



Lenten Study 2021 – Week 2: Wahkohtowin

In our first week we looked at some stories of call as Jesus gathered the first community of disciples and reflected a bit on our own community. We talked a bit about what it means for us to be followers of Jesus in this place together.

How we are learning to live our lives in the Kingdom among us is intertwined with our work together as a team discerning and living God's mission through the Spirit and our relationships with one another and our neighbours as we minister to and lead each other.

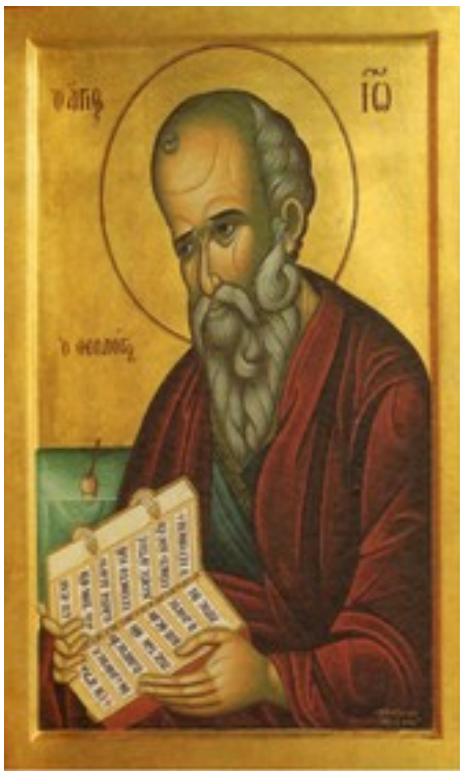
One of the prophetic words to the Church in Canada today is the call to name, repent of, and begin to redress the suppression of Indigenous culture and spirituality by the churches in Canada, including the Anglican church. Over several decades, through much conversation, listening and healing, the Anglican Church of Canada, has begun taking steps to remove barriers and open doors to a self-determining expression of church for Indigenous followers of Jesus in this land.

The years ahead will show us what shapes for ministry this communion of Indigenous Canadian Anglicans will take. This promises to be a life-giving process for the Church as a whole and one that reverberates in other circles of renewal and reformation.

Like all cultures and nations, the First Peoples of Turtle Island have many rich and diverse histories and forms of communal life, conciliar decision making, roles of leadership, and so on. It is not my place to tell these stories and give these teachings, nor could I adequately do so even if it were. But it is important to raise the hope that Indigenous ecclesial self-determination, and the development of ecclesiological forms that will go along with it, are not just a gift to be experienced within the Indigenous churches. God willing, all Anglicans who now live on this land, will be open to learning from the People of the Land, and from the land itself, about what the Spirit of God might be calling the Church of this place to look like, and what it needs for us all to live well together here as a community of disciples together.

One of these is the Cree/Nehiyawak concept of wahkotowin. Wahkohtowin denotes the interconnected nature of relationships, communities, and natural systems. Its literal meaning is "kinship" though Wahkohtowin often refers to the natural law which influences and directs the way that a people or peoples live together in good and responsible ways. It is not a juridical law that governs based on rules designed to dictate behavior, but rather a sense of respect and duty based on understanding the interrelatedness of humanity, society, and all creation. The complex and interrelated nature of pre-contact Cree/Nehiyawak governance, without a singular leader, but rather a dynamic system of different kinds of Elders and Lodge Keepers each exercising their respective oversights over certain aspects of knowledge and ceremony and the like, is an expression of this wahkohtowin foundation.

Expanding upon our image of disciples as a community with Jesus at the center we can think of all creation as related in the same way. Everything that is created and has life is in a circle of relationship with one another through Creator at the center. When people come together to share their gifts and life together in peace it is called Wetaskiwin.



John

The Other Disciple

The phrase “the other disciple”, or sometimes “the disciple Jesus loved” occurs multiple times throughout the Gospel of John. It has been suggested that these references were given in this way by a community of Jesus followers who were uniquely loyal to John’s witness and who wanted to underscore the unique place of the apostle who had brought them into the fold. Although there is not scholarly consensus that this figure was for certain the disciple named elsewhere as John, this has been the most common identification since early in the tradition of the Church. The next to last verse of John chapter 21 seems to suggest the same: “This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know his testimony is true” (John 21:24).

