Rev. Jim's Sermon for October 1, 2023

Why do we begin each service with a land acknowledgement? What does it really mean? Is it a good thing?

Land ownership is so complex, with so many layers of legal and financial agreements, that it seems unquestionable. This is how it is. This is how it has always been. If someone has a title to a piece of property, they own the land described on that title, and that's that.

But land ownership, like all social, financial and political structures, is based on a series of agreements that have been made between and among human beings for many years. The authority by which anyone can own a piece of land is just the authority that has been agreed to by those who wish to claim such ownership. There is nothing ultimate or permanent about it. In fact, land ownership is one of the most fluid arrangements we can think of.

Only a few hundred years ago, the authority by which people owned land came from the monarch. The king or queen would simply decide who could own a particular property. We see vestiges of this in our own country when we talk about land held by the government as Crown Land.

The authority by which we own land in our current society does not come from heaven, it is of human origin, it is an agreement made by banks and municipal governments and land offices.

There are many traditional societies in which land ownership does not exist at all, where it would be considered blasphemous and arrogant to claim ownership of a part of mother earth. In such societies the idea of ownership is reversed, that we are a part of Pachamama, mother earth, not the other way around.

My point isn't to question the legitimacy of the system in Canada by which we decide who owns a particular piece of land, it is to suggest that this is merely one way to understand what land ownership is.

Regardless of how we understand land ownership, the reality is that in this country the agreements that have been made about who owns what piece of land, have rarely included the most important party, the people who had already been living on this land for thousands of years at the time these agreements were made.

The problem of course with the Land acknowledgement is that it claims that there is an injustice, without any suggestion of how that injustice might be reversed. At best it is like a notation on our list of things we should do but will never get to. The questions raised each time we acknowledge that the land we live on has been taken from the first peoples are deeply serious ones. They are immensely complex, because they call into question hundreds of years of real estate and banking legislation, and our whole social structure. They remind us that nothing is permanent, that we are here on this earth for our little appointed time, and that we came with nothing and can take nothing with us when we leave. Land ownership, at best, is a temporary arrangement for ordering where and how we live. That land has become commoditized and is now a way to build wealth, rather than seen as a necessity which every human has a right to, has not been the most positive element of modern life.

I wouldn't suggest that we stop land acknowledgements, but I would say that we must be clear that there is no virtue in it for us. We should not feel proud of ourselves simply because we state that we are aware that there is this tremendous injustice in our society.

It is, in a way, simply admitting that our ancestors have taken something that belongs to someone else and have given it to us, and that we have no intention of returning it. One wonders how this will ever be resolved.

But small steps are being made, and the conversation continues.

Indigenous voices are beginning to be heard for the first time, and non-indigenous Canadians are beginning to learn how to listen with open minds and hearts. Someday, God willing, agreements will be reached that will allow for a just resolution, but we have a long way to go and much work needs to be done.
What has been made clear by Indigenous leaders across Canada, is that there can be no reconciliation without Truth. Of course determining the truth is no simple matter. In our world, we usually think of truth as scientific or legal truth, truth that is based on facts, evidence, repeatability, proofs.

The biblical notion of truth is quite different. It is active. It is about relationships and about the principles by which we live our lives.
Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

Truth is a way, and of course in the Bible, and in many other spiritual cultures, that way is always the way of love. Mahatma Gandhi called his approach to non-violent change, Satyagraha: The Sanskrit words meaning “truth force”.
For Jesus, for Gandhi, and for the sages of many traditional societies, the truth, when it is rooted in love, integrity and justice, has the power to change, to heal, to reconcile.

So, what can we do, right here and right now? I believe that we can incorporate some integral truth-telling practices into our own lives that may perhaps prevent the perpetuation of new injustices. And chief among these is speaking with integrity, being impeccable with our words.

Particularly, this means being clear and intentional and fair-minded about the agreements we enter into with others.

It means not agreeing to things that we have no intention of honouring. To do so is often a coward’s way out of a difficult situation.

It also means meeting our obligations, even when it is difficult for us to do so.
And it means striving to make agreements that benefit others as well as ourselves.
To follow the guidance of St. Paul when he exhorts us:

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

This all sounds simple, it might even sound idealistic, but the opposite of this, hypocrisy, saying one thing and doing another, is at the basis of mostk if not all, of our social and political problems. It has been a problem for the Christian church over the centuries.

It may not seem like much, but when we honour our word, when we agree only to those things that we think are right, when we follow through on our obligations, we change the world around us. We make a difference.

Truth and reconciliation will not happen because someone else thinks it should happen, it will happen when each one of us commits ourselves to telling the truth and letting the truth guide our actions.

Truth-telling is the first step. We can't know where it will lead.
Jesus says the truth will set us free, we only have to decide if that freedom is worth whatever it might cost, whatever changes it might bring about and whatever sacrifices it may require.