

“Right Relations”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, February 24th, 2019

Genesis 45 – Indigenous Right Relations in Canada

There was a man named Jacob who lived in the land of Canaan. Jacob had many sons, and one of them was Joseph. Jacob loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. His brothers hated him out of their jealousy. Joseph was a dreamer. He had dreams that spoke to him of his pending greatness. He would tell his brothers these dreams and they grew more and more annoyed at this younger brother, to the point that they plotted to kill him. One day, he met his brothers, and they took off his long robe with sleeves and they threw him into a pit. When some Midianite traders passed by, they took Joseph out of the pit and sold him to the traders for twenty pieces of silver, and Joseph was taken to Egypt. The brothers took the long robe, dipped it in goat’s blood and took the robe to their father and said a wild animal had devoured him. Meanwhile, Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams found him in the Pharaoh’s court, advising the Pharaoh on his dreams. Pharaoh was so pleased that he gave Joseph great authority over the land of Egypt.

As the story unfolds, the brothers who had sold him into slavery would come into his life once more. But they did not recognize him. And our passage today is the moment in which he reveals his identity to the men who had sold him into slavery those many years ago. Joseph says to them, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed are they at his presence. And then Joseph tells them that he will provide for them, and their households, during the five years of famine to come. He forgives them, even after all they had done to him. As my Gathering worship resource suggests, “Sometimes in life, there is a moment when it is important to work toward a new relationship.”¹

When I was attending General Council 43 of the United Church of Canada last summer in Oshawa, commissioners were invited to attend a number of mid-week excursions, as a much needed break from the grind of working through work proposals. I signed up to see the Petroglyphs at Curve Lake First Nations Community, near Peterborough. In the Curve Lake giftshop, I bought a dvd² explaining the treaties signed in the Province of Ontario between the indigenous communities and the Government between the years 1781 and 1923. There are 46 treaties that cover the lands of Ontario, 18 of which include the Mississaugas, the indigenous peoples who lived here in the lands near Lake Ontario. I have heard it said before that we are all treaty people but I didn’t understand what that meant until I learned more about the history of the treaties. If you are interested, I will be showing the 30 minute Treaty video during our Truth and Reconciliation Meeting this Thursday at 7:30 pm in the Friendship Room. Everyone is welcome.

In the Acknowledgement of the Land that we say in our worship service, are the words, “We are mindful of broken covenants and the need to strive to make right with all our relations.” Broken covenants. It seems to me that the brothers of Joseph broke a covenant of sorts – an

¹ Gathering A/C/E/ 2018/2019 p. 24.

² Inaakonigewin Andaadad Aki: Michi Saagii Treaties: Defining Relationships Between Peoples, DVD, Curve Lake First Nation 2017

unspoken one – that you look out for your siblings. You don't sell them into slavery. A broken covenant speaks of broken trust, of a breakdown of relationship. Certainly divorce is a sign of a breakdown of relationship in a marriage. Right relation implies that there is a mutuality in the relationship – things are done fairly and equitably, and it is not a win-lose proposition but a win-win. Like in today's children's story of the boomerang illusion – no one is better or higher than the other. To be in right relation means we enter into a relation where both sides, you and me, stand on equal ground. When our government agents signed treaties with the indigenous communities of Ontario, they signed on 'our' behalf. Which means we are still an active, living holder of those treaty documents, which means we have an obligation to ensure values of equality and fairness as part of that relationship. While the treaties may have been signed between 1781 and 1923, they continue to be living documents.

On October 29, 1783, the Crawford Purchase was signed between the Mississauga People and the Empire for a purchase of land in the Bay of Quinte (Peterborough area), which is about an hour's travel from Stouffville. There was no paperwork signed for this purchase. In 1788 the Gunshot Treaty was made between the Mississauga people and the Government to acquire land along Lake Ontario. It was called the Gunshot Treaty because the land was defined as the distance in which you could hear a gun shot from the shore of Lake Ontario. The government wanted the land to move troops more safely between Frontenac and York. Four years later, in 1792, a Simcoe treaty covered the lands familiar to us here – Georgina, East Gwillimbury and Whitchurch. After the War of 1812, the Government wanted to construct an inland waterway, for safer movement of ships and troops. The Government negotiated the 1818 Rice Lake Treaty⁷⁷ which took the lands north of Rice Lake. In 1923 the Williams Treaty contained an extra clause which was inserted without informing the Indian chiefs, that by signing they were giving up their rights for hunting and fishing on the lands the treaty covered. The people were moved to reserves and now had to find their livelihoods off the reserve for the lands were insufficient for hunting and fishing. In a short period of time, their ways of living from the land were ended.