Just prior to this conclusion (21:18–20) we see Peter in private conversation with Jesus. Peter has just been told about the kind of suffering and death that awaits him on his journey of faithful shepherding of the sheep, and has been exhorted by the Lord “Follow me!” Typical of the occasional blurting out of relative non-sequiturs after import sayings and events, Peter reacts by looking over his shoulder at the beloved disciple and asking “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answers, with his characteristic patience but perhaps more than a hint of frustration, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me” (John 21:21–23). On the one hand, this exchange tells us something about Peter, and particularly about Peter’s unique role among the apostolic community; namely, that it has limits. Peter may indeed be called to provide a special kind of leadership in the Church, but he is not the only leader. And it is important for him to know that, and, in a certain sense, mind his own business about it.

Jesus will also call other people to unique roles and ask them to give different kinds of leadership which are not less integral to being Church, and Peter needs to learn to accept this, work with it, and even welcome it. It also tells us something about the other disciple, and indeed those who are called to be like this other disciple in subsequent iterations of the Church – i.e., those who may not be the ‘Peter among equals’, but maybe the ‘John among equals.’ Part of the John’s primacy includes just being there too, and being the other leader. Simply recognizing that Jesus wants to carve out space for this ‘Other Disciple’ and their ministry as a complement and partner to the “Rock” is what begins to open the door for the Church to consider how there might in fact be several ‘other disciples’, several other leaders, all of which are needed in their own rights.

It is the Lord!

In every age of the Church, there is a need to hand on the same Gospel that was once delivered to the Saints. This begins as largely a retrospective task – a looking back to ensure that what comes in the present and future is consistent with what has been in the past. However, the apostolic vocation is also very much a forward-looking endeavor. As the Church encounters new people, new places, new contexts, and new questions, it can and should show itself willing and able to adapt and change in a prospective or forward-looking way. A God-given and graced-filled ability to recognize when this is necessary, and how the signs of the times are to be interpreted and integrated anew, is the prophetic side of apostolicity.

On the day of resurrection, in John 20, when Peter and John hear from Mary Magdalene that the stone has been rolled away, they quickly take off running, and then the key detail comes: “the other disciple outran Peter and reached to tomb first” (John 20:4). And just in case we forgot, this note about which one had “reached the tomb first” is repeated in John 20:8. The other disciple gets there first, and more than that; he sees what is inside first. Acting in character as the other, he still defers to Peter to step into the tomb before him. However, once inside, again it is the beloved disciple who is recorded as the one who puts it together prior to Peter catching up. Thus, we read: “The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed” (John 20:8). What we have here is the ministry of John apprehending ahead of the curve that God has done something new. Peter’s recognition follows later. Both perspectives are needed, but it takes more than one of them to figure it out.

A similar kind of occurrence is seen in chapter 21 of John, during one of the resurrection appearances of Christ. Going back to their roots, a small group of the disciples have gone fishing. Peter is at the helm of the boat. They have worked through the night and have had no luck, but then someone shows up on the shore. The stranger calls out and tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat to find their catch. Well, the fish show up, and Peter is focused on hauling in the nets. You can almost picture John slapping him on the shoulder when he yells, “It is the Lord!” It is only after Peter hears from the other disciple that Jesus shows up that he gets out of the boat and goes to meet him on the group’s behalf: “As soon as Simon Peter heard [the beloved disciple] say, ‘It is the Lord,’ he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water” (John 21:7). Peter takes the lead here but he does so on the basis of John’s vision catching a glimpse of what is really going on before others are able to see it.

Have you felt ‘other’ or excluded, at church or in other settings?

How have you seen your faith or your church change over the years?

How are you or our church challenged to change now? What is God working now?

What does it mean to you to see “the other” as part of “us”?

Are there relationships we should be pursuing as a church with those who are “other”?

Whose voices do we need to hear? How might we listen and act?