

Sermon – **Planting Relationships of Hope**

07 Nov 2021

First Mennonite Church

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Theme: Peace Sunday

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-3, 2

Cor 5:18-20, 1 Peter 3:15-16

Resources: Peace Sunday

resources, Ched & Elaine's

Ambassadors of

Reconciliation, Suzanne

Simard's tree research



Good morning! My name is Eileen Klassen Hamm, and I serve as the Executive Director for MCC in Saskatchewan. I'm glad to be with you here at First Mennonite this morning for this Peace Sunday service.

You are such faithful friends and supporters of MCC's ministry around the world, and we are most grateful for your gifts of time, volunteering in our Thrift Shops, creating blankets and kits, and for your generous financial gifts – all these good things allow us to be present in 50 countries alongside more than 500 church and community organizations, supporting activities that provide emergency assistance, reduce poverty and promote healthy communities, sustainable living and alternatives to violence.

MCC's **vision** is “communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation.” (MCC Principles and Practices) This is the vision we hold before ourselves as we do relief, development and peacebuilding work in the name of Christ.

This morning I would like to explore the image of trees as we think about peace and reconciliation and hope.

The Isaiah passage paints a picture of the good news of God's salvation and says that this good news is like a strong oak tree, that this good news is a planting of God. We'll come back to this.



The scripture from **2 Corinthians** calls us into lives of witness to reconciliation. We've been given a mission, should we choose to accept it, to embody a world of generous and compassionate and reconciling relationships in the very midst of

legacies of colonialism; violence along ethnic, political and religious divisions; and environmental degradation, and human brokenness including MCC's brokenness. In this letter to the church at Corinth, Paul is serious about demonstrating a new creation, not in heaven far away, but here and now, in the world of the Corinthians, in our world today.

Very interestingly, the word Paul uses for “reconciliation” is the Greek word *katallasso*. Paul is the only one to use this word in the New Testament, and its roots are about economics, about everyday living, not about atonement or salvation. Paul is creating this reconciliation metaphor of God as a kind of central storehouse in an alternative economy, providing unlimited abundance. Christians, in turn, are to practice sharing that abundance. (Ched Myers) The ministry of reconciliation is not only spiritual; it also speaks to physical, social and economic right relations, just like the vision from Isaiah 61 – good tidings to the afflicted, binding up the brokenhearted. It is this ministry, this new

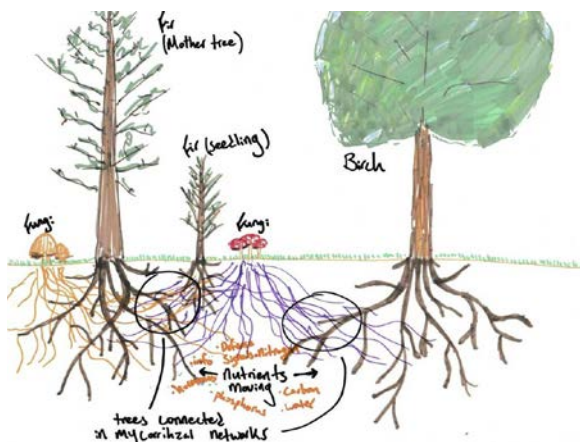
creation, to which we are invited to be ambassadors, ambassadors of a reconciliation which remakes relationships in which needs are met, gifts are given, care is taken.



Now, let me tell you about this woman, Dr. Suzanne Simard, who teaches at UBC.

Suzanne is a forest ecologist “whose research has shown how trees communicate with and nurture each other, supported by the fungal network below ground. She sees that a forest, rather than begin a

gathering of individual trees in competition with each other, is more like a single organism wherein support – nutrients, the stuff of life – is shared in a system of benefit rather than competed for in a system of dominance.



Her findings around collaboration include: shared underground regeneration networks, elder trees providing benefit for saplings, “Mother Trees” acting as caregivers for the network, and vast underground system of fungal mycelium that moves water and nutrients and messages between trees.

Suzanne is keen to point out that what is

being validated now through scientific research is not a “new” understanding.

