

**Sermon: Indigenous Peoples Sunday, June 23, 2019 - Isaiah 26: 6-9**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley**

I want you to bring to mind the most lavish banquet you can imagine: rich foods prepared just right, tender-crisp vegetables fresh from farm to table, your favourite beverages served with a flair, perfectly ripe fruits and a cascading dessert trolley. (About now my stomach is suggesting that I should have had a bigger breakfast before Church!) That is the image painted for us today in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah.

These words are so vivid, because they were expected to happen soon. It's hard to place the exact point in history, because in some places Isaiah is very vague about locations and in other places, very specific. But the suggestion by Bible commentator Christopher Seitz, is that this was written right on the cusp of the Jewish exiles coming back home. Jerusalem, and all of Judah, had been ransacked by the Babylonians and the healthiest of the people hauled off to exile, but now Babylon was under siege and nearly ready to fall. Now it was time to prepare for a feast, back on the holy hill in Jerusalem. Israel and Judah would soon be restored but so would other nations, as they turned toward God... and there would be rejoicing, and food for all. Though many Christian commentators have viewed this scene in Isaiah 25 as a far-off prophecy of a heavenly banquet at the end of time, that doesn't fit the mindset of this Jewish prophet; the banquet described by Isaiah is an imminent time of restoration, enemies and unhappy neighbours reconciled to one another at a banquet, surrounded by holy intention.

Jesus also spoke of banquets in his parables, and his banquet metaphor typically has two aspects. One aspect is the "heavenly banquet" of everlasting heavenly joy, and the other aspect is a very earthy image, of a world where all people were treated fairly in the here and now. Jesus' promise of a new realm or Kin-dom where all may sit together at table freed from rivalries, is both a statement of the final destination of this human journey, and a challenge to expand the tables we eat at right now. And to underline his words with actions, Jesus chose to enjoy the company of dining partners who were systematically excluded in his culture. By his actions, he demonstrated that we feast best when nobody is excluded from the table.

And yet, our tables often have missing guests. A Jewish Passover tradition is to have an extra cup of wine and, in some settings, one extra chair at the Passover table. Known as "Elijah's seat" this chair is set out in recognition of the prophet who will usher in the Messiah; making room for Elijah and the Messiah at Passover and other rituals also symbolizes the people's desire for a day of equity and justice, a day when all those who are in need, will have a place to come and eat. What a beautiful, powerful tradition to include in a sacred meal.

Many of us have empty chairs at our tables. Loved ones who have died, family members from whom we are estranged, hopes abandoned or not yet realized... many of us have that sense of incompleteness. As noted by the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls report released earlier this month, countless Indigenous households have empty chairs, and anger and sorrow and enduring fear, as chairs continue to empty. Amidst the pain of life's empty chairs, we seek reassurance that there are better days ahead: reassurance from God and from one another.

It has felt to me that every congregation I have served in the United Church of Canada, has had empty chairs at the table. If we view each Sunday gathering, and each pot-luck luncheon, and each Council or committee meeting, as places where we sit 'round God's table, there are always empty chairs. We'd like to hear younger voices at the table. We'd like to hear a variety of accents and languages at the table. We hope the table talk can include the struggles of those who have a hard time holding a job, and those who have deep doubts about God, and those seeking a safe place as they battle their way through addiction. We'd like people with a variety of opinions, experiences, sexual orientations and gender identities, to feel equally welcome and equally valued at the table, knowing how much everyone's experience is enriched by such diversity. We'd like to be at tables where we had done everything within our capacity to eliminate physical or emotional or cultural barriers to having a place at the table. We know that there will always be some empty chairs at table,

for God's circle of care will always be bigger than we are able to bring into being, and that gap creates in us a healthy yearning for a table that is inching closer to fullness.

One place where the empty chairs have been most noticeable, has been in our denomination's relationship with Indigenous congregations. From 1925 until the end of 2018, the United Church was arranged into Presbyteries – local groupings of congregations, such as Foothills Presbytery which went from Banff to Acme to Strathmore to Claresholm, not including the city of Calgary – and Conferences – larger collections of several Presbyteries, with our former Conference including all of Alberta, plus Peace River Country in BC, plus the Territories. But starting in the mid-1980s, the Indigenous Church needed its own space, to be able to find a place of spiritual self-determination after being so messed around by the Indian Residential Schools and the overall colonial attitudes of the Church. So the Indigenous congregations in Alberta became a Presbytery unto themselves, All Tribes Presbytery; and Plains Presbytery in Saskatchewan, and Keewatin Presbytery in Manitoba and NW Ontario, and Great Lakes Waterways Presbytery in Ontario and Quebec were formed, and with participation from Indigenous ministries in British Columbia formed the new, Canada-wide All Native Circle Conference.

