

## Is it good news?

### A sermon on James 2:1–17 and Matthew 15:21–28

Melissa Florer-Bixler

**O**ne day last year my neighbor came to see me. Her subsidized housing unit, a dilapidated duplex, had been sold to a new rental company. In exchange for a break in the rent, she had agreed to move out early, to another part of town. In her seventies, frail and tired, she wondered if we would help her pack up her things.

**In my neighborhood, more and more houses of long-term residents are on the market today. Property values, including that of my house, have gone up. And I wonder, is this good news?**

A few weeks later, a renovation team pulled up and turned over the entire property, installing central heating, hardwood floors, a new paint job, new appliances. A young man who looks and talks like me moved in with his dog. In my neighborhood,

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### **Two people walk into a church . . .**

The second chapter of James directs this question toward a church whose vision is clouded by class and status. The issue they're wrestling with is where to seat visitors among them. It is rare that we are given an example from first-century Palestine that translates seamlessly into our own context, but in this passage from James, we get exactly that.

Two people walk into a church. One, as James describes it, is dressed in a well-tailored suit, gold rings flashing as he makes his way down the aisle. At the same time, in walks a woman in filthy clothes. Maybe she slept in them. Maybe this is the only outfit she owns.

For the congregation in James's letter, it is obvious how the seating arrangements will unfold. The places up front are reserved

for the prominent members of the community, the wealthy and powerful. The man wearing the suit will obviously be seated there. The visiting woman, on the other hand, will mostly likely be seated in the balcony—out of sight and out of mind, kept on the outskirts of the community, inside the sanctuary yet at the margins.

And James asks, is this good news?

This question echoes throughout our scriptures, amplified in the ministry of Jesus. It is a question that reverberates throughout the history of the church. Are we preaching good news, and is that good news being born in our lives? Who decides? For whom is it good news? And for whom is the life that we live actually bad news—bad news for someone else’s job and children and school and neighborhood?

The community addressed in James’s letter sees good news for their church when a well-dressed man walks into the sanctuary. Surely this visitor is a sign of God’s blessing, they think. He will boost their social status. If he stays, he will soon contribute to the financial well-being of the community, thus increasing the church’s budget. As middle-income people who are ready to be taken seriously by their wider community, the church members James addresses want to blend into the social world around them.

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They are drawn to these well-suited visitors. Respectable people. Individuals with social capital. People who have something to offer.

It makes sense. But is it good news? For James the answer is no.

The homiletician Thomas Long reminds us that the set-up of worship in the book of James is a result of this tendency to rely on our natural inclination toward what is good. “James’s point,” writes Long, “is not to encourage the ushers to smile with equal warmth toward all who come to worship but instead to remind the church that in the economy of

God’s grace, the very ones for whom the world has little regard have become the guests of honor in the household of God.”<sup>1</sup>

We know good news when it is good news for the poor, not when it is fair. And to hear this text as good news, we need to be

changed. To regard vulnerable people as guests of honor requires revelation: new ways of experiencing the world, the movement of God's grace as our bodies are drawn near to people whom the world regards as insignificant.

We cannot come to this good news on our own. We are too steeped in an ethic of fairness to imagine that God could possibly be for some and against others, that the good news for the poor may end up being bad news for those who oppress, that "God [has] chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom" (James 2:5).

We cannot see the good news before our eyes if all we have is our own will. The very fact that we can be "hearers and doers" of the word of God requires an act of divine intervention, a miracle of God reaching down into time.

### **Jesus receives good news**

Is it good news? Today's Gospel lesson describes a moment of revelation that answers this question. And this time the one who receives the good news is Jesus. It is a story in which Jesus comes to be surprised by the way the abundance of the kingdom spills over, erupts, and runs wild—by the way the good news becomes a revelation to him.

Jesus is tired (Matt. 15:21–28). He has set off for Tyre, a Gentile part of the country. Avoiding more confrontation, more miracles, more teaching, Jesus ducks into a house. But even here, we read, he cannot escape notice. Inadvertently, he has entered the home of a Canaanite woman with a sick child, a woman who begs Jesus to cure her little one.

Jesus dismisses the woman. "Look," he tells her, "it's not fair to give the food of children to dogs." He calls her a dog. He belittles her. He reinforces ethnic boundaries. He tells the woman that he has come for God's people, for Israel. "You," he says. "There's nothing left for you. There isn't enough" (Matt 15:26).

In response, the woman: "Even dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." There's a question in her words to Jesus: Is this good news? Is it good news? Do you know, Jesus, that there is enough? Can you see through your exhaustion and notice the person sitting here before you, begging for a miracle? Can you see that I am the bearer of good news to you, good news beyond your

culture's conditioning, good news beyond the boundaries you've assumed?

