



Photos provided by Ched Myers.

Grade 8 & 9 students at St. Mary's Residential School. Right, Ched Myers.

A People Who Remember

This past August, Ched Myers – Mennonite theologian and activist (see www.chedmyers.org) – spoke at the Creative World Justice Festival held in Mission, B.C. Significantly, the site of the event was the former grounds of the St. Mary's Residential School (1863-1984), located on traditional Sto:lo territory. Ched invited his audience – a Christian gathering exploring ways to pursue global justice – to remember the dismembered, hidden story of local injustice. Specifically, Ched summoned us to a deep wrestling with the history of cultural genocide in Canada, and to concrete participation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Discipleship that remembers a crucified Saviour demands nothing less. What follows is a portion of Ched's talk.

Thanks to Sto:lo elders Ray and Millie Silver for their welcome onto this land, and to Cheryl Bear and her band for singing us into this place.

Tonight, I'd like to talk about the stories of the people of this place, and our need to acknowledge them. Unfortunately, we European North Americans will do anything to avoid walking into the dark forest of our history to confront the truth of our bloody past. But we must do a bit of that, gathered as we are here this weekend in Mission, B.C. You see, everybody has a story. And to come

to a place is to walk into (and onto) a story. As people of faith, we should aspire to be responsible and sensitive visitors, not ignorant or blustery tourists. This means taking the time and attention required to learn the stories of the place we have come to.

What does this have to do with "creative world justice"? Everything. Because most of the injustice in our world, past and present, is the direct or indirect result of human beings not respecting the stories of places and peoples they encountered. Structural poverty, human trafficking, environmental destruction, labor exploitation, human rights violations – you name it, it all ultimately stems from ways in which we have put people and places at the service of profit, power and privilege.

The issues of violence and injustice we face today, without exception, have deep roots in history, in choices that some people made to ignore the integrity of other people and their places. This is especially true on this continent, where European conquest and colonization displaced and dismembered indigenous human cultures and exploited and destroyed their lands. This centuries long process was justified by the religious conviction that only European stories and material well being mattered. And

we continue to deny that past because we are committed to the myth of our own essential nobility and innocence, and we are desperate to hang on to our privilege and power.

... Dear friends, Creative World Justice begins right here. In this province, where most of you were born and raised. In this Fraser Valley, where white society built its prosperity on the "false gospel" of settler entitlement and stolen land. And on these very grounds where a residential school once confused European superiority with the "good news to the poor" and as a result, the "least among us," whom Jesus specifically instructed Christians to serve, were instead systematically disenfranchised.

Yeah, every place has a story, but the story of this place is so painful that we've conveniently forgotten it. Best not to bring up the past. You know, white Canadians don't really have to pay attention to this national Truth and Reconciliation process regarding the residential school legacy. It's all so, ah, complicated, you know? Better to just let sleeping dogs lie; the past is past. Let's get on with our lives and ministries.

Well, this might work for a lot of Canadians, but Christians have to deal with another really inconvenient truth. For people of biblical faith, the luxury

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of historical amnesia is consistently proscribed, indeed unequivocally prohibited. Take, for example, the simple exhortation that lies at the heart of the church's one universal ritual, the Eucharist/Lord's Supper: **Remember.** When we take both the bread and the cup, we repeat for emphasis the words Jesus left us with: "Do this in order to remember."

Whenever you eat or drink this, said Jesus on the eve of his execution, you are re-membering that which will soon be dis-membered: my Body, given for you. But let's not take these words out of their context in a story about a specific historical place and time. Jesus was giving a Passover homily, which is all about re-membering the long and continuing journey of his people from slavery and oppression. The Jews were deeply familiar with distress, displacement, and near-disappearance by one empire after another: Egypt, Babylon, Rome. Make no mistake: their consistent experience was much more akin to that of the Sto:lo people than to ours – removed from their beloved land, their rituals suppressed, treated as a despised minority.

We, on the other hand, are for the most part children of Pharaoh's household, citizens of Caesar's empire. We don't want to remember the blood that was spilled to build our privilege; we don't want to go into that forbidden forest. Oppressed people want to remember; oppressors want to forget.

But the reality is . . . Jesus was Sto:lo - a political refugee from birth, living on traditional lands that were militarily occupied by a colonial power, forced to speak another language, and impoverished by an economic system geared to benefit distant elites. Yet for all that, Jesus struggled hard to save his people from the twin fates of total assimilation or annihilation, and spoke truth to the Powers who were busily trying to dismember his people. And because of that, those Powers arrested him, convicted him of being a dissident native terrorist, and they broke his body on their executioner's cross, just as he had anticipated. But they couldn't keep him dead, or kill the memory of his liberation movement.

So what will we be remembering

when we take communion on Sunday? Jesus' exhortation at the last Supper sums up the deep wisdom of the entire biblical tradition: liberation begins with memory. To participate in this ritual meal is to ingest that memory, and thus to join ourselves to the historic struggle for wholeness that began in an Exodus march to freedom, culminated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and continues whenever we re-member all that has been dis-membered by empire and hubris and sin, not least right here in Mission, B.C.

This is why this Festival began by recognizing Sto:lo elders, and following protocol of being welcomed onto this land. And it is why tomorrow Elaine Enns will be offering a workshop on restorative justice and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I pray each and every one of you and your church communities will learn about this national re-membering process, participate in and promote it, in order to bring healing to the broken body of Canada. It would be easy for you as people of relative privilege to ignore the process, or simply lament what happened in the past to poor indigenous people, but finally to dismiss it as "not your issue." But Jesus asks us to "take and eat" the work of remembering, to internalize the stories of dismemberment, and to take responsibility for healing. This legacy is "hard to swallow," it's "a lot to stomach." But this is what communion requires.

Let us journey then into the haunted forest of our history, so that our churches can become spaces where those difficult stories can be aired in order that healing can begin. There is an old Sto:lo saying: "The ancestor of everything is an action." That's their way of reminding us that practice takes precedence over mere thinking or rhetoric. So when you go home, will you make a commitment to put yourself in the company of those seeking justice and healing for First Nations, and of those experimenting with how to truly address the "settler problem"? Because our healing is tied to theirs. And Creative World Justice begins right here.

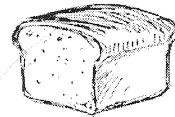
Ched Myers

October 13-15, 2011: *Native Mennonite Ministries Council Meeting* (Clinton, Oklahoma)

October 26-29, 2011: *Atlantic National Event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, (World Trade and Convention Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia)

April 13-23, 2012: *CPT Aboriginal Justice Delegation to Kenora & Grassy Narrows*

For more events visit www.mennonitechurch.ca/events. Native Ministry related events can be submitted for the calendar. Submit events in writing to the mailing address on page 3, or email to imiller@mennonitechurch.ca.



Pumpkin Cranberry Nut Bread

3/4 cup butter or margarine, softened
2 cups sugar
3 eggs
1 (15 ounce) can solid pack pumpkin
1 1/2 teaspoons grated orange peel
3 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup chopped walnuts
1 cup chopped fresh or frozen cranberries

Directions

In a mixing bowl, cream butter and sugar. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add pumpkin and orange peel; mix well (mixture will appear curdled). Combine the flour, cinnamon, salt, baking soda and baking powder; add to pumpkin mixture, beating on low speed just until moistened. Fold in walnuts and cranberries. Pour into two greased 8-in. x 4-in. x 2-in. loaf pans. Bake at 350 degrees F for 65-75 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean. Cool for 10 minutes before removing from pans to wire racks.