

Thursday in the Third Week of Lent: March 11, 2021

In Jerusalem, Jesus continues to challenge those with religious and political authority who seek to maintain their positions of power among the Hebrew People. Those with religious and political authority bring a woman caught in the act of adultery to Jesus seeking to apply the full extent of the law by stoning her to death. The male party in this relationship has not been arrested with this woman and there is no indication that the law will be applied in the same way with him. Jesus ignored their pleas for judgement by bending down and drawing in the dirt. In response to their persistent questioning, Jesus invites any of the men who are without sin to cast the first stone. After all of the men leave, Jesus sends the woman on her way with some words of wisdom. Jesus uses this incident to teach about his approach to judgement, noting the commonality between his own understanding and that of the Source of All Life and Love who sent him into this world at that particular time.

Read John 8:21-32. What catches my attention in this gospel passage?

Jesus challenges those with religious and political authority with grace and fortitude. Jesus teaches with clarity, intimately connected and nourished by the One for whom he speaks. Jesus tells those who seek to maintain their power and privilege, **“I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sins. Where I am going, you cannot come!” John 8:21.** However, those with religious and political authority among the Hebrew People are perplexed by this teaching. Even those who have been following Jesus and opened themselves to accept his direction in their lives did not yet fully understand this teaching about judgment. Jesus knows where the next steps in his journey will take him and makes it clear that only he can accomplish what the Source of All Life and Love intends for each and every Human Being in this creation. Jesus knows that he will suffer betrayal, rejection, derision, hatred, and various forms of physical violence. Jesus knows that he will be lifted up for all to witness his willingness to walk the path set out by the Source of All Life and Love for him.

Jesus tells those who follow him, **“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free!” John 8:32.** Those who open themselves to learn from the mystery and generosity of the Source of All Life and Love will become the Human Beings whom we are meant to be and have the creative energy to accomplish what Jesus himself was able to do.

Reread John 8:21-32. What is God saying to us?

The theology and spiritual practices brought to the Americas by Settlers from European countries caused spiritual harm to the Indigenous Peoples which continue to impact relationships between Settlers and indigenous Peoples in our generation. For the Lenten Series through All Saints Anglican Church in King City, another three articles from **QUEST FOR RESPECT: THE CHURCH AND INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY (INTOTEMAK, Mennonite Church Canada, 2017, editors Jeff Friesen & Steve Heinrichs)** were explored in a Talking Circle with an Indigenous Participant present.

In her article **ON GRASSLANDS, GOD, AND THE GIFTS OF OTHERS**, associate professor of Christian Theology at Ambrose University Christina Conroy shares what she learned from the grasslands of Saskatchewan. In travelling from Winnipeg to Regina to Calgary, many people hurtle along the

TransCanada Highway thinking that there is nothing of interest to see in this flat land. However, Dr. Conroy found a section of grasslands between Moosomin and Maple Creek in the traditional territories of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) Peoples. Here the big sky overwhelms the land which teems with obscure forms of life. Grasses and lichen cover the earth. The grasslands sing a song of their own as gusts of wind move the blades of green shimmering in the sunlight. Crocuses and fleabane decorated the green of the grasses with splashes of colour. Wafts of the smell of turkey vulture are caught up in the breezes. White-tail deer lope across the landscape and have given their lives to feed and clothe the Ancestors of the Niitsitapi Peoples for thousands of years. Birds sing giving glory to Creator and Great Spirit. Here Dr. Conroy discovered a community. The first time that she came upon this section of land, she fell on all fours to get closer to the earth and then she rose with gratitude facing in each direction to acknowledge the presence of the Sacred and the abundance of life. Dr. Conroy felt like she had been brought home experiencing herself as sharing in the beauty and goodness of Creation. For six years, Dr. Conroy listened to the stories of Indigenous Peoples about their experiences in residential schools as part of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As a professor, she shared summaries of these stories, noting the role played by the Church in justifying the abuses which had been perpetrated but also inflaming this abuse. As part of Settler society, the Church communicated that the names, stories, languages, knowledge, and ceremonies were wrong and needed to be abandoned. Commissioner Murray Sinclair has pointed out that not only were Indigenous children and youth taught that their languages, cultural practices, and ceremonies were of no value but Settler children and youth were also taught the same lesson. In her own journey of faith and ministry, she too had been hurt by the Church. Dr. Conroy teaches her students about the importance of learning about Indigenous knowledge and wisdom as a way of more fully moving into a relationship with the Source of All Life and Love. Dr. Conroy also teaches her students the importance of Indigenous spirituality in developing a different understanding and relationship with Creation. For Indigenous Peoples, Creation is good. Every part of creation is good, communicating the character of Creator as well as Creator's intention and goal for plants, animals, and the materials of this creation. Dr. Conroy points out that when we observe love, mercy, strength, and healing in the world then we see and hear the presence of the Sacred. In her classrooms after stories of the pain and cruelty which residential school survivors experienced were shared with her students, Dr. Conroy realized that the practice of some Indigenous People to smudge was more beneficial than any of the spiritual practices from her Christian heritage in being cleansed and restored to experience the goodness of being a part of Creator's Creation.