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expectation. A woman approaches Jesus for healing—but, being pressed back by the crowd, she decides instead to reach out. She brushes the cloth with her hand. I imagine she touches him with just her fingertips as her arm stretches toward him through the crowd. Instantly she feels her bleeding stop. She can feel it inside her. Stopped—after decades. She is healed.

Jesus's power gets away from him. It's superabundant, profligate, extravagant. And the Canaanite woman reminds Jesus that it is. She reminds him that there is enough. She

reminds him that she bears this good news in her body because the gospel will shatter the boundaries of the people of God—the gospel going where it will.

And here, with a Gentile woman, as she begs for her daughter to be healed, Jesus is once again confronted by the revelation of good news. The gospel cannot be contained. It will not be bound. He heals the child because of this word she has spoken to him. Jesus receives the good news from her.

### **The partiality of God's good news**

This woman's story must be why the lectionary points us toward James and the ragged people seated at the back of the sanctuary, those who show up to worship with their despair worn on their very bodies. Consistently, without exception, the people who bear the good news in the Gospel are those who suffer economic oppression. To put ourselves in a position to receive these people impartially is to make ourselves available to the revelation of the partiality of God's good news, that God is for the vulnerable.

Is it good news? This question finds its way to us when we make ourselves vulnerable to those who are victims of systems by which so many others profit.

It's the question that confronts us as we see Syrian refugees, camped in parking lots and gas stations across Europe.

It's the question that confronts us in the child whose only meals will be those she receives in her public school cafeteria.

It's the question that confronts us when a homeless person is arrested for begging on a public corner.

It's the question that confronts me as my neighbor packs her bags for another move to another part of town.

It should come as no surprise that James reminds us that mercy, not judgment, is what will find its way to us when all is said and done. We cannot earn our way to it through study or piety or

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spiritual practice. The kingdom, the outpouring of this good news, will spring up in unexpected places, like wild seeds that sprout and take off, enclosing the ground in thick weedy undergrowth. It takes off like the yeast of our communion bread that requires no kneading, no effort on our part—like the yeast that works itself into the bread you take into your body.

From James we learn that the good news will avoid the scholarly and the learned. It will erupt from a little boy's lunch, from a begging demon, from a windstorm. The good news will find its way into our churches. It

will keep surprising us, keep upending us, keep us wondering and watching and waiting.

The abundance of God. This sounds like something we might want to be a part of. But James reminds us that our faith looks like becoming vulnerable to the places where we do not expect God's kingdom to erupt. We are a people in negotiation, constantly unsettled, attending to the question always before us: Is it good news?

That's mercy. You cannot earn your way into understanding the good news, but you can wait, ready to receive whoever walks through your doors. You can ask for eyes to see the messengers of good news in your life, or the ones you try to avoid. You can't lean on your own understanding, on your natural sense of goodness. You can interrogate the good news. You can organize when

you see that the current trend in urban development is not good news for your neighbor. You can welcome the good news you never expected, hands outstretched, ready to receive the one you never knew was waiting for you.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, "God is Partial," *Sunday's Coming* (blog), *Christian Century*, August 31, 2009, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2009-08/god-partial>.

### **About the author**

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## Reconciliation and the residential school

Paul Dyck

**D**uring the last decade or so, as Canada has attempted to reckon with its historical and its present treatment of Indigenous peoples, and particularly its treatment of those who attended Indian residential schools, I have looked on with some discomfort. The topic of reconciliation has been a significant focus recently here at Canadian Mennonite University, particularly in light of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of

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Canada, and it seems a good time to describe this discomfort. I understand that I hold a minority view, but I trust that examining it might do some good, regardless of what readers might think at the end of the day.

It is not easy to put my finger on the nature of my discomfort with how we think about the residential schools and their legacy. On one hand, I am not interested in defending the schools. At the same time, that is exactly what I want to do. Years ago, when I first read accounts by people who had been students in these schools, I was convinced that attending them involved and even

comprised terrible deprivations. I have no confidence that I, having experienced even a suburban elementary school as traumatic, would have survived the breaking of family ties and every bond of intimacy and cultural orientation, which were matters of policy in these schools. I have profound respect for those whose resilience has brought them through this experience. I do not mean in anything that follows to minimize or simplify the residential school experience, or the experience of Indigenous people in Canada generally. Rather, I am concerned about the way the words “residential school” have now become loaded words, and I

am concerned that the particular way in which they are shameful words has the potential to blind us to important truths.

