** of gifts, **AND 84 wampum belts** were exchanged **[IMAGE ON SCREEN – wampum belts]**, as traditional signs of peace and respect and agreement, of spirituality and shared values, **PAINSTAKINGLY** created out of 10,000 tiny beads to reflect the importance of these agreements. The foundation of all of these negotiations and the Treaty that emerged lay in three basic **PRINCIPLES** that were agreed upon between everyone, Indigenous and settler: **PEACE, FRIENDSHIP, and RESPECT**. These promises happened **RIGHT** here, a **FEW** kilometers away.

In the **STORY** which we read earlier in the service, Canada's prime minister is a young woman who, through a trusted secretary, finds this forgotten agreement, the Treaty of Niagara. Now, you may have recognized this as a retelling of a story from the Old Testament book of 2 Kings, in which Judah's young king, Josiah, finds a dusty old book in the midst of renovating the neglected temple. He reads it, and is overwhelmed by a devastating truth: God had partnered with his people, had clearly laid out a way of living in a **GOOD** way, and they had made promises, a covenant together. But, as Josiah now had the sickening realization, he and his people had been neglecting this covenant, this way of being and behaving towards others, this relationship with God, for **GENERATIONS!**

And it tells us that Josiah is overcome, and he TEARS HIS ROBES. That's an act of emotional *grief*! But he was also expressing that grief in the *symbolism* of his culture: tearing one's robes was a *visible* image of the *invisible* damage to one's HEART that a person had suddenly experienced or become aware of. And it's also an exposing of nakedness. It showed that I've BEEN exposed, by loss or grief or shame, and I can't hide from what's real, whatever the embarrassment I feel. Josiah tears his robes because he now KNOWS a hard truth and he's NOT going to hide from it.

In the story of the young prime minister, after some research and digging around in the archives, the Treaty of Niagara is rediscovered. It had been hidden, and it's dusty. And it has been neglected, and forgotten, just as, in REALITY, its promises HAVE been neglected, broken, and forgotten. The parable speaks to the reality that we've been learning about through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery, and beyond: that is, that the PROMISES of peace, friendship and respect in the Treaty of Niagara, and in the way of Jesus, have largely not been honoured.

As we hear the stories of broken treaties, harmful systems, dehumanizing beliefs, and if we feel the classic deflection bubbling to the surface ("that wasn't ME"), then even beyond the similarly classic response ("yeah, but have you benefitted from any of that?"), please hear Jesus saying: "You're answering a question that I haven't asked. I didn't ask if you DID the most harmful acts, my question is, will YOU NOW see and love YOUR NEIGHBOUR?"

The young prime minister, and Josiah, each received information that they chose to see as UNIGNORABLE. And their two pieces of unignorable information combine to BOTH be true for us today as well: there are some remarkable, ground-breaking promises of peace, friendship, and respect that were made RIGHT HERE in Niagara between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Peoples. And these were NOT upheld, and the prime minister wept. And God has made a covenant with God's people to partner with God to live in God's way of LIFE. And THIS has been neglected, and Josiah tore his robes...

BUT...it doesn't END with weeping and tearing robes. They then share it with their COMMUNITY. And once it's shared with the community, as it says in 2 Kings, "**...then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant" (2 Kings 23:3)**. It's a communal act of holding each other accountable to take these steps together. To now, together, pick up the Treaty, the wampum belts that have been neglected.

Because, by the way, as a side note, when we've found something that's TRUE, we CAN'T keep it to ourselves! We need to SHARE it. That's what it means to be followers of Jesus, to be DISCIPLES of the one who is the WAY, the TRUTH, the LIFE. In the book of John we read that Andrew meets Jesus for the first time and spends the day with him. And then as he leaves, it says, **[SCRIPTURE ON SCREEN] "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus." (John 1:41-42)** The same is true when WE experience Jesus NOW, when we see the WAY and TRUTH and LIFE of Jesus in the PLACES that Jesus calls us to with the PEOPLE that Jesus calls us to. We need to share that together and GO THERE TOGETHER! And I would suggest that when the Becoming Good Relatives team is inviting us to come and see, as you've heard, they're inviting us to spaces that THEY'VE experienced the invitation of Jesus, the invitation to TRUTH and to RECONCILIATION that leads to PEACE.

...SO...having received these truths that to us have become dusty and neglected, how do WE now respond? The first answer is, WE DON'T KNOW...

...There ISN'T an exact formula. BUT, like Josiah and the young prime minister, we want to choose to ENGAGE, rather than IGNORE. AND there ARE indicators of first steps that can allow us to see more...

The Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission serve as a good starting point.

