

St James United Church

Message for September 24, 2023
Third Sunday of Creation and Orange Shirt Sunday



“Called to Listen and Learn” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-31; Excerpt from Sherri Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-based Change*, (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books), 6, 7-8.

I realize it's a coincidence that the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, or Orange Shirt Day, lands during the Season of Creation each year, but I'm glad it does. The two events have a much common. The Season of Creation celebrates the natural world and our relationship to it, both in the invitation to stand in awe of creation's beauty and its capacity to provide for us, and to acknowledge ways that we've failed to do either. Orange Shirt Day invites us to reflect on how Indigenous peoples are treated, including the attempt to suppress traditional teachings by placing children in residential schools, but also to restore the relationship, to renew it with openness to concepts that thankfully are still taught, including teachings about creation.

We catch a glimpse of that teaching in our reading from *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-based Change* by Sherri Mitchell, also called Weh'na Ha'mu' Kwasset or She Who Brings Light. What an amazing experience that must have been for her, to feel such a deep connection with the ant, the grass it was crawling on, the entire area where she was sitting! The light that shone within and between them sounds like the light that we heard shone from the clouds as God spoke to Moses and Aaron to reassure the Israelites that they were not alone but cared for by God, their parent and provider. We all share that light. That's one of the meanings behind the candle we gave to Arabella earlier when she was baptized.

Wonderfully, the experience Sherri had isn't uniquely Indigenous. People across various faiths, Christianity included, speak of such experiences. I had one while on a seminary retreat. I was praying by a lake, watching a shorebird when I felt an embracing presence of love connecting me and the water and the bird. I believe those types of experiences come when we are open to them, perhaps primed by teachings we have received, which for me was an appreciation of creation as fundamentally blessed by God. This is a teaching I learned in a Christian context but one which was affirmed repeatedly during my years of ministry in Indigenous communities.

A key teaching I received there was in terms of the land. I was raised like many of us to think of land as property, as something you own, can control. That's not how the Oji-Cree I lived with see it. If there's any ownership, it's the other way around. The land and people are part of each other. The land is a shared gift to be looked after, that will care for them if they care for it. Take cattails as an example. Did you know the roots are edible, both boiled like potatoes or dried and made into flour? The leaves can be eaten when young and when older woven into mats. The cattail flower can be dipped in melted fat and used as a torch. Pretty cool. But they aren't

as abundant as they once were as we lose more and more wetlands. The cattail's usefulness points to a teaching that wherever people have lived on this planet, the land has provided medicines, foods and other supplies they needed, otherwise they couldn't have lived there. This doesn't mean the land was never touched. Indigenous people have made small clearings to grow crops, did controlled burns and other land management practices to encourage food bearing plants, but practices sought balance with other creatures, were gentler than those of European settlers. Where I lived has grocery stores and more food is bought than harvested off of the land but the fundamental appreciation for the gift that is creation remains.

This appreciation for creation informed the practices I learned on reserve, like the importance of prayerfully thanking the animal that gave its life for my sustenance, taking only a portion of berries or medicines, not only so there's enough for others in the current season, but so there'll be enough in seasons to come, sharing what you've harvested, especially with the elders no longer able to go out on the land. The practices are all about caring, caring for the land, for the animals and plants, for each other, especially for the most vulnerable in our communities.

These practices echo the teachings God wanted the Israelites to learn by eating manna in their time in the wilderness. As we heard in Exodus, each morning when they got up there was a flaky substance on the ground that they'd gather for food. They were to gather only as much as they needed, twice as much on the day before the Sabbath so they could honour the call to rest. If they gathered more than they needed, what they stored would spoil. In this they were offered a new economics than what they'd learned in Egypt, one founded on trust of God and trust of the land, trust they could source what they needed from it, and continue to by sharing their harvest rather than hoarding, and so live more gently with each other and the land. It was an economics they were to bring with them to their new home and, though they got caught up in more exploitive practices, their experience offers us a much needed approach for our day.

The core of the approach is rooted in the experience Sherri Mitchell had as she, the ant, grass, everything around them shared a profound unity. Our awareness of that unity is our hope for the planet and a renewed relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers. Orange Shirt Day invites us to seek reconciliation. A big part of that is learning the views our government once tried to suppress. Doing so shows a willingness to listen, to learn from, to appreciate Indigenous peoples that's been absent for much of settler history in North America. As Paul writes to the Philippians, his prayer is for them, and us, to live a life worthy of the gospel by standing firm in one spirit, in other words to be joined in respect and with caring for each other. Canadian residential school policy was the opposite of that, but we have an opportunity to start over and listen to the wisdom that Indigenous peoples are thankfully still willing to share.

As we've shared over these weeks, we're living in an ecologically critical time. It's also a critical time in Indigenous-settler relations. Both crises can be resolved by restoring our relationship and coming to a renewed appreciation for Indigenous teachings, including views about the land, about respecting creation. Doing so will help to restore creation, and us as well. Amen.