

WAR & PEACE

John 18: 28-38; Job 19: 23-27

In August of this year, there was a large gathering of indigenous people at a reserve just outside Montreal. They came from all over Ontario, Quebec and the U.S. The occasion of the gathering was a public recitation of the Great Law of Peace, a 500 year old first nations constitution. This constitution is the basis of a peace agreement that brought an end to centuries long conflict between six nations. Once united, these nations became the Haudenosaunee. These nations include peoples in Ontario, near where we are right now. 500 years ago there were no Europeans here. It was just indigenous peoples. So how was it that six nations that had been in conflict for centuries came together and made peace?

The story that is recounted has some surprising points of similarity to the gospel story about Jesus we find in the bible. Again, this was before any Europeans were around. The story begins with a miracle child born to a young virgin in a Huron-Wendat village near the bay of Quinte, on the shores of Lake Ontario. The boys name was Deganawinda. His mother and grandmother lived a safe distance away from any village because they were afraid. It was a time of violence and war. So how did Deganawinda's mother get pregnant? There was no man around. Grandmother was suspicious. Maybe her daughter was taken advantage of. Maybe this boy was cursed somehow. Her daughter didn't talk about it. The child's origins were a mystery. After repeated threats to his life, Deganawinda's miraculous survival convinced his grandmother and mother that there was a special purpose to the child. As the boy grew into a man, he built a canoe to travel the lakes and rivers of the land, spreading a message of peace.

Just like he had survived his birth and early days as a child, Deganawinda survived as an adult, coming across various peoples and nations possessed by the fever of war. He came across many fleeing the terror. He also came across others who were committing it. His success in how he engaged the fear in people and stopped the warring gave Deganawinda a new name: the Peacemaker. His teachings about peace and righteousness became the basis of a new movement of peace; and out of this movement, the law of peace was established.

How did the peacemaker accomplish this? It all began at the house of Tsikonsaseh, a witch who lured travelers into her home with the promise of a meal. Over food, she would poison them. But the peacemaker knew her scheme. Invited inside he confronted her with the message of peace he had shared with others." Your words are true," she said, telling him she would accept his message and enforce it. "I vow never to return to my evil practices of bringing harm to humans who come to my lodge." As the first to accept the Peacemaker's law, Tsikonsaseh and the clan mothers were given the power to select chiefs, a practice that continues to this day.

The peacemaker continued his journey. Just like he had done with Tsikonsaseh, wherever he went he confronted perpetrators of violence, and rather than damning them, he persuaded them to join him

in the new movement of peace. Providing those who were possessed by the fever of war with responsibility for peace and challenging them to protect rather than harm those they considered enemies, peoples hearts were being changed and the law of peace was taking root.

The peacemaker also developed rituals to console those who carried losses from war and from life. For example, there was Hiawatha, an Onondaga chief who was also spreading a message of peace in his own way. But in his case, rather than receptivity to his message of peace, Hiawatha suffered rejection. For example, there was a vicious tyrant named Thadodaho who held sway over many peoples through terror and fear. Hiawatha couldn't overcome Thadodaho's terror over the people and eventually he returned home dejected. But even worse, when he returned home after having been away a long time, he found that his seven daughters had fallen ill and died. Overwhelmed by his failure to establish peace and the terrible loss of his daughters, Hiawatha left his people to roam the forests on a lonely journey of lament.

But the peacemaker heard about him. He sent men to find Hiawatha, and once they found him, they escorted him to the peacemaker's lodge. Seeing the pain in Hiawatha's soul, The peacemaker performed the first 'ceremony of condolence' which is now part of indigenous tradition. After wiping away his tears, the peacemaker had Hiawatha join him as partner with the purpose to unite the people in the way of peace. Sorrow and tears would mingle with new inspiration and resolve to put an end to war.

But what to do with the tyrant Thadodaho. The peacemaker confronted him. He had much blood on his hands. But the peacemaker laid his hands on him. They were hands of healing. Thadodaho experienced something like an exorcism, with the demons of violence leaving his body and soul. The peacemaker then invited him to become a Haudenosaunee chief responsible for helping gather the six nations together. His capacity to influence people with terror would now be turned to influence them in the way of peace. Now the Great Peace agreement could be established with a constitution that would unite all the nations – The Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora. Traditionally, they were called the Iroquois by their enemies. Their chosen name is the Haudenosaunee.