### **An architecture we still inhabit**

Before I worked at CMU, and before I did my doctorate, I worked for a few years in Cree communities in Alberta. In a way, I actually did work in a residential school—or more accurately, in a former residential school building which was then the home of a small college where we taught everything from basic literacy to first-year university courses. The college was owned and operated cooperatively by a number of bands. The building had been—according to popular report—condemned. I also heard that every year, when the fire inspector came, the college’s director met him out front and took him out for coffee. We weren’t using the building because of a lack of funds. The bands had ample funds from oil and gas royalties, but deciding which band would get the campus on its land had proved impossible. In any case, from the first time I visited the place, I loved its bohemian feel. It was not beautiful, but it felt lived in and lively in a way that no new building could. It was haunted by memories, and reportedly by the ghost of a nun, but it was also living space. It was a place where people were learning and becoming stronger.

An old residential school building seems like it should be exactly the wrong place for such teaching, but that was not my experience. Instead, I had a visceral dislike for the new schools in the community, which seemed to be transplanted from the city. The old building felt truer. Truer to the realities of the situation, realities that included the fact that I was a kind of foreigner, a kind of enemy, a kind of friend-enemy.

The people who were forced into residential schools have every right to an accounting, a full accounting. I have no quarrel with that. What I do object to is the way that reconciliation is being imagined through a repudiation of the residential schools. We are so fixed on casting out the residential schools as demonic that we cannot bring ourselves to acknowledge that the architecture of the residential

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school is an architecture we still inhabit. I've been there in the flesh, but I mean something more: we're all there. And trying to leave cannot work and does not help.

### **Opening ourselves to bewilderment**

One of the acknowledged problems of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the great imbalance of the testimony—that there was so little testimony from those who ran the schools. (The TRC report does treat the staff of the schools with balance and respect, but that has been lost in the larger conversation.)<sup>1</sup>

The depth of this problem, though, seems to remain largely unfathomed. The hope seems to be, roughly speaking, that if enough white people listen enough to the testimony of the residential school survivors, some level of white understanding will be

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reached so that a new day of social justice will dawn. When we finally realize how much those who were forced into residential schools have suffered, then things will change.

But here's the thing. What else we white people really need to understand is how people like us imagined and taught in these schools, how they were attempting to solve actual problems with what seemed a good approach. I am not talking about the abusers but about the teachers and administrators at their best. We need to open ourselves to their bewilderment. By bewilderment, I do not mean bewilderment at having become the bad guys to society in general. Rather, I mean the more elemental bewilderment of having spent their lives contributing to the good, only to find that on the whole it did not

work. Their bewilderment at pouring themselves into a solution that, on the whole, made the problem more complex and worse.

To me the critical question is not, how did we end up doing something bad, but rather, how did we end up doing something bad even as we were trying to do something good? We need to understand this bewilderment, because we are still the same people, thinking in the same ways, especially when we are trying

not to. Like it or not, unless we can think of the residential school as something closer to normal, we are not going to get much insight and we're not going to be much good to anyone. My desire is that we would inhabit the space of the residential school and resist narrating it. The quickest way out of bewilderment is to begin naming things and taking control. And we will find ourselves once again telling a story into which our Indigenous brothers and sisters will need to fit. It will seem like a new story, but it will be the old story.

### **Reckoning with our present monstrosity**

As much as anything, I'm concerned about our tendency to cast shame from one thing to another. Picking up on the work of Julia

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Kristeva regarding the abject, it seems to be the case that shame is here and it must reside somewhere.<sup>2</sup> We are (rightly) trying to remove it from Indigenous people, but we are doing so by moving it onto others, and those others inevitably are the people who actually did the work, the front-line workers. A whole set of people who devoted themselves to helping Indigenous people now have a status reminiscent of that of soldiers returning from Vietnam: we cast our shame on them, and they bear it. The teachers and administrators of the schools, though, like the Indigenous people before them, have priceless resources

and knowledge that holds transformative power, and we cut ourselves off from it when we turn them into the abject other. Ironically, the harder we try to distance ourselves from the residential school legacy by condemning those who taught in and ran those schools, the more deeply we entrench ourselves in the worst traditions of those schools.

The secret heart of our current order is that it desires an Indigenous victim. A victim to defend, yes, but a victim nonetheless. Such victimhood is produced when we assume the role of advocate for Indigenous people, against ourselves. Put another way, the former students of residential schools must talk through and against the deep damage that that project and its policies

caused, but when white liberals demonize those same programs and policies, something else is going on, something insidious. Unless white liberals remember that they speak in the same tradition that produced the residential schools, and that their most fundamental ways of thinking about the world still reside in those schools, there can be no possibility of reconciliation. We can't just switch sides, and if we think we can, all our positive sentiment is only a cover for an engine of dominance. We are the monster. I think of Jeremiah, the main character of Tomson Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, encountering his own potential to be Weetigo, the cannibalistic monster of the Cree world: an actual reconciliation can only follow a reckoning with our present monstrosity, not just with a past one. Evil is not so easily cast out.