Indigenous communities have long held teachings about the networks in the soil that nurtured the forest, and that humans are part of ecosystems, connected together, that “the world is an entwined place.” I invite you to check out Suzanne Simard’s work. It is fascinating and profound and also deeply hopeful.

Our society steeps us in dominance and competition, in scarcity – there’s not enough for everyone, and in isolation – we’re all independent.



God calls us to collaboration, abundance, and community.

Suzanne Simard reminds us that these teachings are in the very trees and soil around us.

God invites us to be reconciled, to be connected, to be fed by a web of relationships that carry gifts for our lives.

And this gives us hope. The scripture from 1 Peter 3 asks us to account for the hope that is in us. Where does our hope come

from?

Listen for the webs of connection and the hope that they create in these stories:



This is Feneck Gilbert's **microforest**. In Haiti, MCC is working with local communities and partners to plant millions of trees in the areas that need them most. This work began in the 1980s and continues today. Not only do families benefit

from nutritious food and the income from fruit and lumber sales, whole communities thrive as a result of healthier ecosystems – birds are coming back; trees provide a renewable energy source for cooking and cash for school fees; and trees reduce erosion and allow more water to penetrate the soil, reducing vulnerability to natural disasters like hurricanes and droughts. In reforested areas, streams are flowing again. These growing techniques are being shared farmer to farmer, community to community.

Because MCC has these **long-standing relationships** with local churches and community partners in Haiti, when hurricanes and earthquakes strike, which they do, MCC can respond quickly. One small example after the Aug 14 earthquake, MCC – together with the local Mennonite church and our community partner AVOREDES, with donated flight support from Mission Aviation Fellowship – was the first to reach the

community of Saint-Jean-du-Sud in the southwest. Fifty families each received a relief kit and 12 cans of meat, which represents the maximum that aircraft could hold. Our colleague, Paul Shetler Fast, who was there for the distribution says, "All of them that we talked to mentioned someone else they knew who was facing hard times—family member, cousin, someone who they knew needed help, who they would be sharing some of their canned meat with," They said, 'You know, when God gives you a gift, then you give gifts to others.'"

Their generosity and compassion had also sustained them and given them hope before this help arrived. Paul says, "Everywhere you look, people are doing what they can to rebuild, patching houses that can be patched. Neighbours have been letting neighbours stay in their homes."



In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, these children and hundreds of other displaced children go to school now instead of hiding from or fleeing fighting, like they did just a few years ago in the Kasai region of DRC. These smiles can be credited to Mennonite, Evangelical Mennonite and Mennonite

Brethren churches in the cities of Tshikapa and Kikwit and in the Kabwela area. In partnership with MCC and with support from Anabaptist organizations around the world, the churches reached out to the displaced people who flooded their neighbourhoods and settled in their church yards beginning in 2017. These years of relief distributions and education and livelihoods projects have created stronger and healthier networks between our various Mennonite denominations and agencies. We're better together. Together we can be part of planting hope even after much violence.



This is a **photo** of church leaders from the Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church in Colombia, together with Cesar Garcia from Mennonite World Conference and Bonnie Klassen from MCC. These are our brothers and

sisters in Christ who have been through years of violence and always in the midst of that and continuing now they are planting and nurturing networks of relationships to create peace.

The Anabaptist churches in Colombia are on the forefront of peacebuilding efforts in this country that has been very torn by violence. Here's the story of Osmery:

As a teenager raised in the tension and fear of Colombia's years of armed conflict, Osmery Tejedor loved to hear people talk about the time before. She soaked up stories of how people in her small coastal community of Libertad used to leave their doors open late into the night and how, if someone was planting yuca or rice, others would come to help.

She and other youth longed to see the community rebuild that trust and togetherness, and they began to meet to see how they could help make that happen.

But even meeting was difficult. For years, residents of Libertad lived with the terror that expressing opinions or sharing views could spark a threat against their lives by an armed group. And that feeling lasted long beyond the most direct dangers to the community.

In 2014 when Osmery, then 16, and others started forming a youth group, 10 years had passed since Libertad had regained independence from the armed group that had occupied it. Yet a deep fear remained.

