

Sermon TUMC - September 26, 2021 - (First Hybrid)

Season of Creation: Know your place

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Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Psalm 126

["The neighbourhood that we have been set down in is one that we must learn to care for in all its diverse parts and needs. We must become "ecologically literate," understanding its most basic law: that there is no way the whole can flourish unless all parts are cared for. Sallie McFague, in 'Essentials of Christian Theology' (111-112)]

So here we are with our feet touching the ground of "our" church building. And suddenly, a sense of place becomes more important than what we thought it was. And this idea of place of and land is what I'd like us to reflect on this morning in light of our Season of Creation theme.

Last week Peter told us about how his friend Kathy had done some composting while in Kurdistan and how odd it was for her urban neighbours to figure out why on earth she was doing that. I was reminded of a group I used to help run when I worked at the U of T Chaplaincy called Ecology and Spirituality. It was the simplest of things: we mostly planted a garden on campus, had time of reflection, and visited someone's backyard garden. I remember needing to explain how strawberries don't grow on trees. It was amazing to me that many of these urban young adults in the group had never even planted anything, much less put their hands into the dirt! That was mind boggling to me.

So how do we reflect on land and place from our mostly urban experience?

I want to say that there are some among us who have embraced the farming life and the gardening life. I am so grateful for that, and I am sure we can learn from the people among us who have continued those practices.

We are in danger of losing something important when we lose our connections with land and place. There is knowledge that comes with knowing the ins and outs of somewhere. Like where are the water sources? How high do tides get? What direction do storms normally come from? What kind of soil do we have here and what grows best? Where are the floodplains where we shouldn't build houses? Are there deer or racoons who hang around who might be interested in eating my garden in this particular place?

An example close to home about knowing your place: did you know that there is a stream that runs underneath this building and is kept under control by a system of sump pumps? Last week we were at the building when Peter Dick, someone with a deep knowledge of 1774 Queen Street East emerged from the bowels of this building. He had just serviced those pumps on our behalf. I for one am glad for all of you who quietly tend to this particular building in this particular place. Somebody has to know about those pumps, so I'm putting it in a sermon so that we pass it on to future generations.

There are so many other examples of place-based knowledge, especially by folks who live in close relationship with the land. This week I heard a report on CBC about how the scale of the BC fire disasters might have been avoided if folks had paid attention to local indigenous practices of controlled burns, to their knowledge of how fire behaves in their particular geography. And of course, the outcome might have been significantly different with indigenous access to fire fighting resources that didn't rely on appealing to the provincial government which took several days to respond.

When it comes to how settler cultures interact with the land, there is so much that could use a do-over. The scale of it is mind-boggling, especially in our current context of climate crisis. We are coming to terms with the destructive ways of interacting with the land and the environments it sustains. And of course, this means coming to terms with the harms done to indigenous peoples who stewarded the land before settlers came around thinking we could do better. It is urgent that we listen to and adopt the wisdom of how to truly live in mutual relationship with the land. And this, even for urban dwellers such as most of us, requires a shift in how we think.

My Mennonite ancestors were part of a harmful cultural mindset about how to interact with the land which I realize I still carry it in me. It's complicated, and hard to sum up in just a few words. I think it mostly has to do with upholding the values of ownership and productivity.

For instance, I carry a sense that I “own” my house, my yard, my trees, my mortgage — and in turn that creates frustrations when my neighbour Virginia creeper insists on crossing over the fence! I also feel like there should be physical evidence that I'm taking good care of “my” property — weed control, landscaping, orderly gardening, etc. I even plant things that I will never really get around to eating, just as a matter of principle— sage anyone? And I daydream or worry about property values, inheritances for my kids, will it all fund my old age, that kind of thing. Ownership and productivity are deep in my bones. [In case you didn't notice that was me confessing to my position of privilege]

One of the things that happened to some early farming Anabaptists over in Europe (my ancestors) when they were trying to separate church from State, was that the State was happy to separate them from their land — “no rights of ownership for you Anabaptists, if you want to farm you can go over there to that wasteland, knock yourselves out, see what you can make of it.” And that they did, they took wastelands and through cooperation with each other and hard work turned them into “productive” farmland to feed themselves and take care of their families. Eventually they did scoop up their chances to “own” land, and the “turn-a-so-called wasteland-into-farmland model thrived.” Some examples are the Ukraine, the Paraguayan Chaco and a lot of Canadian soil. — Historians and farmers among you, please forgive this over-simplification.

