Sermon September 24, 2023 by Tricia Gerhard

Our scripture this morning introduces us to two people looking for wisdom, discernment and for one young man is completely unsettled by the answer he gets. Our Hebrew scripture focuses on Solomon, a young man thrust into leadership as a king at a very young age. He has quite the legacy to live up to, taking on leadership after his father, the beloved King David. We hear this morning of a dream he has where he meets with God and pleads for wisdom and understanding as he seeks to be the very best leader he can be for his people. He wants to lead but needs help in discerning the very best and wisest way to offer care for the people in his kingdom. Our Gospel introduces us to an unnamed young man who comes to Jesus with questions. In particular, he is desperate to know how to live a perfect and eternal life. The answer Jesus offers, leaves him unsettled. Jesus tells him that the only way to have this life he is asking about is by selling all he owns, taking the money from the sales and giving it to the poor, and then following him. But the young man owns a lot of stuff. Unsettled and likely unhappy, the young man walks away from Jesus, for this new life wasn’t compensation enough for the sacrifices he’d have to make in downsizing.

Wisdom, discernment and being unsettled. Themes that not only run through the scriptures but our own lives too, especially as we continue our work on healing and restoring our relationships with our indigenous siblings. One piece of the United Church’s commitment to reconciliation is found in the remit that is in front of communities of faith and regions right now. As many of you will remember there were a whirlwind of remits several years ago as the church moved from a four- court structure (congregations, presbyteries, conferences and national) to a three-court structure (congregations, regions and national). Remits are required when there are proposed changes to the Basis of Union.

If you are new to the United Church or need a quick refresher (my apologies to the leadership team who heard all of this at the retreat) … The Basis of Union is the theological and structural document that was established when the union between the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational churches happened in 1925. Any changes, from some language changes to large denominationally shaping ones, are required to go to the congregations and or the regions as a remit, which has a deadline that allows for study and decision making. In 2022, the 44th General Council met to do the work of the United Church and at that meeting the National Indigenous Council (which was established with the restructuring) came back to the council with a proposal that requested that the church identify and remove any structural barriers that would prevent developing and sustaining an autonomous National Indigenous Organization within the United Church of Canada.

Friends, the journey to this remit has been lengthy and complex with much discussion, vulnerability, and learning (particularly for the non-indigenous church). I want to take you back in time, in 2018 the General Council gathered in Oshawa, Ontario and in the course of the meeting, the court was presented what is called “The Calls to the Church” which was written by elders who discerned what the indigenous church needs in order to be in good and healthy relationship with the United Church, especially in light of the United Church’s commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The elders write: “We, the Indigenous ministries, and communities of faith of the United Church, declare that we will tell our own story of what ministry means for us. We will decide for ourselves who we are, who constitutes our ministries, groups, and practices.” In all there are nine calls to the church which concern: an Office of Vocation; Ministry Formation, Accompaniment and Oversight; Approved Ministry Placements; Testamur; a National Indigenous Organization for support and fellowship; Belonging; Sustainable Support; and Sexual orientation and diversity.

And so, with the calls in mind, and with the UN Declaration in mind, a proposal came to the general council in 2022 that reflected the National Indigenous Council’s vision that the two parts of the church (indigenous and non-indigenous) work side by side by the removal of structural barriers. In this proposal the General Secretary asks the church to give pre-emptive remit approval for whatever the Indigenous Church determines in the future as the place it will have in the United Church of Canada as guided by the Calls to the Church and without the need for further remits.

On Saturday, the Westworth Leadership Team listened, discerned, and asked questions about the remit, ultimately recommending that the Westworth Council vote “yes” on the remit. If the remit passes it will:

* Enable the indigenous Church to determine its place and structure within the United Church of Canada, and
* Enable the creation of an autonomous National Indigenous Organization within the United Church of Canada.

This, friends, is not only about the indigenous church’s ability to create a church that is reflective of their own spiritual identities and self-determination, but it also about the non-indigenous church recognizing when it’s structures and procedures stand in the way of healing and relationship. I know there are questions… so many questions and so many are unanswerable right now. The approval of this remit means that we are willing to be open to new possibilities even though we might be anxious and unsettled by them. It means that we are willing to recognize that some things need to be beyond our control. This is about the indigenous church being and becoming what it needs to as part of the United Church.

In the original proposal that came from the National Indigenous Circle, the authors write: “The Haudenosaunee speak of the Two Row Wampum. This covenant speaks of our two peoples traveling down a river, each in their own canoe. With respect, we need to allow one another to simply be who we are. It is time to remember this covenant and work as two bodies side by side – The United Church with all its complexity, the National Indigenous Circle with similar complexity. Together we will support each other’s journey.”

We are each in our canoes travelling alongside each other, offering encouragement and support as we travel this river of faith and church. We are not in the same boat, but we navigate the same river. In our willingness to travel along side, to hear the needs of our indigenous family and friends, and to ensure that we uphold our commitment to the learnings offered, we show our continued commitment to reconciliation.

I want to end with some wisdom from Richard Wagamese, but before I do, I say if you have questions, please ask them of me. I may or may not have the answers --- some questions are unanswerable right now but ask me anyway and I will try to find if there are answers out there.

From Richard Wagamese, in his book *What Comes From Spirit.*

What remains the same.

When you come to stand upon the land there’s a sense in you that you’ve seen it all before. Not in any empirical way perhaps. Not in any western sense of recognition. But more in the way it comes to feel upon your skin, the way it floods you with recollection.

Standing beside a tiny creek in the mountains I suddenly remember how it felt to catch minnows in a jar. The goggle-eyed sense of wonder at those silvered, wriggling beams of light darting between stones and the feel of the water on my arms, cool and slick as the surface of dreams.

I lived my life for the sudden flare of sunlight when I broke from the bush back then. The land beckoned through my bedroom window so that sometimes when the house was quiet, I stood there just to hear the call of it spoken in a language that I didn’t know. Calling me to it.

That creek ran out of farmland and wound its way to the reservoir behind an old mill, the voice of it a chuckle, its edges dappled by the shadows of old elms and its light like the dancing bluish green eyes of the girl on the bus you could never find a way to say a word to.

I’d lay across a long flat stone to dip a mason jar elbows deep and hung there, suspended, while minnows nibbled at my fingertips. I let that arm dangle until the feeling went away then raised it with minnows frantic in the sudden absence of their world.

I couldn’t keep them. Couldn’t carry them home like a carnival prize, give them names or place them in a bowl upon my desk. No, something in me understood that some things ache to be free and the charm of them resides in their ability to be that freedom.

So, I let them go. Let them swim away. But, I carried something of that creek, that cold against my arms, the sun warmed stone against my belly, the breeze, the light and the idea of minnows away with me forever.

So that standing on the edge of another creek at fifty-five its like years haven’t happened at all. It’s a journey, this life. A crossing of creeks on steppingstones where so much comes to depend on maintaining balance on every careful placing of the foot.

May it be so.