

Quest for Respect Part I: Our Home and Native Land

Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-46 By Patty Friesen (Thanksgiving Oct. 8/17)

Today's scripture is powerful poetry and parable about land and love and equitable relationships between people and an appropriate start to our three part series on the quest for respect and relationship with our indigenous neighbours. It feels like the Spirit is moving the larger Mennonite church and society in this season of post Truth and Reconciliation.

Last spring, twenty of us participated in the Willow Cree Healing Lodge tour and twelve of us went to Muskeg Lake and several to Spruce River Folk Festival and five of us were at Ancient Echoes in Herschel last weekend. In the larger Mennonite world, Reserve 107 Documentary about Young Chippeweyn, Lutheran and Mennonite relationship has been met with national acclaim. Mennonite Church Saskatchewan and Mennonite Church Canada have made Indigenous Relations a priority for this year and if anything will excite our local congregation this next year, it will hopefully be our participation in these initiatives.

It feels like the Great Spirit is moving me in a personal way as well. In preparation for my sabbatical week in Eastend, Saskatchewan, I read Sharon Butala's Perfection of the Morning. Sharon was an academic living in Saskatoon who married a rancher from Eastend. Dumped in the middle of nowhere, Sharon began to study the history of the area and write about it. She was intrigued by the dinosaur history, the T-Rex named Scotty who was discovered in Eastend, the only one in Saskatchewan and one of 12 in all of North America. She learned about the settler/ranching/farming history of

southwest Saskatchewan called the Palliser Triangle which explorer John Palliser deemed the prairie un-farmable.

But as Sharon walked on her ranch and discovered stone circles and burial cairns and arrowheads and scraping stones, she realized there was a whole history, the history of indigenous people which occurred after the dinosaurs and before the settlers that was absent from schools, books, libraries and museums in the area. So she began her own research and conversion process.

She discovered that the Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, and Nakoda people lived and hunted bison throughout southwest Saskatchewan until the Blackfoot (so named because their moccasins were black after prairie wildfires) pushed them west into the Cypress Hills. Cypress Hills had long been a peaceful meeting ground between Cree, Assiniboine, Blackfoot and Nakoda who would hunt and winter in the protective hills. In 1886, white hunters in the Cypress Hills believed the Nakoda stole their horses and in a drunken frenzy killed 27 of them, which prompted John A Macdonald to establish Fort Walsh and a Northwest Mounted Police presence all along the US border. After the Battle of Little Big Horn in Montana where Chief Sitting Bull beat back the US Cavalry, Sitting Bull with 6000 Lakota came north to Canada for sanctuary at Fort Walsh. They lived there for years and Chief Crazy Horse or Chief Vision Horse came up and camped outside Eastend for awhile.

When Sitting Bull was asked at Fort Walsh why he didn't surrender and return to the US he said, "Because I am a red man. If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man he would have made me so in the first place. The Spirit put in your heart certain wishes and plans, in my heart he put different desires. Each man is good in the Creator's

sight. It is not necessary for eagles to be crows.” Eventually Sitting Bull went back to settle on reservations in Montana but some like Lakota Chief Nekaneet refused to go back or sign treaties with the Canadian government but eventually settled on a reservation southeast of Maple Creek which currently houses the Women’s Healing Lodge Okimaw Ohci.

Sharon developed a relationship with the Nekaneet First Nation by teaching at the women’s healing lodge and inviting elders numerous times to the ranch to identify ancient aboriginal stone sites and have them dedicate the Old Man on His Back Nature Conservancy.

Sharon’s quest for respect and relationship and conversion of understanding leads me to ask the same questions of the land I grew up on. I grew up on Treaty 8 land in the Peace River country in Northern Alberta signed by Beaver and Woodland Cree and Father Lacombe and the government at Fort Dunvegan in 1899. Dunvegan was 15 kilometers from my house and we frequently picnicked there but we didn’t really know about the treaty. We only had one aboriginal family in our white northern town and didn’t have any reservations nearby but drove through some on the way to Edmonton and always marveled at the poverty and seeming downward spiral of self-destruction. We couldn’t figure out why native people couldn’t farm or get a job and just lived off the government and drank. We lived separately from indigenous peoples and never knew their proud history.

It wasn’t until I went to Canadian Mennonite Bible College and took Native Studies with Adolf Enns and read April Raintree and went to a pow-wow north of Winnipeg that I began to appreciate indigenous culture in an intellectual way but it

wasn't until this summer's sabbatical and reading Sharon Butala's quest that I have begun to quest in a spiritual way, asking of every place I visit, what is the aboriginal history and spiritual influence of this place?

We have sacred aboriginal sites right here in the Valley at Wanuskewin, Redberry Lake, and Stony Knoll in Laird. Who lived here in Osler before us – where did they camp and where did they hunt and how did they worship and how did they organize themselves? They didn't leave buildings but they left stones, arrowheads and hammerheads and spear shafts and bone carvings that some of our Mennonite farmers have found and we will start a collection here at church if others have contributions. Wilf found an eagle stone carving that is going up to the Willow Cree Healing Lodge and there is a buffalo rubbing stone in the field south of his house. The stones speak of those who were here for millennia before us, and that should make us curious about these people and their lives and their faith.

Some of us have already been on this quest for relationship for years through our adopted aboriginal children and aboriginal friends we have met along the way. Some of us have participated in sweat lodges and sentencing circles. For some of us who have lived on this land for generations, the land speaks to us also in interesting, comforting and spiritual ways. To a person, I have heard these quests and relationships with our indigenous neighbours have humbled us and enriched our lives. We will spend today's Sunday School Forum here at 11:15 sharing encounters with indigenous peoples in the past and present. Next Sunday's sermon will explore indigenous spirituality as it intersects with Christianity. And then Harold and I will talk about present relationships and poverty.

May Jesus who has broken down the dividing walls between people, visit us with reconciliation in communion this morning. May we be reconciled with the Creator who made us and this incredibly beautiful earth. May we be reconciled to each other and our aboriginal neighbours through Christ. May the Holy Spirit guide us in this path where we are led.

Let us pray: Creator God, thank you for this beautiful land you made and the first people you placed upon it to eat from it and worship you. Help us to learn from these people and their descendants how we may live on the land in the same respectful way and please forgive us and reconcile us, even as we participate in this communion symbol of reconciliation with you. Amen.

Sermon Reflection Questions:

1. How does Isaiah 5 and Matthew 22's passages about God's ownership of land and the relationships between people on God's land speak to us this morning?
2. Indigenous people say the core of their identity and spirituality has to do with their relationship to land. How is our personal and Mennonite identity and spirituality also tied to land in our history and present experience? What do Canada 150+ Shared Land celebrations between Mennonites and Indigenous peoples this summer say to us?
3. What have been our first experiences of aboriginal peoples and what are our current experiences?
4. What does the symbol of communion mean to this conversation?