A question that probably wasn't often asked is what was going on in those so-called “wastelands” in the first place, and who got to call them that? Who (animal or human) might have been living in those environments before they were turned into “productive” farms? What might have been growing there before?

Mennonites of course weren't the only ones with this way of thinking and this environmental blindspot. It just was and is part of colonialism: “the policy or

practice of acquiring full or partial control over another [land], and occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.”

The thing is, this way of seeing the world had lots of ways of justifying itself. One was how we understood — as Christians— our roles of stewards of the earth. What did God really want us to do with the land?

And then there is a thing called the Doctrine of Discovery.¹ These were theological and legal frameworks back in the 1400’s before the Americas were “discovered” that said Christian governments — most of the European ones at the time — could just take over any land that wasn’t owned by Christians, and could enslave other people who were not Christians.

So much harm has come from this way of seeing the world. It comes with a sense of Christian superiority that is at the root of much racism, a sense of control and a lack of humility that is at the root of destructive “progress,” and is one of the sources moral and spiritual poverty that we find in our society today. (There is an Anabaptist Network committed to undoing the damage of this particular doctrine. It has informative videos and podcasts you will find a link in this week’s announcements²)

The thing is, there are ways of reading the Bible that also make it seem OK to dominate the land and make it fruitful. This one we read in Deuteronomy could be one of them, except when we take a closer look.

¹ The Doctrine of Discovery: A theological, philosophical, and legal framework dating to the fifteenth century that gave Christian governments moral and legal right to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous Peoples. This pattern of oppression began with papal bulls, or decrees. One of the most infamous is Romanus Pontifex, issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1455. Romanus Pontifex justified enslaving and seizing the land and possessions of anyone who was not a Christian, setting the stage for colonization as well as the enslavement of African people by Europeans. – Sarah Augustine, *The Land is Not Empty* (Herald Press, 2021), 27

² Dismantling the doctrine of discovery: a movement of Anabaptist people of faith. <https://dofdmverno.org/>
Podcast: <https://dofdmverno.org/the-doctrine-of-discovery-podcast/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvM4SjN76Yg>

Land occupation in scripture is complicated and the discussion lives in many a treatise about God's presumed violence in the Hebrew Scriptures. (A few years back we did a series on the book of Joshua that explored this too — it takes more than one paragraph in my sermon to unpack all that). I'll just say that the key thing to keep in mind when reading about passages of land that God has given and people have taken, is that the narratives of domination in Scripture can be somebody's version of justifying their position and claiming it was God who put them in power over others. We might not be getting all sides of a story when we are reading just one passage.

What could possibly go wrong if you think God gave you the right to "own" the land and kick everyone else out and kill or enslave them? — that is a rhetorical question. A lot can go wrong and a lot did go wrong, not just in our times but even already in the Biblical narrative.

For now, I'd like to draw your attention to a couple of key things here in Deuteronomy that can sometimes be overlooked. God had some very clear expectations about those formerly enslaved Israelites who were about to move from wandering in the desert into some new land. They are above all to keep things in perspective. They are reminded that **it is and always has been God's sustenance that takes care of them**, whether in the desert or in the land flowing with milk and honey.

The other thing is that the land they are being promised is already set up with everything that they need to thrive: water, wheat, barley, grapes, figs, olives, pomegranates (some will recognize this as the seven species). And it comes with a warning: "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God." Nowhere does it say that they own the land or are to transform it into something other than what it is.

Elsewhere in Scripture, in parts we have mostly chosen to ignore, there is an ingenious plan called Jubilee that makes sure that any sense of ownership of land, has a reset every so often, each generation (50 years) so that nobody can keep owning more and more land. So that nobody can own more and more and more.

Leviticus 25:23-24 has God saying: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine: with me you are but aliens and tenants. Through the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.”

In the book *Unsettling the Word*, Tamara Shantz has a powerful poem that interacts with this portion of Scripture. Her refrain is “*This land is not your retirement plan, this land belongs to me.*” She goes on to wonder about the implications in relation to indigenous peoples. (*For those who have the book, I highly recommend it to you pg.34*).

Another author points out that: “ Land is food, pharmacy, clothing, shelter, ancestral burial grounds, site of spiritual connection, and so much more. Under the Doctrine of Discovery, Indigenous lives were deemed to matter less than Christian, European-descended lives. Sovereign land claims and treaties going back generations were dismissed as standing in the way of “progress” and “civilization.” This dynamic continues today. White settler colonialism, hand-in-hand with capitalism, converts land from gift into commodity to be used, bought, and sold, along with the water and soil on its surface and the oil, gas, and ore beneath. “³

Here at TUMC we have made it a practice to make a land acknowledgement at the start of our services. It’s not because it is politically correct. We are doing this because we know that our use of this land is complicated and is built on injustice and misunderstanding in relation to the original peoples and species and landscapes that were here.