As we've heard, the 5 Calls to Action that are SPECIFIC to the Church involves themes like LEARNING ABOUT the experiences OF Indigenous Peoples, LISTENING TO Indigenous Peoples,

FINANCIALLY SUPPORTING Indigenous-led initiatives towards healing, and PERSONALIZING, both through rejecting dehumanizing doctrines AND adopting humanizing covenants and friendships.

In regards to Call to Action #61, regarding FINANCIAL SUPPORT, a number of us from our community have been participating in some learning sessions with Indigenous-Mennonite author and teacher Sarah Augustine about how to move towards financial reparations as community. A few Mennonite churches have taken the responsive step of creating a new covenant with local Indigenous groups regarding starting to contribute 1% of their annual budget towards Indigenous-led healing programs. Is that something that we could move towards? Let's let this serve as a part of the start of that conversation. We're hoping to discuss more of that together in the next year, and we're inviting each of us to start prayerfully considering what it could look like for us as a church to take a financial step in that direction.

And in regards to LEARNING ABOUT the experiences of Indigenous Peoples, LISTENING TO Indigenous Peoples, and PERSONALIZING connection among Indigenous Peoples, our Becoming Good Relatives team has been exploring this for themselves and on behalf of our church, and they'd like to invite you to join in. These invites are not FORMULAIC, and they're not overly COMPLICATED, but they attempt to honour the intention of the Calls to Action, and in doing so reflect the ways of JESUS.

Things like a BOOK CLUB, reading books by Indigenous authors. In this case, NOVELS by Indigenous authors, talking about life and hopes and struggles and families and vacations!...We'll ALSO be doing this by leaning into the storytelling of a 'BLANKET EXERCISE' practice later this winter, which will physically walk us through the experiences of Indigenous Peoples and settlers on the land. We feel that everyone in our church should experience this powerful practice. Both of these are part of the work of LEARNING, as beginning responses to Call to Action #59.

We also want to LISTEN TO the invitations from Indigenous Peoples as a part of Call to Action #60, which calls for us to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right, and to take responsibility to prevent

spiritual violence. Here the invitation is to participate in spaces where we can listen, such as the Strawberry Thanksgiving next spring, and the local Pow Wow next fall.

And lastly, we want to lean into the PERSONALIZING invitations, humanizing, neighbouring, kinship, leading to repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and fully respecting Indigenous Peoples, as we see in Calls to Action #48 and #49. The current invitation towards this type of relational connection comes through the Niagara Regional Native Centre in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and the invitation to attend their meal and drum circle evenings once a month alongside two of our Becoming Good Relatives team members. We're going to extend the invitation more specifically to you in a few moments.

Friends, we've been hearing from teachers in different Indigenous communities who have said that it has taken GENERATIONS to get to where we are today, in the SEPARATION and HARMS that are present. And so, it's going to take generations to REPAIR and HEAL together as well. Instead of being INCAPACITATED by the weight of it all, by our inability to know what to do, we are invited to simply start with the NEXT FAITHFUL STEP towards reconciliation. We know the expression, "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." The invitation that we believe that we're being invited to, as followers of Jesus on this land, is to TAKE that first step.

I PERSONALLY still don't entirely know what to do with the truth of the harms that Indigenous Peoples have experienced. Especially those experienced at the hands of Christian settlers. Mennonites. MY people. But I'm now attempting to ACKNOWLEDGE this truth as I CONTINUE to learn about it, and, in the midst of my internal apathy and even resistance, I also have an OPENNESS to next steps in MY life, in the life of my FAMILY, and the life of my CHURCH community. It's been a SLOW journey for me for the past number of years. My READING has included books by Indigenous authors that have started to inform my perspective (sometimes with a sense of HUMOUR in the writing that amazes me). My wife Taryn and I have had the chance to be in different CIRCUMSTANCES that have started to teach us, like meals with the land defenders up at 1492 Land Back Lane, or drum circles at the Niagara Regional Native



Centre. And we're seeing a slow change in our perspective, our values, and our actions as Christians on Indigenous lands.

Perhaps the MOST significant piece of this for me and for Taryn is to see our three BOYS being raised in the perspective that we're slowly gaining. They hear the STORIES of Indigenous Peoples included in the books that we now read to them, AND as they now specifically bring home similar books from school to learn more. They spend time in contexts with us where Indigenous communities are REAL and ACTIVE **[IMAGE ON SCREEN]**, good people, rather than being solely shaped by the cultural forces of apathy, distance or even suspicion. Perhaps the Treaty of Niagara CAN be DUSTED OFF through our actions, and INCREASINGLY through the actions of our young ones. And it gives me HOPE that if I can slowly but steadily take ongoing steps towards truth and reconciliation, that the children of OUR community and the children of INDIGENOUS neighbours and kin will have a NEW story to tell to the NEXT generations.

**[VIDEO – BGR team talking about their next steps, followed by facilitated 'NEXT STEPS' invitation']**