

St James United Church

Message for June 25, 2023

Indigenous Peoples Sunday (4th Sunday after Pentecost)



“From Lament to Hope”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39; Excerpt from *Embers* by Richard Wagamese

This past week I went to the Techniplex for the mawio'mi held in celebration of Indigenous Peoples Day. It was a great event as the community gathered to celebrate their culture. There were drum groups taking turns singing the songs and a good number of dancers, mostly young. When I arrived, I noticed a man dressed in his regalia. He looked so proud. He is a grass dancer. They're always the first to dance. They traditionally flattened the grass for the gathering, praying that it will be positive with good relationships. As I watched the Grand Entry as those who'd be dancing came in, I commented to a friend how it felt like a reclamation of culture, more than on the prairies. He nodded. “The culture was suppressed for a long time here,” he said, “but it's coming back with events like the mawio'mi.” What he said was bitter-sweet. I'm glad the culture is coming back but saddened at its long loss.

Sadly, we know the who of that loss, how missionaries came to North America but did not take time to understand the traditions of Indigenous peoples but prejudged them as demonic. To pick up on what I shared earlier, they weren't good relations. They didn't see them as family even though time and again Indigenous peoples on the mainland helped settlers when they struggled in their first winters. They looked at Indigenous peoples much as Sarah viewed Hagar when she demanded that Abraham expel her and her son from camp even though Ishmael was as much Abraham's son as Isaac. She looked at the boy and saw only a foreigner, not Isaac's brother.

It's a sad history but it struck me that this happened in part because we hadn't paid attention to the meaning of discipleship in the gospels. We've often been taught to think that Christianity's purpose is to make the whole world Christian, for everyone to be a disciple of Jesus. We even appeal to Matthew 28:19 from a couple of Sundays ago in which Jesus instructed his apostles to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. We felt urgency in this but it was based on a choice translators made in rendering the passive voice of the original Greek into a command. What if it had been more like “wherever you go, make disciples in all nations” as one translator I read recently suggested. I like it. It aligns better with the pre-resurrection Jesus who only invited a few to follow him while most people he sent on their way once he had healed or forgiven them.

If, as Jesus suggests in today's gospel, disciples are to emulate their teacher not more, why did we end up with missionaries trying to convert everyone? Moderator Bob Smith explained it well in the United Church's apology to Indigenous peoples in 1986: “We confused Western ways and

culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel.” I can imagine more than one missionary pointing to the section about a sword separating families to justify telling a new Christian in a polygamous culture he could only have one wife (which would condemn his other wives and children), or using it as a proof text when they took children away to attend residential schools.

But the sword Jesus spoke of is the sword of justice. He was being honest with his disciples that the path he was inviting them to follow would likely cause conflict as their lives challenged the status quo. Jesus’ life did just that as he modelled a way of accepting love and compassionate justice. That is the heart of the gospel he wanted his disciples to learn, and then to invite people to live within alternative communities that would show others what a more just, caring world can be, in effect being good relations. Everyone doesn’t need to be a disciple for that. Instead, you need a few dedicated people acting as a catalyst for change, nurturing faith by example.

I wish that’s what missionaries had done. And as they lived with Indigenous peoples, listening and learning from them, they would have discerned where God was already at work, where gospel was already present in how the people lived. That’s what I hear happening to Hagar and Ishmael. God promises to be with them, to bless them as much as Sarah and Isaac. The way of life of Ishmael’s descendants would be different than Isaac’s but a sign of divine promise just the same, like Mi’kmaq or Inuit culture is different from French or British but all expressive of the gospel in varying ways, and in need of challenging where there is a lack of gospel values too.

If they had listened and learned, they would have discovered the wisdom we heard in Richard Wagamese’s reflection, how he was a good relation beyond just his culture or even among fellow humans but with the moose and bear, the tamarack and lichen, with “the rich brown earth and the eternal bowl of the sky”. He shares a powerful understanding of who we are in the world. It invites us to be more conscious of our impact. And when we are conscious of the sky and earth, the moose and pine, we can’t help but be more conscious of other humans, inviting us to live the accepting love, the compassionate justice, the good relationships at the gospel’s heart.

Though the history of church leaders in this part of the world was not as I just imagined it could have been, we can reset the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. It is why we have special celebrations like Indigenous Peoples Day, a chance to listen and learn, to gather as a community across cultural differences, to discover the gifts of the various nations, to see where we can nurture partnerships in tackling the issues facing our communities and our wider world, but most importantly to nurture friendships, to start seeing ourselves as family.

Beloved, today we mark Indigenous Peoples Sunday. As we do I pray we move beyond this one day celebration to be good relations every day. The look of pride I saw on the grass dancer’s face last Wednesday said it all. He had reclaimed a key part of his culture that had been lost for too long. As he danced to bless the mawio’mi, he expressed the heart of the gospel. Our church and settler ancestors didn’t see that, but now we can. And that makes all the difference. Amen.