We sometimes mention the Dish with one Spoon wampum belt agreement. This is something that goes way back in time. Then in the 1800’s some parts of the Great Lakes came under Treaty 13. A Dish With One Spoon, is a law used by indigenous peoples of the Americas to describe an agreement for sharing hunting territory among two or more nations. People are all eating out of the single dish, that is, all hunting in the shared territory. This is in a mindset that recognizes we all share the natural resources together.

³ Katerina Friesen, *Stories of Repair : A Reparative Justice Resource toward Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery*

Adrian Jacobs clarifies: “Treaty was about how we were to conduct relationships with one another in places where there could be conflict: for example, in hunting territories.” ... What Europeans did is take their conceptions of land ownership ... and fix them—without permission—on our territories. In much of North America, the colonizers were acting out of English common law, using terms like quitclaim, cede, release, and surrender. Indigenous peoples did not have that lexicon of meaning. They had their own understandings—relational understandings—to respect each other in this territory. We opened the door and said, “Come in and share the rich bounty of the land.”⁴

I guess my neighbour’s annoying vine and the huge pine trees that is in my yard and reaches across theirs, have the right idea of how things really work on the land. They don’t care about the fence.

The work of reconciliation with indigenous peoples, the work of climate justice and the call of our faith requires that change our minds about how we conceive about land and place. **God has provided the land in its abundance, it does not belong to us. This is a small and a huge shift. Can we do it?**

I’d like to conclude with a poignant story from the book *Stories of Repair* Returning Land to the Siletz Tribe by Deb Coates {EDITED}

“In the late 1970s, my dear father-in-law died, and my mother-in-law gave my husband and me a twenty-two-acre parcel of land as a living inheritance. This beautiful, ancient land was once owned, nurtured, and honored by the Indigenous tribe known then and now as the Siletz. In the 1950s, the federal government seized this land from the Siletz and made it available for purchase. [That’s how it came into their possession.]

Our inherited land included a two-acre parcel lot that was bound by the Siletz River to the west and crowned with towering ancient old-growth fir trees that

⁴ See *The Dish Feeds Us All: Jubilee and Indigenous Laws of Sharing* Adrian Jacobs and Steve Heinrichs in *Stories of Repair*

kept sentinel watch over ancient Siletz burial grounds. The cemetery continues to be used as a sacred Siletz burial site.

Early one May we received a call from one of the elders of the Siletz. He was requesting permission to cross our land and enter the sacred burial site to pay homage, remember, and celebrate the lives of his people. Each May, for decades, the Siletz tribe had made this call to my mother-in-law's family, requesting permission to enter their burial site. Now they were asking us.

We were stunned. We felt the weight of the request, and our position of power inherited through conquest. We felt the wrongness of this land ownership. In that moment, the truth of conquest and the calling for reparation were made abundantly clear. We went to the land. We walked the land. We knew the land was not ours. We were not the rightful owners of this land or these burial sites.

Our story is one of return, loss, grief, and ultimately dancing. When we decided in the mid- 1980s to "gift" —return!— the two-acre burial site to the rightful owners, neighbours and friends in the Siletz and Logsdan communities, our decision came at great cost of relationship with my husband's family (and the recent loss/denial of further inheritance).

The Siletz tribe invited us and our young family to participate in the circle dance of Nee Dosh (a sacred dance, once forbidden), in which the Siletz people go to "the center of our world" and offer prayers for individuals, whole families, and the community. Inviting us to participate was a way of saying thanks to us, but it was more. It was a prayer of thanks to the Creator for all God had provided, a prayer for the continuation of these good gifts, and a reasserting of their determination to fix the world, to renew and repair it and make it as it is supposed to be.

We have never regretted returning the burial land to the Siletz tribe. We do grieve the loss of family relationships. And we have lingering anguish about the ownership of twenty acres.

This is the first time we have publicly spoken about our experience regarding firsthand reparation. It is a deeply humbling story for us. We have only recently begun to recognize our relationship to identity and place. We wonder what more we can do. . . .

I wish you could come and walk the creek and the riverside with me. And just be. Be in that space of sacred connectedness, and there wonder with me about the voices who were, who are, and who will come. All voices singing the Divine of all creation.

The Siletz people are dancing again. We dance with them.”