

Title: **We are All Treaty People**

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Series: Who We Are and Where We Are (First in a four part sermon series in relation to Indigenous Peoples)

Where: TUMC

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Circumstance: "Along the Road to Freedom" (women of courage who experienced great hardship and immigration) painting series is hanging in the sanctuary. This is its third and final week.

Scriptures: Psalm 23, 1 John 3: 16-24

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (1 John 3:17)

Seeing a need and refusing to help, passing by on the other side. This passage – with its question format and its need/refusal juxtaposition - reminds me of the Parable of the Good Samaritan which we have looked at many times before.

It says in Luke's gospel: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27)

Then the query comes: Who indeed is the neighbour?

That will change depending Who We Are and Where We Are. My answer to that today is that we are *all* 'Treaty People' and I will explain that a little later. Today's scripture helps us begin to answer the question of how to love and be a good neighbour. **Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.** (1 John 3:18)

This verse is a deep tenant of my faith. A basic premise of the Anabaptist faith in the Reformation was to read the Bible for oneself and, in community, discern the truth. And then to live and act on that truth.

I'm not much of a history buff - names and dates quickly escape my memory - but the essence of a story draws me in and makes a lasting impression on me. I want to tell you some of my story and to do that I'm going to start with some of the stories that have influenced me over the years.

Any notion I had of history began with the stories of "pioneers" and the "wild west." There were many books, all quite similar in theme, probably the best known were the Laura Ingalls Wilder series, starting with *Little House on the Prairie*. These books were all about the harshness of the vast empty land and how the heroes of the book looked out for one another and used incredible ingenuity to overcome any adversity the land could throw at them.

Barbara Smucker was another favourite authors and I read all of her books in the church library. Some of you may recognize her as the author of *Underground to Canada*. The book I think of today, as I look at all of these paintings is *Henry's Red Sea*. In it "Smucker relates the dramatic and courageous story of refugees from Russia.... in 1946."ⁱ I knew Peter Dyck, my great uncle had been doing relief work with MCC and was charged with seeing these refugees to their destination. It felt entirely different to read this story – tied to my family's history – than the much more 'distant' story of slavery.

When I was 13 I went with my parents to the prestigious Regina Centre of the Arts to see, *And When They Shall Ask*. Perhaps some of you saw it too? The

feature length docu-drama covered 200 years of history about the Russian Mennonite experience, featuring re-enactments, interviews, and archival film footage. It is all bound together by the question: “Can faith triumph in the face of great adversity?”ⁱⁱ

I think the pictures surrounding us are evidence that it can. These women are remembered as courageous and faithful. Many knew Psalm 23 by heart and believed it to be true in their own lives. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” (Ps 23: 4a)

A few years later I slogged through the 440 pages of Al Reimer’s *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*ⁱⁱⁱ and learned more about the events surrounding the Russian Revolution as experienced by the Mennonite colonies. I came to understand how good life had been in Russia for many years, how brutal and bloody it became and how much they lost in the leaving – or not leaving. I also began to glimpse why the peasants revolted and why Mennonite colonies were targets – or at least – considered available for plunder: the wealth discrepancy was great, the neighbourly relationships were minimal, the separation was extreme, and maintaining their German language, private schools and churches, and lack of Russian military service made them appear particularly unpatriotic and suspicious.

These stories are significant among the stories that shaped me. Stories of my people. Stories of many of your people as well.

Now as we consider *Who We Are* and *Where We Are* one more memory from some time in my teen years comes to mind ...

Sitting in the back of my parents' car as we drove through Laird, Saskatchewan, leaving my grandparents' farm, the land where my father was raised, Dad tells me, "This was a First Nations reserve. Some people are now claiming their right to this land right here." I didn't know the history. I didn't know the people. I don't remember the details of what he said. What I do remember is the feeling. A vague dis-ease. An almost unconscious, but deep-rooted fear that I didn't want to acknowledge, along-side a confused awareness of injustice for the Indigenous peoples.

I wished I hadn't heard it. This was a land of peace and prosperity. We were a peace-loving people. How could such a conflict be resolved; I didn't want my family's hundred years' worth of history on this piece of land discounted, but...nothing seemed fair.

It didn't really crystalize for me until I was preparing this sermon that for me - and for the people who were living in the Laird area in the 1970s, 80s and 90s - it wasn't only the distress of any settler facing the prospect of losing their land. It was the fear of some sort of repeat of history.

The Mennonites, my ancestors, prospered in Russia for many years – the Golden Years – and then the people who had been there first revolted and wanted their land back.