Where this left us, in places like Foothills Presbytery, was geographic gatherings well aware that we had empty chairs at the table, as our neighbours from Morley were, quite rightly, at table with other First Peoples. We knew this had to be, for the 1986 Apology from the United Church to First Peoples, which we heard earlier today, was acknowledged, but not accepted. At the General Council of 1988, Elder Edith Memnook said these words:

“It is heartening to see that The United Church of Canada is a forerunner in making this Apology to Native People. The All Native Circle Conference has now acknowledged your Apology. Our people have continued to affirm the teachings of the Native way of life. Our spiritual teachings and values have taught us to uphold the Sacred Fire; to be guardians of Mother Earth, and strive to maintain harmony and peaceful coexistence with all peoples.

“We only ask of you to respect our Sacred Fire, the Creation, and to live in peaceful coexistence with us. We recognize the hurts and feelings will continue amongst our people, but through partnership and walking hand in hand, the Indian spirit will eventually heal. Through our love, understanding, and sincerity the brotherhood and sisterhood of unity, strength, and respect can be achieved.

“The Native People of The All Native Circle Conference hope and pray that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are the words of action and sincerity. We appreciate the freedom for culture and religious expression. In the new spirit this Apology has created, let us unite our hearts and minds in the wholeness of life that the Great Spirit has given us.”

This time, of being in separate circles, separate tables, was necessary for the sake of healing and wisdom and empowerment. That time apart made room for us to do the hard work, of trying to live into the spirit of the 1986 Apology, and helped create space for the 1998 apology regarding Residential Schools to come forth. It called us to be witnesses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, and to start embracing its recommendations. As much as I lament how diminished my Ministry has been, by these thirty-plus years of apart-ness, thirty years of geographic Presbytery and Conference life without Indigenous congregations, yet I know how important these years have been for the consolidation of the Indigenous Ministries of the United Church, and for new shapes of relationship to emerge.

Now, in the year 2019, we find ourselves very much in an in-between time. Presbyteries and Conferences are no more and for many of us that evokes a huge sigh of relief, as the amount of busy-work required to keep that machinery running was simply beyond our capacity. Within the new model – of mid-sized regions replacing Presbyteries and Conferences, and much of that former work being handled in very different ways or simply not being done anymore – we have the opportunity to seek new relationships, new priorities, new ways of being. And in the original schematic of these regions, there was the stated possibility that Indigenous congregations would have the possibility of “dual membership” – continuing on in separate gatherings, while once again

taking a seat at our regional table. I was perhaps unduly excited by this, because in our growing connections and friendships with the Stoney Nakoda people, we have learned and grown so much in our understanding of a God who speaks to us in many ways, through all of creation.

What we came to realize in Lethbridge, at the first ever gathering of our new Chinook Winds Region, is how premature these hopes were. We did an excellent job at electing a strong, diverse group of leaders to form our first executive, but it turns out that on a National scale, we've done what we've always done as a Church, assuming that the timeline that fits the settler church will just naturally work for everyone, and that simply has not given the time for the fullness of traditional wisdom to emerge. And so we're still not sure what the structure of the Indigenous Church will look like, and we're still not sure how or how often we will all sit together at table, but we are starting to find the patience to just let this unfold as it will. Regardless of how that national Indigenous entity emerges, my hope and prayer is that the local connections we have started to make, and the trust that is starting to emerge, will continue as we allow our Creator God to build links between the United Church community in Morley and Ralph Connor Memorial United Church in Canmore.

At our final Evensong of the season last Wednesday, Gloria Snow and Ken Levae presented us with some wonderful images, that speak of how much we have to gain as we move towards God's intention for connection, and mutual support. We heard about the significance of the braid, braids of hair and braids of sweetgrass, with many individual strands coming together as one. We heard about the strength of intersecting circles, as circles of care come together to form a strong and durable chain. We heard spiritual insights from the perspectives of the Stoney Nakoda people, the coastal Salish people, along with Hawaiian traditional beliefs, all speaking of respect across cultures and the equality we have in Christ. And it reminded me once more, of how much we benefit when we can sit together in sacred circles. I learned so much and felt the power of the Spirit present in all of it, and a deep participation in Christ's heart for inclusion.

Our Affirming Journey – our embracing of an agenda of inclusiveness, our yearning for a table of diversity, our acknowledgement of our own marginalization as we seek the companionship of others on the margins – is a profound, ongoing way of saying “yes” to Christ's own heart for inclusion. It accepts responsibility for past hurts and orients us toward the future of reconciliation and grace that is both intended and energized by the Holy Spirit. And it very much understands that to be affirming and inclusive demands ongoing efforts to build good relations with our Indigenous sisters and brothers.

In the great arc of life, and in the small decisions of our days, we know how much fuller everything is when our tables are open and diverse and everyone knows that they are welcome, and honoured, and beloved. We have learned that the heart of Christ is closer to us when we walk together, and listen to one another. In this hour of worship, and in all we do as disciples of Jesus, may our actions proclaim this belief. Amen.

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