In his article **GAAGII-ISHI-MINIGOWIZIYANG: WE WERE GIFTED BY THE CREATOR**, the Citizen of Sagkeeng First Nation along the southern shores of Lake Winnipeg in central Manitoba and doctoral student of the University of Manitoba in 2017 Darren Courchene poses a question raised by many Indigenous youth and adults: Why follow the religion that has tried to destroy our way of life, the religion of "colonization"? Darren Courchene shares a saying adopted by many Indigenous Peoples around the world about the first meeting between Indigenous and non-Indigenous spiritual leaders: WHEN THE MISSIONARIES ARRIVED, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAD THE LAND AND THE MISSIONARIES HAD THE BIBLE. THEY TAUGHT US HOW TO PRAY WITH OUR EYES CLOSED. WHEN WE OPENED OUR EYES, THEY HAD THE LAND AND WE HAD THE BIBLE. This piece of wry humour also communicates a painful truth. Darren Courchene was raised in a Roman Catholic family, attending mass, observing Lenten

practices, and ate foods permitted on Holy Days. However, his family also followed the teachings of his Anishinaabe-Ojibwe teachings, participating in ceremonies and retaining traditional medicinal knowledge. He noted that it was his understanding that “Anishinaabe-Ojibwe law prohibited the sharing of traditional stories not from the self, family, clan, community, or nation, and you must be given sanction to do so. However, Darren Courchene shared his own story, beginning with questions arising from the first chapter of the Gospel of John which he posed with Sister Spence who taught catechism classes. He found answers to his question through participation in ceremonies and in understanding meaning conveyed through the words of his own language. With humour, Darren Courchene points out the futility of engaging in a competition about who knows more about the events of creation. He notes, “In Anishinaabe-Ojibwe philosophy, all creation stories are true.” At this point in his walk, Darren Courchene understands this principle as “Gizhe-Manidoo’s (Loving Spirit) way of gifting every people of the world a distinct way of communicating with her in other words gaagii-izhi-minigowiziyang (we were gifted by the Creator)”. From the age of 3 to 10 years, every summer, Darren Courchene listened to his great uncle Peter Guimond tell the stories of Nanabozho about great deeds, mishaps, long journeys, and great changes which filled him with a sense of wonder and awe. Over the years, Darren Courchene remembered what his great-uncle said and had fond memories about how he told these stories. As a result, his understanding about the complex meanings and implications of these stories became transformative. Darren Courchene points out that flood stories also can be found among all of the peoples of the world. For the Anishinaabe-Ojibwe Peoples. The gichi-mooshka’an happened in response to the Anishnaabeg not following the Original Instructions given to them by Gizhe-Manidoo. Darren Courchene points out that Nanabozho was one of many sacred being to come to Mother Earth but also identifies that the more important character in the story is Aki (land). For the beginning parts of the story, Aki remains hidden. It is the smallest and most humble animal Wazhashk (Muskrat) who survives the flood and brings some of Aki to the surface of the waters but gives his life in his efforts. Aki agrees to share part of herself so that life can flourish again. When Aki accepts the gift of bimaadizi-bagidanaamowin (breath of life) from Nanabozho, Aki once again became an inawemaagan (relative) to gakina-awiyaa (everyone). For children, this recreation story evokes a sense of wonder and awe in light of the actions of the characters. For adults, the meaning of the recreation story focuses on how a small morsel of Aki can regenerate and become the land upon which all Indigenous Peoples dwell and share. In spite of the destruction caused by colonization, Indigenous Peoples believe that even a small portion of Indigenous knowledge can become sufficient for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples to survive on Mother Earth. Over the years, Darren Courchene has come to understand that these stories of the Anishinaabe-Ojibwe Peoples teach about nindinawemaaginidog (relationality), enawendiwin (connectivity), and waawiyewaag (circularity). Throughout his life, his family accepted both Christian and Anishinaabe-Ojibwe teachings. His mother told stories about her own childhood, including those about her fear of being caught speaking Anishinaabemowin and making sure that her door was locked at night when she was praying the rosary in her own language. Throughout his article, Darren Courchene posted snippets of Christian prayers translated into Anishinaabemowin, noting that his own language Courchene also uses the language of his People to communicate key concepts in his understanding of the spiritual knowledge of his People embedded in the stories of his Ancestors. As Darren Courchene concludes, “I will MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE UNTO THE LORD, but I will choose in which language and spirituality to do so based on the teachings gaagii-izhi-minigowiziyang.”