Just as the "road to freedom" once led to the Steppes of the Ukraine, the "Road to Freedom" for my family, such as my ancestor Judith Epp – whose story now hangs at the side of our sanctuary (point), led to the Saskatchewan "Valley" – the

rich agricultural land between the North and South Saskatchewan rivers. Eventually, all of my grandparents made their way to that land – Treaty 6 Land.

Then in the 70's, 80's and 90's, there was tension in Laird. Would there be “revolt” in Canada in the 20th century? Would there be violence? Would “we” lose our “hard-earned” prosperity? Would we be displaced *again*? Where would we go?

My fears were not realized. Nothing dramatic or terrible happened to my family or their community. Life was essentially status quo and so I didn't hear about it again for over 20 years.

You know, somewhere along the line I learned about Louis Riel and the Battle of Batouche and a few other military encounters, but I never understood what came before that...or what came after that until quite recently.

(Paraphrased from the KAIROS Blanket Exercise intro)

Indigenous people lived in this land we now call Canada for at least 10,000 years before the arrival of Europeans. At the time of first contact the land was not empty at all as the pioneer stories tend to imply, but populated by millions of people who lived in hundreds of nations. Each community had its own language, culture, traditions, laws and governments. Before the newcomers arrived the Indigenous peoples ended disputes by making treaties.^{iv} When Europeans first came to this land, Turtle Island, they were welcomed, treated as guests, and taught how to survive. Early on treaties were made between various sovereign nations – Indigenous nations and European nations. They were Peace and

Friendship treaties that talked of how the First Peoples and the Settlers would share the resources and live in harmony with each other and the earth.

Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island did not have a concept of owning land.

Mother Earth provided for them and in return they took great care to treat her with respect, only taking what they needed and always giving thanks. Treaties were sacred agreements based on respect and honesty – covenants of peace – not agreements to cede or surrender parcels of land.

Over the years things changed. More Europeans came and more Indigenous people died, many from the diseases Europeans brought with them. Some people believe that half of the Indigenous population alive at the time died from these imported diseases.^v In any case, it wasn't long before settlers outnumbered Indigenous people. As the fur trade dried up, the European newcomers turned more and more to farming and started looking for more land.

Treaty 6 which covers vast portions of what is now central Saskatchewan and Alberta was signed between the Queen and bands of Cree and Stoney First Nations in 1876.^{vi}

According to the Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan, "Soon after the treaty was first signed, some bands chose reserves, moved to them, and began receiving treaty agricultural supplies. Others refused to choose reserves, and tried to hold out for better terms. But in 1879" – 3 years after the first signing – "the last of the great buffalo herds vanished, and the holdout bands had to adhere to the treaty to survive. Chief Big Bear [who we saw on the slide earlier] was the most determined, but he finally signed in 1882."^{vii}

According to a paper called, "Young Chippewayan History – Stoney Knoll - IR #107
The Shared Path of the Young Chippewayan, Mennonite and Lutheran Peoples"

There are 30 square miles of excellent farm land located near the present town of Laird, that was granted to Chief Chippewayan and his people in 1876. The following year, Chief Chippewayan died and his son Young Chippewayan became Chief. Life following the Treaty was very difficult. With the disappearance of the buffalo, many people faced starvation. In turn, some became dependent on Indian agents for food and others returned to the hunt. In 1885, Louis Riel and his Metis people confronted the Government about the way they were being treated and expressed fear about the loss of their land. The Federal Government feared that local Aboriginal people would join with the Metis, so their guns were taken away to force them to farm and to eliminate the possibility of them fighting with Riel. Young Chippewayan heard that buffalo had been sighted and headed south to Cypress Hills to find food for his people. The Young Chippewayan people were scared of returning to this land for fear of reprisal from the Indian Agents and eventually many of them made their home with Bands near North Battleford.

In May of 1897, this land (Reserve #107) was taken from the Young Chippewayan Band by the Federal Government to make it available for white settlement. The Young Chippewayan people were never contacted and were not aware that their land had been relinquished, for it was done without their surrender or consent....in October 1898, [it was given to the Mennonites]....

The Young Chippewayan band has never been compensated for this land that they had taken from them. Most of the descendents of this band reside in the North Battleford area and others near Prince Albert but are considered to be squatters in the communities in which they reside.

