**Thirsting for Reconciliation**

**Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**NPMC, August 20, 2017**

**Scripture: Amos 5:21-24 and John 4:1-26**

No doubt many of you have been watching and reading news this week about Charlottesville, Virginia. This U.S. city was the site of a huge neo-Nazi/white supremacist demonstration, which at one point surrounded a church during an interfaith worship service, holding torches and weapons and chanting racist slogans. One white supremacist man also drove his car into a crowd of peaceful counter-protesters, which resulted in the death of 32-year-old Heather Heyer as well as two law enforcement officers. There has been endless commentary and analysis of what really happened, shock that Nazism is still an active ideology so long after the Second World War, outrage at the U.S. president’s refusal to clearly condemn this public display of white supremacy. In the midst of all of this troubling news, however, there have somehow also been inspiring moments, such as the coming together of clergy of various faiths in a peaceful march through the streets of Charlottesville, and a statement put together by more than 350 Christian ethicists and theologians condemning the white supremacy that claims to represent their faith. I found one quote particularly meaningful: they write,

**We proclaim**that the gospel of Jesus Christ has social and political implications. Those who claim salvation in Jesus Christ, therefore, must publicly name evil, actively resist it, and demonstrate a world of harmony and justice in the midst of racial, religious and indeed all forms of human diversity.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As Canadians, it might be easy for us to look at a situation like that of Charlottesville and think, well, good thing we live in Canada, cause that would never happen here! After all, we represented freedom for the African American slaves who came North on the Underground Railroad. But while the violence of racism here may not be as overt as the mob brutality of the KKK in the southern US, that doesn’t mean there is no racism in our context. It’s just that it takes other forms and is directed predominantly toward a different group of people – namely, Indigenous peoples.

Now I know those of us who are white settlers of European descent often react quite strongly when the question of racism arises (one has only to think of the reactions to the billboard the city put up about checking one’s privilege and prejudice). We tend to think, “well, I’m a nice person. I’m generally polite to everyone I meet, no matter their background. I haven’t personally done any harm to Indigenous people; I’m not racist.” But the problem with thinking of it so individualistically is that it erases the history between Indigenous and settler peoples in this land, and the way that prejudice against Indigenous people is built into our laws, traditions, and systems – think residential schools, the pass system, voting rights, etc. – in ways that I benefit from as a settler, whether I’m aware of it or not. That’s why those on the front lines of anti-racism work often speak of systemic racism or systemic violence – it’s part of the systems of how we function as a society in this country.

The clearest example I can think of comes from Winnipeg, the city in which I grew up, which is on Treaty 1 Territory. Now Winnipeg is a large city with a population of about 750 000, and it gets its water from Shoal Lake, which just over the border into Ontario, near Kenora. Now what I haven’t known until relatively recently is the tragedy and the irony of the situation of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, which is an Anishinaabe/Ojibway reserve on this lake. Despite being so close to the source of Winnipeg’s drinking water, this community itself doesn’t have access to clean water; they’ve been under a boil-water advisory for almost 20 years. The problem is that the aqueduct that supplies Winnipeg’s water cuts this reserve off from the mainland, making it an artificial island. This means the people have to take a barge or ice roads to get back and forth to work and school, to buy groceries, and everything they need on the mainland. But this aqueduct also diverted dirty water into the reserve’s water source. So Winnipeg’s access to water contaminated their water, and they do not have the resources or access to roads to build an adequate water treatment plant on their isolated artificial island. They have to buy and transport bottled water for drinking, and use contaminated water for other things; they talk of their children getting rashes from bathing in contaminated water. To add insult to injury, the aqueduct also disturbed their ancestral burial site when it was built 100 years ago.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Now obviously, I personally had no hand in the decisions that led Shoal Lake 40 to its current situation. And yet, as a Winnipegger for many years, I have quite directly benefitted from the poverty of this particular First Nations community without really knowing. And two years ago, I had the privilege of visiting Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, and hearing first-hand from the Chief and some community members about what life is like for them, what conditions they live with so that my home city can have clean water. It was a heartbreaking experience.

When I read the Scripture for today, I couldn’t help but think of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, because it has so much to do with water and thirst. So in the story from John 4, Jesus is travelling from Judea to Galilee, and it says that “he had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4). In fact, sometimes Jewish people chose to avoid Samaria on this journey, as they did not want to associate with the Samaritan people. But Jesus decides to go straight through Samaritan territory. Not only that, but Jesus decides to stop at a well and ask a Samaritan person – and a woman at that! – for a drink of water, which results in a full-blown theological discussion. The text says that Jesus was sitting by the well, when “A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’” But the woman is surprised, and lets him know it, replying, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)” (v. 7, 9). Jesus says that actually, she should be the one asking him for water – specifically, “living water,” or clean, flowing water. But she finds his words confusing, and says, “Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” And Jesus clarifies that he’s speaking metaphorically, of quenching a spiritual, even existential thirst; in other words, he’s offering life-giving restoration, healing, or *shalom*. He says, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” And “The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water’” (v. 13-15).

