

# St James United Church



## Message for June 22, 2025 Indigenous Peoples Sunday

“Honestly Facing the Past” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Kings 19:1-15; Luke 8:26-39; Chief Robert Joseph, *Namwayut: A Pathway to Reconciliation* (Toronto: Page Two, MacMillan Books, 2022), 30; “The Seven Teachings,” <https://youtu.be/4PRAot3lzzE?feature=shared>.

“Every child should grow up to experience what love names for each of us: safety, security, connection and oneness.” Those words of Chief Robert Joseph are important for us to hear on this Indigenous Peoples Sunday, knowing as we do that the church for too many years didn’t live that when it came to Indigenous peoples, bringing harm not safety, believing we knew the only way to God, and so part of an assimilation plan rather than celebrating the diversity of spirituality and culture we encountered. I say this not to saddle us with guilt but help us face our past with honesty. As we learned earlier in the service, being true to yourself and others, is one of the seven sacred teachings. And it takes courage, another teaching, to admit things we’d rather not. But without either there’s only denial, and we can’t share our stories, which means we can’t live the other teachings of humility, respect, wisdom, truth and especially love.

That all is very isolating, leaving us in a spiritual void we may not even realise that we are in, leaving is like the Gerasene man possessed by demons, separated from the rest of his community, forced to live in the cemetery, suggesting he is not really living. And why is that? The name Legion for the demon suggests more than a large number. As I’ve said before, a legion was a unit of the Roman army, and so the name suggests the man is not able to truly live as his full self because his land was occupied as part of the Roman empire, or looking at it through the lens of this Sunday, he lived under colonization, subject to its laws, policies, and prejudices. And as much as we like to think that is a thing of the past in our context, we realize it’s not when a provincial premier describes First Nations as always coming “cap in hand.” Indigenous leaders rightly called it racist. Returning to the gospel, I wonder what slurs the people of Gerasa endured, even internalised given it was likely the neighbours of the possessed man who shackled him in the cemetery. It makes you wonder who are the ones that are not fully living.

As I frame the story this way, I wonder who might you identify with in it? Are you the possessed man? A disciple? Jesus? A passerby? As much as I want to be a disciple, Jesus, even just an observer, I must admit that within our historical context I am the legion, or at least one of the neighbours who shackled the man. It’s a troubling admission, but how can I say otherwise when I’m but a generation away from church leaders who did as much, or even now reap the benefits of a society built on disenfranchising of Indigenous people from their land, spiritualities, lifeways, a trauma leaving many feeling spiritually dead, not fully themselves. And as much as I don’t want to, I must admit the same dynamics apply to the 1 Kings reading. Again, I want to be Elijah, but

can I be? Not when I consider the background, King Ahab marrying Jezebel, a Phoenician princess who brought her religion with her, made possible by bringing prophets of Baal. What were they if not missionaries and through them the traditional religion of Israel was almost completely replaced with the worship of Baal and Asherah? What was Elijah in this context but someone fighting against religious assimilation, not unlike First Nations who pushed against the Indian Act's prohibition of sun dance, pow wow and potlatch. The Queen sending soldiers after Elijah sounds like police arresting people during a potlatch and missionaries "following the law" as they confiscated sacred items. In the end Indigenous peoples aren't the only ones deadened. What impact is there on those of us who are settlers knowing this harm was done on our behalf?

All was not lost though. People as often hid sacred items and continued practicing ceremonies in secret, making it possible for the diverse religious and cultural traditions of this land to be reclaimed and now practiced with pride. Likewise, people kept speaking their languages and so kept sharing the wisdom carried in them. And while tragically many are at risk of extinction, efforts are being made to preserve them. One of the speakers at the sunrise ceremony yesterday spoke about this recovery, how families who once hid their heritage now affirm it. That is such good news. I believe we'll all be culturally richer as these lifeways are reclaimed.

I believe it's also a spiritual imperative, fundamentally for Indigenous nations as the renewal brings much needed healing, and for us as church as we redress the legacy of the past and lend support to the spiritual landscape that could have been. This for me is the point of the reading from 1 Kings as Elijah is told by the angel to go to Mount Horeb where he will encounter God. Mount Horeb is Sinai, the place where God gave Torah to the Jewish people. He was being told to return to the source of his spirituality and there take time in prayer and reflection. And what happened when he did? God told him not to hide away but to return and to continue what he had been doing. Similarly in our gospel. Jesus restores the Gerasene to himself. He brings about his spiritual healing. It wasn't about converting him. Jesus says no when the man asks to go with him. His role was to help his people be restored to themselves, to help them heal.

Thankfully this is happening now across the land, including in our church as Indigenous members function as an autonomous body within the United Church of Canada, and with the help of the Spirit they are discerning how to live their faith in Christ in ways that reflect the diversity of spirituality and culture that is their heritage. Imagine what amazing Indigenous expressions of Christianity would be thriving right now if missionaries had affirmed that heritage when they arrived. But at least they're coming. And it is the work of the Spirit, encouraging humility and honesty as those of us of European heritage face our painful history, encouraging wisdom and truth as those of us who are Indigenous reclaim traditional lifeways, encouraging respect as all of us pull down walls and share our stories, ultimately encouraging us to live together in love. As Chief Robert Joseph reminds us, love is our foundation. When we honour that then not only do we experience safety and security but also connection and oneness, the gifts God has always wanted for us. As we face our past, that will be our future. May it be so. Amen.