There is so much we need to learn about the treaties made by our government with the indigenous peoples for the land on which we worship, work and live upon. It is our part of being a treaty people. We all need land to grow food on, water to drink, clean air, and housing to keep us from the elements. And yet, in Ontario, we have indigenous communities who cannot turn on a water tap and drink from it as we do every day. There are indigenous peoples who cannot go to school in their neighbourhood because there are no schools and they have to travel hundreds of miles to attend a school. Where we walk into a walk-in clinic for any medical needs, doctors and nurses are flown into the reserves because there is no road access. All of these things speak to me of a break in right relations.

Joseph said to his brothers – I forgive you for the terrible lies and evil plans you did to me. And I will now provide for you and your family and your children's children and your livestock and your servants during the five years of the drought that God is sending. I will provide for you. And we will be in right relation.

In an interview with the Toronto Star, Prime Minister Paul Martin was quoted as saying, "We signed treaties with many First Nations because their cooperation and their land were essential to the growth and success of our communities. And then, when our economic and

military needs changed, and the peoples with whom we had contracted solemn oaths had been enfeebled by us, we simply abandoned our honour, ignored our agreements, and did what we damned well pleased. It is our national disgrace.”³

Justice Harry LaForme is a member of the Mississaugas of New Credit First Nation, Ontario. He was appointed a judge of the Ontario Court of Justice, now the Superior Court of Justice, Ontario. In 2004 he was appointed to the Ontario Court of Appeal, and became the first chair to the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He reminds us that “the treaties, as flawed as they may seem to some, are a permanent reminder that Aboriginal people were brought into the agreement of occupation of Canada as partners, as invested nations.

In other words, the original Aboriginal/European settler relationship was based on equality, mutual respect and shared occupation. And they were to be the foundation within which the roots of the Aboriginal/Canadian relationship were to take hold, to flourish and to grow into a guide to lead Canada into the future.”⁴ Into the early 1800’s, “Aboriginal use of lands was seen as an obstruction to economic development. In addition, there was widespread illness that depleted Aboriginal populations in the late 1800’s, which reduced the colonists’ fear of Aboriginal peoples. The indigenous people of Canada ceased to be seen as a threat and became background noise and raised the question: What could/should we do with them? ... Government’s intention now shifted to one that considered the treaties legalistically: that is, as contracts specifying the minimum requirements the government was obligated to do.”⁵

This past week, on Wednesday, Feb 20, Tanya Talaga wrote in the Toronto Star, “It has been one month since a state of emergency was declared in Cat Lake First Nation, 180 km north of Sioux Lookout, where children live in mouldy homes and grapple with the resulting respiratory conditions and festering skin. One month into the official crisis in Cat Lake, no urgency is evident at any level of government ... Ontario continues to blame Ottawa for shortchanging First Nations communities even though the province is a signatory to Treaty #9, which encompasses most of northern Ontario, including Cat Lake. Most of the northern First Nations communities in Treaty #9 declared a collective housing emergency back in 2014 due to health and construction problems. Ontario indicated a few weeks ago that it would provide some form of temporary housing. The community is still waiting.”⁶

We are mindful of broken covenants and the need to make right with all our relations. It is hard work, but not impossible work. Sometimes in life, as with Joseph and his brothers, as between Canada and First Nations people, as between you and I and the Indigenous communities near us, there is a moment when it is important to work toward a new relationship.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Shelagh Rogers, Mike Degagne, Glen Lowry, Sara Fryer, Editors, *Reconciliation & The Way Forward: Collected Essays & Personal Reflections*, (Aboriginal Healing Foundation: Ottawa, 2014), 60.

⁴*Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁵*Ibid.*, 64.

⁶ <https://www.thestar.com/politics/political-opinion/2019/02/19/cat-lake-first-nation-suffers-as-ottawa-and-ontario-dither.html>