In his article **RECOVERING ANCIENT PATHWAYS**, the Cree-Saulteaux member of Muscowpetung First Nation in the Qu'Appelle Valley in southern Saskatchewan and professor at the First Nations University of Canada in Regina Blair Stonechild explores the impact of colonization and need to understand the role of Indigenous spirituality for the future. Blair Stonechild is a survivor of Qu'Appelle Indian Residential School. His day began with morning prayers, grace followed at every meal, prayers were said at the start and then again at the end of classes, the rosary was prayed in the evening, and then confession preceded Sunday mass. The teachings of Elders were never mentioned. Indigenous knowledge and spiritual practices were never allowed. A large poster of Father Lacombe's Ladder illustrated how Indigenous children and youth were on the path to heaven if they converted to Christianity while those who followed Indigenous traditional practices were on the path to hell. It was at the University of McGill where Blair Stonechild became aware of the teachings of Indigenous Elders, encountering a non-judgemental attitude as well as a joyful celebration of life and gifts of Creator. Well before the establishment of residential schools, the Vatican communicated to Europeans that Indigenous Peoples in the Americas were less than human and were under the influence of Satan. Blair Stonechild refers to the concept TERRA NULLIUS which identified these "undiscovered" lands as empty so when crosses and flags were planted for respective monarchs, the land was considered to be "empty" so the "discoverers" laid claim and assumed ownership of the lands and all other resources, even if these were still unknown to Europeans. The European spiritual ideology taught that "man" was the central focus of creation and could take dominion of all of the lands, waters, and resources. However, Blair Stonechild points out that for Indigenous Peoples over thousands of years, dreams, visions, and sacred stories communicated that the plants, animals, fish in the waters, birds in the air, insects, crawling creatures, rocks, the sun, the moon, stars, and the materials of creation were beings who were relatives. Human Beings were considered to be part of Creation and to be most vulnerable dependent on the Original Instructions given by Creator to every other being in Creation. As such, Human Beings expressed gratitude to Creator and to each of their Relatives who gave themselves as food, clothing, or shelter. Indigenous Peoples continue their traditional teachings and spiritual practices honouring a complex web of intimate spiritual relationships with the land. However, "discovery" and "colonization" went hand in hand. Indigenous Peoples became obstacles for Europeans to achieve their political, economic, and military goals. Epidemics reduced Indigenous populations significantly. In the name of "civilization", Indigenous culture and languages faced ongoing dynamics set in place by Settlers to be eradicated and erased. However, Indigenous Elders continued to believe that their knowledge and spiritual practices make a significant contribution to the problems of environmental degradation, climate change, and social inequalities which plague all of the Peoples of this planet. Blair Stonechild points out that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission put before Canadians the need for Settlers to "decolonize" our understanding of Indigenous spirituality. Blair Stonechild reviews the basic framework of Indigenous spirituality as a holistic belief system which does not support disrespectful exploitation of resources for profit nor the establishment of societies with glaring social inequalities. Respectful relationships became a central focus so that healing in relationships were sought through prayer, ongoing learning and reflection on the traditional stories, virtuous action, and ceremonies. This belief system is also a practical system. Ceremonies can take place in a variety of places since all of creation is sacred. Elders are spiritual mentors who gain knowledge through a lifetime of hearing the stories of the Ancestors, ongoing prayer, fasting, dreams, visions, learning from the other Beings in creation, and being out on

the land encountering and listening to Creator. Blair Stonechild is aware of the growing consensus among Human Beings that our trajectory forward is not sustainable and that the knowledge and wisdom embedded in Indigenous spirituality is increasing in value.

Reread John 8:21-32. What is God calling us to be and do?

Consider the generosity and ongoing commitment by Creator, Eternal Word, and Great Spirit to create a new path forward for all Human Beings. How can you and I experience the awe and wonder in the presence of the goodness of Creation teeming with life? What do we need to unlearn in order to move forward? What do we need to learn in order to be respectful in the use of the resources which Creation makes available for the survival of our descendants and to deconstruct the glaring inequalities among the Peoples who live on this planet?

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