So we find ourselves in an awkward spot. Does one apologize for running the residential schools? Obviously, yes. For what exactly? For several things in particular: the conscious and system-

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atic attempt to suppress Indigenous languages and cultural ways, and the establishment of institutions that unintentionally made students profoundly vulnerable to abuse, and especially sexual abuse. But after that, things get complicated. When the residential school idea was invented, the Indigenous people in Canada were not understood to be flourishing, and in fact by any standards, many were not flourishing. Then as now, people saw education as a critical tool for improving life. Education itself is a treaty right. The inventors of the residential school aimed for the full

participation of Indigenous people in Canadian political life. They did not aim for racial segregation, but putting Indigenous children in mainstream schools could not have been seen as a practical option.

In retrospect, the insistence on an English Canadian monoculture was deeply mistaken, both ideally and predictively: between my mother's generation and mine, Canadian identity has shifted from an emphasis on perfect, unaccented English, to a vision of a country of many languages. My parents did not teach me their

first language, but my children are learning their mother's (Japanese). My point is that some of the worst damage to Indigenous culture was done by reasonable people thinking normally. I say this not as a defence but rather out of radical skepticism, and I think that it is a skepticism to which the church is called. The church cannot simply align itself to the normal thinking of reasonable people. Rather, the church must understand that sometimes we are at our worst when we think that we are at our best.

### **The skepticism to which the church is called**

At the same time, we must allow our wounds to stay open. One medieval motif that stays with me is the image of the church proceeding from the wound in Christ's side: the wounded body of Christ is the salvific space of the church: in Christ's wounds we live. Or as George Herbert writes,

*Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,  
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.*<sup>3</sup>

Eucharistic theology meets real life in our response to wounds, ours and others'. Even now, Canada feels itself wounded and understands that the woundedness of Indigenous people is in some profound way the nation's woundedness. But even now, as we see the need for reconciliation, we rush to it, condemning the past and putting into operation what one friend of mine has called a "reconciliation industry," an industry dominated by lawyers and policies, and also an industry that many Indigenous people do not—and should not—trust. The present nation-building project is to reconcile, but anyone close to the wound will know that it is not going to heal on any nation-building timeline. The question is not how we will solve this problem but whether and how we will be present to each other's tragedies, even in our own irresolvably compromised positions, implicated in the wounding of the other. I do not know what other body besides the church can proclaim this message.

Why am I still committed to the church as the body that can address our present need? Ideally, because it most deeply disrupts the binary, making it impossible in the present moment to speak coherently of "us and them." But we must ask: what do we mean by church? I was struck recently by a well-intended church synod

motion proposing an act of reconciliation between the church and Indigenous people. How it is possible that we still draw this division, when for centuries there has been Indigenous Christian-

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ity in Canada? The dominant narrative insists on Christianity as a colonial imposition, and this has some obvious truth. But it ignores a long history of Indigenous Christian faith. For example, most of the Indigenous Anglican church in Manitoba was evangelized by Indigenous catechists, a fact that Indigenous bishop Mark MacDonald has made clear repeatedly and for good reason: the Indigenous church is not the property or the fault of the white church. Again, in the dominant narrative there is no room for the Indigenous church, and in some communities there is real

tension between Christians and traditionalists. It seems to me that the white instinct is to feel bad about this, for what we have done, but to adopt this position is to be ashamed of Indigenous Christianity. Rather, let us deeply consider and live the theology of the church, acknowledging both the differences across the body and the unity of that body. The body of Christ which is the church is awkward, often embarrassing, and bears wounds that have been self-inflicted. It is tempting to close our eyes to it, to look to clean, well-dressed models. But they may just be another form of whitewashing.

We inheritors of the European colonial legacy are both obsessively fixated on our guilt and feeling a desperate need for a scapegoat. We want to be the pronouncers of our own guilt, the makers of our own sentence. Let us rather walk alongside our Indigenous brothers and sisters, open to judgment, allowing our bewilderments to meet theirs. We might be surprised at how the conversation goes.

## **A prayer**

*Creator Lord, source and lover of life,*

*Let us always remember  
that by your wounds we are healed.*

*Give us grace to acknowledge  
the wounds we have received  
and those we have made.*

*Give us grace to understand anew the whole church,  
a body that trespasses the many boundaries of this world,  
a body of strange fellowship.*

*Help us turn from our own judgment,  
which is a judgment of death,  
to await your judgment,  
which is a judgment of life.*

*And finally,  
make us partakers in your ministry of reconciliation.*

*Amen.*

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* at [http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive\\_Summary\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf). The entire report is an important starting point for understanding the history and present legacy of the schools. See pages 14–15 in particular on the balance of testimony, and pages 121ff. on the staff of the schools.

<sup>2</sup> I have encountered Julia Kristeva's theory through Virginia Burrus's remarkable book, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> George Herbert, "The Agony," in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (London: Penguin, 2005).

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