“We were scared of sharing with people we didn’t know,” she says. As if this didn’t make meeting hard enough, Osmerly and others had no experience leading or even being part of group activities.

That’s where MCC came in.

Around the world, MCC partners with local organizations, communities and churches in projects that empower and equip people to work for change for themselves and their neighbours.

So when MCC worker Lani Pickard was invited to Osmerly’s group, her role was not to take the lead or set objectives, but to ask questions and provide resources that would help Osmerly and others move the group forward.

“I didn’t do things for them, but I helped them know the route,” recalls Lani, who is from Minnesota, and was living and serving in Libertad through MCC’s two-year Seed program.

Osmerly and others who formed Organización Juvenil Fomentadora de Paz, or Youth Organization for Promoting Peace, had big aims. They knew they wanted to help reweave the social fabric of trust that had been torn by the conflict. But how?

Support from Lani and Sembrandopaz (Sowing Peace), the Colombian MCC partner organization that Lani worked with, was critical. “They were the base of our own formation,” Osmerly remembers.

Sembrandopaz works throughout the region in communities affected by the armed conflict and emphasizes discussion, reflection, grassroots projects and advocacy. Lani helped youth look at their strengths and challenges and decide what tangible actions the group could take to bring people together and improve Libertad.

Today, a core group of 10 young people continues to meet about once a month, carrying out projects from community cleanups to partnering with the local police in establishing community programs. The group has sent letters to universities and the

government entity for technical and career training, asking them to bring educational opportunities to Libertad.

“Now we’re creating our own processes and projects we can carry out as youth,” Osmery says.

With this group, as with other youth organizations that MCC workers and Sembrandopaz have encouraged throughout the region, the lessons run deeper than activities or plans, lessons — from how to treat others with deep respect to seeing how people maintain hope even in the face of steep challenges.

MCC and its partners are striving to build the kind of leadership that mirrors Anabaptist values of respect and care for others, of service that is grounded in humility and dedicated to listening and learning.

“This is really the essence of Anabaptism — how we can serve with humility,” says Ricardo Esquivia, Mennonite peace activist and founder of Sembrandopaz. “Jesus said follow me and serve others.”

Through years of war, Esquivia says, Colombia has seen heads of armed groups, narcotraffickers and others impose their own paths on communities and put themselves over others.

“That’s why we need this type of leadership that is humble and comes from the community itself,” Esquivia says.

And as Osmery and others use what they’ve learned, they continue to work to build opportunities not just for themselves but for all.

“I know that the problems that I have are not only my problems, but most of the youth in the community have the same problems,” says Osmery. “The way I look at it, it’s better if we can bring opportunities to the community so everyone can take advantage of them instead of looking for single opportunities for only ourselves outside the community.”



These **Colombian** children are part of an education project held in an Mennonite Brethren church in the jungle village of Suruco. When we think about hope for the future, we obviously think about our children and

grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It is for them that we seek peace.

We all need the robust ministry of reconciliation that Paul speaks of in the letter to the Corinthians to guide us to a more just and peaceful and hope-filled future for all of our children and their children's children.



Like the **seed** that becomes an oak of righteousness in Isaiah, Scripture is full of instances where God chose the small and weak to create a network of activity that brings hope.

- One elderly man named Abram became the father of a great nation. (Genesis 12:2)
- One jar of meal and one jug of oil kept a community fed. (1 Kings 17:12–16)
- Esther, an orphaned exile, became queen of Persia and saved the Jewish people from genocide. (Esther 2:5–10; 7:3–4)
- Jesus entered the world as the helpless infant son of an underprivileged, unwed mother in an occupied territory, and started life as a refugee to Egypt. (Matthew 1:18; 2:13–14)
- Five loaves and two fish fed a multitude. (John 6:9–11)
- A mustard seed of faith becomes a sheltering tree. (Matthew 13:31–32)

May we continue to plant small and large webs of reciprocity and generosity that demonstrate that we can share and receive gifts that nurture life and hope. Amen.