

St James United Church



Message for June 21, 2026

Indigenous Peoples Sunday

“Joining the Dance of Reciprocity” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39; Excerpt from Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Epilogue” in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*. (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 383-384.

Each year, we have two opportunities to reflect on Indigeneity. There is Truth and Reconciliation or Orange Shirt Sunday, marked each September, when we name our history both as church and society regarding the treatment of Indigenous peoples and pray for healing in the Indigenous-settler relationship. Then there is today, Indigenous Peoples Sunday, a time to affirm the gifts of Indigenous peoples and reflect on the wisdom of the life-ways of Indigenous nations.

There is much wisdom to reflect upon, highlighted in the reading from Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Throughout, she lifts up reciprocity, a value shared across many different nations. It’s about recognizing that humans are part of creation, in a sacred relationship of mutual exchange with the Earth. This means not treating it as a larder from which to take but also giving back. Reciprocity begins with gratitude but goes beyond that to stewardship as we take only what we need, leave resources for others, including the other than human, give time for the Earth to replenish, and help her do so, especially helping the Earth to heal from the damage we’ve done through overconsumption and disregard for the delicate balance in which life thrives.

It’s all about giving, giving as a way of receiving, giving as an experience that gives back in how it makes us feel or in the bonds of community that are strengthened as we look after each other and the Earth. It is centred on generosity, on trust in the abundance around us, and yet we know that many in the world do not live this way, instead operate out of a mindset of scarcity, the belief that there is only so much to go around and so I must take before someone else does, even if I already have plenty. That is the dynamic at play in our reading from Genesis as Sarah reacts to Ishmael playing with Isaac. Some scholars suggest that Ishmael wasn’t innocently playing with his little brother but mocking him, possibly threatened that he’d be pushed aside in favour of Isaac. That may be the case, but he was just a kid, he wasn’t the adult in the room. Sarah was, and as we heard, she wanted to make sure it was her boy and not Hagar’s who received the inheritance. She sees Abraham’s wealth through a lens of scarcity, not abundance, Hagar too carrying an empty water-skin, unable to see the well even as her son was dying. But there is a well, in other words God will bless both boys because is always enough for everyone.

Seeing life as a gift with enough for everyone is a key teaching in many Indigenous nations beyond the Potawatomi to which Wall Kimmerer belongs. That’s been my experience with Cree, OjiCree and Anishnaabe, Mohawk and Inuit too. It is also key to Jesus’ teaching about God’s kingdom. We heard of his inclusive vision with everyone able to sit at one table last week as he

called a diverse group into leadership, multiple backgrounds, viewpoints, genders too, Jesus giving key roles to the women in the group. He signified that every time they shared a meal, God's bounty offered not just with an in-group but everyone welcome to partake, and we do the same as we share in communion today. As Jesus reminds his listeners that God cares for the sparrows, even the hair on our heads, God's blessing is far-reaching, God's care embracing the other than human too, nothing ever falling outside of the circle of God's fatherly nurture and love.

It is so sad then that many missionaries who came to the Americas didn't hear the echo of the gospel in Indigenous teaching. We shouldn't be surprised though, especially with Jesus' words about the divisions that would occur over his message. His way of generosity, of reciprocity, came up against the scarcity thinking that kept the Roman world going. Consequently, he got significant pushback from the leaders of his day, so much so it took him to the cross. And though Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, sanctified God's way of generosity, the way of giving as receiving, we struggled to live it, so much so that when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, we aligned ourselves with its power and shored up the scarcity thinking at its heart instead of living Jesus' way. That continued off and on over our history so and as a result, missionaries came with cross alongside soldiers who brought the sword, were all too willing to divide families in service of the gospel. They clearly misunderstood Jesus' words in our reading, with tragic, traumatizing consequences for Indigenous peoples the world over.

As we consider that history, it is clear that the world is still snared in the scarcity view, teeters on the edge because of it, with multiple armed conflicts, increasing xenophobia, global heating and biodiversity loss, political corruption, wealth concentrating at the top while the rest of us struggle. Those issues are each a sign that the scarcity mindset is dead-end. It's a dead-end for the church too, our decline linked to it as young people, beginning in the Sixties, left churches because we were aligned with power and not the way of Jesus. It's tempting to draw further in, worried for our bottom line. But that too is scarcity thinking. Perhaps it's time for us to do the opposite and double down on Jesus' way of generosity, join Wall Kimmerer's dance to renew the Earth. There is so much we can do. We can run thrift stores, plant pollinator gardens, build low-cost, low-carbon housing, support refugees, take care of the elderly, host events for kids in the neighbourhood, the list goes on and on. And we won't be alone, but joined by allies of varying faith traditions, including Indigenous peoples, traumatized but strong and resilient, healing as they draw on the way of reciprocity carried in ceremony, story, and Earth-affirming practices, and willing to work with the wider community despite our history. I've met one Indigenous person after another willing to share wisdom, and with respect inviting people to look to their own traditions to find anew the teachings centred in giving, care and love for the Earth.

So, on this Indigenous Peoples Sunday, let us pause with gratitude to God that the Earth continues to be a teacher and that First Peoples are drawing on her teachings to heal. And let us give thanks for the connection between that wisdom and the gospel message of Jesus. May that sharing be a source of unity as we work together to heal the Earth, living the way of abundance, of reciprocity, not the lie of scarcity. It's time to honour that wisdom and join the dance. Amen.