Over the years, relationships between members of the Young Chippewayan band and the settlers have not been cordial. Deeply felt feelings of betrayal and injustice on the part of the band have resulted

in some intemperate threats to push the settlers off the band's land. This reinforced existing alienation and led in turn to equally deeply held mistrust and even fear on the part of some settlers. Previous efforts at resolving, or at least easing, this tension have fallen on 'stony ground'^{viii}

Prior to 2006 Chief Weenie and MCC staff Leonard Doell worked to bring the factions together. Reading from a report by Leonard Doell(2011, substantiated by the article "An Historic Meeting on Stoney Knoll" from the Mennonite Church paper Intotemak, 2006):

On 22 August 2006, approximately 130 people (Young Chippewayans, Mennonites and Lutherans) gathered at Stoney Knoll to Commemorate the 130th Anniversary of the signing of Treaty Six and to continue the journey of building friendship and understanding....A highlight was the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding by all three groups: giving thanks to the Creator, indicating respect for Covenants including Treaties and calling for a committing to peace, justice and sufficiency for all communities. We agreed that we did not want to fight amongst each other but to hold the Federal Government responsible for the injustice that they had created. Chief Weenie emphasized that this was not a time of confrontation but as a time of healing between our peoples. The emphasis was to be a spiritual one of healing, where perhaps said Chief Weenie we could set an example to the rest of the country of how our peoples could live in peace and harmony with each other. Chief Weenie made it clear that the Young Chippewayan respected the current ownership of the land by the settlers and in turn Mennonite and Lutheran communities pledged support for the Young Chippewayan band's ongoing struggle to obtain compensation for the land owed to them under Treaty Six after all these years.^{ix}

This is just one story. There are many, many more unsettled land claims, to say nothing of all the other injustices along the way. I thought about the disparity between the Mennonite colonies in the Golden Years and their Russian servants or peasant neighbours. And then I thought about where I am now. The disparity of wealth between my life and the life on many First Nation reserves is just as

great. No matter how modest our home appears in comparison to our neighbourhood, I am living firmly in the middle of “first world” conditions, while even representatives of the United Nations have publically said that Canada’s First Nations are living in third world conditions.^x...I have never experienced a boil-water advisory in my home, while some Indigenous people have lived with this for more than 20 years. My children do not need to advocate for their own education just to get basic supplies and services such as adequate libraries and heat. I have never been denied medical care because the federal and provincial governments could not decide who should pay. I can buy all the fresh fruits and vegetables I want in any season and the bill will never be more than 25% of our family income while some families couldn’t possibly buy any fresh fruits or vegetables for months on end.

These conditions are a direct result of how this land has been settled and how the original intent of treaty-making has been ignored. Treaties are agreements between two sovereign nations where the citizens of each have certain rights and responsibilities. We all, as citizens of Canada, have certain rights and responsibilities.

A quote from Ovide Mercredi at the Crown-First Nations Gathering in 2012, “To us the answer is not about incremental change, it is not about just concrete action, it is also repairing the relationship. And the way to repair the relationship between us and Canada is to have this country acknowledge that its richness and its wealth come from their one-sided interpretation of the treaties. There has to be henceforth a double understanding of what those treaties represent.”^{xi}

This brings me back to our Scriptures.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall *not want*.... (Ps 23: 1)

He leads me in *right paths* for his name's sake. (Ps 23: 3)

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (1 John 3:16-17)

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 John 3: 18)

ⁱ http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2166966.Henry_s_Red_Sea

ⁱⁱ <http://www.mennonitemediasociety.com/store.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4816513-my-harp-is-turned-to-mourning>

^{iv} KAIROS Blanket Exercise, 4th edition, 2014.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/treaty_6.html

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} “Young Chippewayan History – Stoney Knoll - IR #107: The Shared Path of the Young Chippewayan, Mennonite and Lutheran Peoples” found at http://www.circle-m.ca/conferences-and-events/circle_m_conferences/Past%20CIRCLE%20M%20Conferences/New%20Shoots%202011/Young%20Chip%20History.pdf

^{ix} Leonard Doell. February 2011.

<http://mcccana.ca/sites/mcccana.ca/files/media/common/documents/youngchippewayanindianreserve.pdf> and Eric Olfert, Intotemak, Fall 2006, Vol 35, No 3, pg 1, 4

<http://resources.mennonitechurch.ca/FileDownload/6020/Intotemak.fall06.pdf>

^x Eg. James Anaya, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2013; United Nations Committee on the Eliminations of Discrimination of Women (2015) on <http://www.kairosCanada.org/dignity-rights/justice-for-indigenous-women/>

^{xi} KAIROS Blanket Exercise, 4th edition, 2014.