

St James United Church

Message for June 19, 2022
Indigenous Peoples Sunday



“A Story of Resilience”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: 1 Kings 19:8-16; Luke 8:26-39; Kalolin Johnson, “We Shall Remain (It Was Not Taken)”

In my early years in ministry, I was in a predominantly First Nations and Métis part of Canada, in northern Manitoba and northern Saskatchewan. That gave me opportunity to live and work in some really interesting places – a mining town, a fly-in First Nations community, a Métis village, a regional hub. More importantly it gave me a chance to meet some really amazing people, many of whom I still consider to be friends, even family. And then when I shifted to the United Church, I had yet more opportunities to work with and to befriend many people who identify as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. As you'd imagine then, Indigenous Peoples Day is meaningful for me, as I bring to mind so many people I know, love and deeply respect.

And believe it or not, I feel much the same love as I read about the Gerasene man who was healed by Jesus. Consider what you heard. Jesus was approached by a man who lived in a cemetery on the outskirts of the city. He was so overcome by malign powers that the people in town had kept him under guard and in chains, but he would break his bonds and run naked into the wild. He was possessed by a legion of demons, that is, more than five thousand of them, but when the demons went into the swine, they were immediately so overcome that they threw themselves into the sea, they drowned themselves. Think of that. You have one man possessed by thousands of demons yet together enough to approach Jesus; but the pigs couldn't take being possessed by maybe five apiece. Talk about strength. Talk about resilience

I saw that kind of strength and resilience in my ministry among First Nations and Métis. Let me tell you about just one community in Northern Manitoba, a fly-in community of Oji-Cree where I lived for five years. In that time there were among other tragedies, a plane crash which killed the chief's spouse and child; a wildfire; hunters lost in a blizzard; a helicopter crash which killed all six onboard; and a series of teen suicides. I don't know how they held it together, I barely could, and yet they did, even though some of them had experienced traumatic childhoods, the older people sent off to residential school and younger ones experiencing sexual and physical abuse in the local school that was once run by the church. Through it all they were strong, supporting each other, keeping it together without outside help, even with outside obstruction.

An example of just that happened in my second year. The band council had expressed to the regional school board, made up of non-Indigenous folks, that they wanted to transition to local control of the school, a newly granted option. But rather than help with the transition, as you'd think they would, the regional board immediately pulled all supports, including all the non-local administrators and teachers, leaving the community scrambling to find staff. I suspect the

board did it expecting them to fail and then beg for them to return. Instead the band kicked into gear and made it work. Twenty-eight years later they're going strong, with local teachers, new schools, and more control over curriculum, especially in terms of the culture and language.

It still makes my blood boil just thinking about how they were treated. And sadly, that example again connects to our reading from Luke. You see, a legion isn't just a very large number. It was the main unit of the Roman army and there were legions spread over the empire, mostly in the frontier to control the populace, often violently. Land even would be taken for soldiers to settle on, like in the region east of the Sea of Galilee where the healing took place. Today's reading is thus as much about imperial abuse and injustice as a story of the man's resilience. The same can be said of how First Nations, Métis and Inuit were treated, corralled by the army, starved into submission, executed for fighting back, derided as "savages", displaced from their land so others could settle, needing a pass to leave the reserve, forced to attend residential schools. Indigenous peoples were as dominated by a legion as the Gerasene had been.

And like him they sought liberation, and in many ways gained it, although there is a long way to go, through strength and resilience that from my observation is grounded in deep trust in God, in Creator, in the spirit of the land, and in the presence of their ancestors. In this I hear echoes of Elijah's story. Before we get to our reading, King Ahab had married Jezebel, a Phoenician, who had all of God's prophets killed, except Elijah who escaped. All seemed lost, and he was hiding in the desert. But while there, he realized God was with him, even in the silence, and would be with those who came after him. I see this too in our history. Similar to how Jezebel persecuted the prophets, our government banned Indigenous ceremonies. But God was in the silence, waiting, working through elders who hid their spiritual bundles, who shared teachings in secret, who adapted them as well, some incorporating their Christian faith with traditional practices, who held on for future generations, And now ceremonies like sweat lodge, pipe, pow wow, sundance are flourishing, a source of still greater strength for the coming generations.

That gives me so much hope. No wonder Kalolin Johnson could sing with such conviction not just that her people will remain, but that "it was not taken" – the culture not taken, beliefs not taken, ceremonies not taken, and most importantly the resilience not taken, the strength that comes from relationships, both within and between communities, and I hope with allies who come alongside in love, not to do what community members can do, like that regional board, and not to put up barriers, again like that board, but to empower and to support them.

Friends, in the early years of contact, Indigenous peoples traded with settlers, signed treaties in the belief there would be mutual benefit, two nations side by side, as each group learned from the other. We know tragically that didn't happen, treaties were broken, and settlers were more like a legion than partners in a new nation. But thankfully Indigenous peoples are still here despite that, resilient and strong, still seeking liberation in the redress of past wrongs and the struggle against present ones. I pray those of us who identify as non-Indigenous will be partners in that quest, and that Indigenous Peoples Day will become as personal for you as it is for me, because we will have had the opportunity to work together, to have become friends with one another, and ultimately to see one another as family. May it be so. Amen.