**Growing Trees of Faith and Peace**

**Ezekiel 17:3-8, 22-24, Mark 4:26-32 by Patty Friesen (June 13/21)**

 Stories are told of long-ago times when the Haudenosaunee people forgot to live in gratitude. They became greedy and jealous and began fighting among themselves. Conflict brought only more conflict, until war between the nations became continuous. Soon grief was known in every longhouse and yet the violence went on. All were suffering.

 During that sorry time a son was born to a Huron woman far to the west. This handsome youth grew to manhood knowing that he had a special purpose. One day he explained to his family that he must leave home to carry a message to people in the east, a message from the Creator. He built a great canoe cared of white stone and journeyed far until at last he pulled his boat ashore in the midst of the warring Haudenosaunee. Here he spoke his message of peace and became known as the Peacemaker. Few heed him at first, but those who listened were transformed.

 His life in danger, weighed down with sorrow, the Peacemaker and his allies, among them the real Hiawatha, spoke peace in times of terrible trouble. For years they traveled between villages and one by one the chiefs of the warring nations came to accept the message of peace.

 The Peacemaker gathered together the leaders of all five Haudenosaunee nations and joined them with one. mind. The Great Tree of Peace, an enormous white pine, has five long green needles joined in one bundle, representing the unity of the Five Nations. With one hand the Peacemaker lifted the great tree from the soil and the assembled chiefs stepped forward to cast their weapons of war into the hold. On this very shore, the nations agreed to “bury the hatchet” and live by the Great Law of Peace, which sets out right relations among peoples and the nature world. Four white roots spread out to the four directions, inviting all peace-loving nations to shelter under the tree’s branches. As a final measure, the Peacemaker placed the far-seeing eagle atop the Great Tree to warn the people of approaching danger. For the many centuries that followed, the eagle did its work and the Haudenosaunee people lived in peace and prosperity. (P. 311, 312 Braiding Sweetgrass, Robin Wall Kimmerer)

 This Haudenosaunee peace story from Robin Wall Kimmerer sounds strikingly like our passage from Ezekial 17 about the eagle and the flourishing vine and the Mark 4 bird sheltering mustard tree. We used these same scriptures last Sunday to focus on the birds and we use them this Sunday to focus on the trees. On this Sunday school Appreciation Sunday, we give thanks for our children and youth and for the hard, creative work of our teachers and mentors at church to raise up flourishing trees of faith and peace. Trees that in Psalm 92 are green and fruitful even into old age.

 Linda Bartel from Rosthern is a teacher tree that is green and fruitful into old age. It’s not uncommon for Linda Bartel to meet former students while volunteering, and she’s always delighted to see them. Bartel, who is 86 years old, volunteers two or three days a week, dividing her time between the Good Neighbours Food Centre and the Mennonite Central Committee Clothes Basket in Rosthern, where she lives. In both places she has had happy reunions with adults who were once her Kindergarten students at Stobart Community School in nearby Duck Lake, Sask.

 Bartel taught at Stobart from 1974 to 1994. Many of her students were from Beardy’s and Okemasis’ First Nation, and, of the Duck Lake residents, many were Metis. “I thank God every day for the years I was able to teach,” she says, “especially those years at Duck Lake.” Among the things she is thankful for are the life lessons she learned from her Indigenous students and their families.

 Bartel first learned about patience from her father. As a rather dark-skinned, German-speaking man in a predominantly English-speaking community, he faced discrimination. But she remembers that he always responded with kindness and patience. She also saw patience demonstrated in the lives of her Indigenous friends. “Time meant nothing to them because people were more important than time.”

 “They were able to laugh at themselves more than we do,” she says. They also taught her to be more comfortable expressing affection. “We didn’t do much hugging in our home,” she says. But it was different in the homes of her students. “Very often I got a hug from the [grandmothers] and a handshake from the older men,” she says. “There was a feeling of comfort.” Over the years, this changed the way Bartel interacted with her own children and grandchildren. “I’m much more physical than how I grew up,” she says.

 Bartel also learned to value the generosity she saw in the Indigenous community. “They are much more appreciative of each other than I think we are,” she says. “They have a bigger heart.” She saw that bigger heart in the way they shared their belongings with one another.  She continues to see that generosity at the Clothes Basket, where Indigenous customers frequently offer one another money to help cover the cost of their purchases.

 “There’s a loyalty to family there that I don’t think we feel that strong,” she says. As a Kindergarten teacher, Bartel visited her students in their homes before the beginning of each school year. She’d play with the children to get to know them better. The grandmothers would offer her soup, coffee or tea, and would simply sit with her as she played with the children. When she left, they’d invite her back and thank her for a good visit.

 From these women Bartel learned the value of being silent together in the same room. “You don’t need to be jabbering all the time,” she says. This lesson stood her in good stead when her husband Lowell suffered from Alzheimer’s disease and could no longer speak. She found comfort in sitting with him in silence. “God gave me a really good opportunity when he gave me a teaching career,” she says. “I would be a different person if I hadn’t taught at Duck Lake.” (Canadian Mennonite, Feb. 1/21, Teachers Learn Lessons Too). Linda is a tree that continues to grow and shelter others and produce fruit as she ages. May we be a faith community that grows such trees.

 And now, after a year of Zoom Monday School and youth Zooms, both teachers and students get to take a summer sabbatical and get out into backyards, parks and campgrounds and enjoy the rest and trees gifted to us by our Creator. Let’s conclude with a prayer for an outdoor summer blessing and this will be the blessing for our outdoor picnic as well, #954 Voices Together. Creator God, thank you for the people and places that stretch us, help us grow, and lead us to know you more. We see you in flickering campfires and starry nights. We hear you in wind through the trees and voices raised in silly songs. We feel you in cool splashes of water and the warm sun on our faces. We know that you are always with us, leading us as the great Adventure Guide. Amen. #847 You Shall Go Out with Joy