Living out this peace brought great cooperation and prosperity for the nations. But it didn't last long. Once Europeans arrived on the land, they brought terror along with them. It started with a terrible disease called smallpox. The Indigenous people had no history with this disease and no antibodies to fight it. Vast numbers were killed off. Then the Europeans brought their wars with them – French, English, Dutch, and different groups driven by greed in search of wealth. They pitted indigenous people against each other: "Either you side with us or we'll wipe you out." Then they began negotiating land agreements, something indigenous people were not familiar with. The land belonged to all peoples. They were swindled out of large chunks of it. Treaties were established but never kept. Then came residential schools where the children were taken away from their families and communities. After residential schools have come foster homes and the missing and murdered, never properly investigated by police. The violence, war and greed of Europeans destroyed whatever peace indigenous nations had with each other and created enemies of each other again. They also stole the spirit from the people separating families and causing them to waste away.

But now, 500 years later, Deganawinda – the Peacemaker, and his partner Hiawatha, are being celebrated as visionaries, and their story is being told again. The story of the Great Law of Peace is also being taught as a basis for indigenous restoration and renewal.

So why am I telling this story on this Remembrance Sunday? The story of the Great Law of Peace, the story of Jesus, and the stories we tell on Remembrance Day have many points of similarity and resonance. How so? Let's turn to our scripture reading for revelatory wisdom.

Our gospel reading is part of the account of Jesus final trial before he is crucified. The religious authorities of his own people have condemned him to death, but only the power of Rome can give the green light to have Jesus killed. And so, the Roman governor is trying to determine why Jesus is hated so much by his own people's leaders. "You believe yourself a King?" he asks Jesus. And Jesus replies: "I am a king, but not the kind of king you and everyone else believes a king to be. Your kind of king has an army ready to kill and destroy enemies, otherwise he is powerless and defeated. But my rule and my kingdom are different. I deal with enemies differently, and I claim victory only when enemies are treated as human beings who may even become friends. Those who belong to my kingdom fight for peace, and rather than weapons to kill, they use weapons of the heart to build bridges of understanding and cooperation." Jesus, like Deganawinda, is the peacemaker. That's the truth he proclaims.

We know that Jesus will be crucified. Unlike Deganawinda the peacemaker, he will not succeed in bringing together his nation in peace to pursue the way of peace with other nations. It is much easier to make war than pursue peace. It is much easier to let our hurts and losses turn outward in hateful and violent revenge. Or, if we are overwhelmed by fear, we cave in and are paralyzed to act. It is much easier to achieve victory over our enemies by trying to defeat them, or if failing to do so, internalizing defeat in our hearts, rather than courageously and creatively seeking a different kind of victory, a victory that brings people together rather than tears them apart.

Jesus is crucified. But somehow, his crucifixion is turned into a new kind of victory. The God in Jesus becomes one with all those crucified as victims of the violence and war giving them new courage and hope. If we believe God is with us in our pain and loss, we have new courage to rise up and fight for peace with new commitment. For God is with us still.

How can we justify war when so many have been slaughtered, be they soldiers or innocent civilians? How can we be satisfied with our lack of determination in pursuing the way of peace rather than war talk? On this Remembrance Sunday, we remember because we want never to repeat what has been repeated through two world wars and beyond: That we as human beings are better at making war than making peace. Like the peoples the peacemaker encountered, we have been possessed by the fever of blame, shame, violence and killing.

And this brings us to our second reading from the ancient book of Job. Job, like the peacemaker's associate Hiawatha, has experienced staggering loss. Job's family has been wiped out by violent raiders, by natural disaster and by misfortune. How can he continue to believe in a higher power?

What kind of power is it that can protect the innocent and promote peace and goodwill when evil and death seems so powerful in the world?

After many chapters of lament and outrage, Job has a moment, a moment where faith, hope and the assurance of love rises up in him. There is a pathway to new life and to peace. But it can only come when some power beyond us awakens something in us, a seed we don't know is there until it is awakened, watered and warmed by the sun. This seed is about faith in the power of love to create new pathways to peace, peace in the world and peace in our hearts. Job utters these words: 'O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has thus been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God...'”

Job has a moment, a moment of ecstasy and joy. Job has a moment when faith, hope and love rises up in his soul past a vision of his skin being destroyed. To see God again is to see life full of meaning and purpose again. To see God again is to experience peace again, in the world and in his heart. What a beautiful vision, especially when life has been cruel. We pray for such a vision: for the Jobs and Hiawathas of the world who suffer staggering personal loss; for the families of all soldiers who died too young on far away battlefields; for the families of all the dead indigenous children at residential schools, missing and murdered women, and indigenous peoples ravaged by the evils colonial settlers from Europe brought to these shores; for all those who feel forsaken and alone on crosses, who cannot access the love of God in their hearts... May we who claim to trust in such a God in our better moments, become ambassadors of faith, hope and love, ambassadors of peace in our own immediate families, communities and societies... The world needs more peacemakers like Deganawinda and Hiawatha, more Jobs who speak truth even when it is raw; the world needs more followers of the divine peacemaker who commit to becoming the embodied hands, feet and heart of their Lord in the world, inspiring peace rather than conflict. Are you a follower of the peacemaker? Amen.