And then Jesus seems to ask her a trick question, telling her to go get her husband. She replies that she is not married, and Jesus then goes through her history of relationships, even though she hasn’t told him any of this information. She says, “Sir, I see you are a prophet,” and then raises the issue or disagreement between the Jews and Samaritans – the appropriate mountain on which to worship God, Jerusalem for the Jews and Mount Gerizim for the Samaritans (v. 16-20). And Jesus essentially tells her that the debate over mountains really doesn’t matter, because soon, “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” And she guesses that he must be referring to the coming of the Messiah or Christ, and he confesses to her that he’s the Messiah (v. 21-26).

Now as you might have noticed, this is a rather long, meandering conversation – it’s in fact Jesus’ longest conversation in the Gospels[[3]](#footnote-3) – and some of it may not make sense to us today. You see, to the original audience, the setting of a man and a woman meeting at a well had a very specific connotation: it was extremely romantic! Several of the major patriarchs and matriarchs meet at wells, including Isaac and Rebecca (Gen. 24), Moses and Zipporah (Exodus 2), and Jacob and Rachel, who fall in love at first sight at a well (Gen. 29-30). And the Samaritan woman actually mentions Jacob in connection with this particular well. So a meeting at a well would have suggested wedding bells, reminding people of marriage covenants as well as the covenant God made to these patriarchs and matriarchs that their families would be blessed and be a blessing to others.

But this story is not, in fact, romantic. It’s actually the opposite, containing a number of broken covenants – there are the woman’s five previous marriages which did not last (we’re not told why),[[4]](#footnote-4) and, of course, also the broken covenant between Jesus’ people and her people, the Jews and the Samaritans, despite their common ancestors. And yet in this very conversation, Jesus and the Samaritan woman take the risk of crossing the boundaries that their people have set up and begin to find common ground. In this way, we could say they begin to quench one another’s thirst for reconciliation, and the renewal of covenant.

Now this implicit reference to covenant is really interesting, because a covenant actually has a lot in common with a treaty. And every Sunday at this church, we remind ourselves that we are on Treaty 6 Territory, that we are all treaty people in this country, bound as Indigenous and Settler peoples in relationship with each other as our forbears agreed long ago to share this land. But as the experience of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation shows, our treaties are in disrepair because Settlers have so often broken these agreements. That community and the 85 other First Nations communities currently under boil-water advisories[[5]](#footnote-5) in Canada are deeply thirsty, both for literal, clean water as well as for true reconciliation and a renewal of commitment to live up to treaty promises.

And this is where Amos comes in, with his somewhat unsettling words. He speaks on God’s behalf, saying,

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
    and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
    I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
    I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
    I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
    and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

What exactly is going on in this passage? It’s a description of worship – of offerings and singing songs of praise, but God wants nothing to do with these things. God goes so far as to say that God “hates” and “despises” these acts of worship! Could that be right, or does the prophet Amos have this all wrong? Well, it’s not that God hates all worship, but rather that God hates empty worship, or worship which is not accompanied by following God’s way in daily life. Earlier, Amos has mentioned that the people of Israel “do not know how to do right” – they are violent, they “oppress the poor,” and “crush the needy” (Amos 3:10, 4:1). So even though they claim to worship God, their acts of worship are hollow and insincere, because they do not do justice in their daily lives. So God hates their insincere worship, but calls for “justice [to] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” It’s actually quite a similar sentiment to one of Jesus’ beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt 5:6).

So as we as Settler and Indigenous peoples in this land continue to work toward truth and reconciliation, I invite us to share a hunger and thirst for righteousness, to live up to our identity as treaty or covenant people. And there are actually many signs of hope, many acts of reconciliation already underway. At Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, there is already a road being built to link that reserve to the mainland, which will hopefully allow them to begin building the water treatment plant they so desperately need; they’re calling it “Freedom Road.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Here in Saskatchewan, there is the documentary “Reserve 107” about the relationship Mennonites and Lutherans and the Young Chippewayan Band whom they displaced when they settled in the Laird area;[[7]](#footnote-7) the Spruce River Folk Festival continues to raise funds for that important work of reconciliation. And there is also the work of Steve Heinrichs from Mennonite Church Canada and the many others who went on the Pilgrimage for Indigenous Rights, walking 600 km from Kitchener to Ottawa, Ontario to educate churches and communities and urge the Canadian government to adopt and implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which would ensure basic rights – like clean water – for First Nations communities.[[8]](#footnote-8)

I encourage us as a faith community to take on this thirst for righteousness and reconciliation in whatever way we’re able, be it through becoming more aware of issues affecting Indigenous people here, through prayer, through building Indigenous-Settler relationships, through learning more about the UN Declaration and becoming involved in upcoming events about it. And of course, let’s continue to remind ourselves each time we worship that we are on Treaty 6 Territory. In the combination of all of these things, I wouldn’t be surprised if we start seeing righteousness well up in life-giving ways, like living water, until there is enough for everyone’s thirst to be quenched. AMEN

1. *Sojourners Magazine*, https://sojo.net/articles/more-350-christian-ethicists-release-statement-condemning-white-supremacy [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/so-near-so-far-113126539.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women’s Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004), 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gench, 111-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/water-on-first-nations-reserves-islam-and-isis-prison-poem-pricey-glasses-heather-o-neill-1.4005479/no-excuses-for-boil-water-orders-on-first-nations-reserves-michael-s-essay-1.4005482 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/shoal-lake-40-celebrates-start-of-on-reserve-construction-of-freedom-road-1.3484662 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.reserve107thefilm.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://pfir.ca/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)