

Wampum Belt – Being a Good Neighbour

Read Sherman, 2021 Indigenous Day of Prayer, The United Church of Canada

In the Bible Jesus talks about how important it is to have and be a good neighbour. One time when he was asked to sum up everything he knew about God—everything he believed God wanted us to be—he talked about loving your neighbour like you love yourself as the key.

June 21 each year is National Indigenous Peoples Day. It's a day set aside to celebrate being neighbours with Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have lived here a long, long time—they were living on the land for thousands, tens of thousands of years before European people ever came to be new neighbours. Indigenous peoples know a lot about being a good neighbour.

I want to show you something very special to the Haudenosaunee people. Their traditional territory covers much of what is now upper New York state, southern Ontario, and southwestern Quebec. When European peoples started showing up in the 1600s, the Haudenosaunee wanted to be good neighbours with the newcomers. So the Elders would sit with the newcomers and agree how to be good neighbours. The people then created this—called a wampum belt—as a symbol of the agreement they had made. Another word for agreement we use is the word “treaty,” and this wampum belt has two rows rather than one.

That represents two peoples! And notice that the two lines are side by side, but they don't cross or join together. This was because it made sense for the two peoples to live side by side but not interfere with each other. A good neighbour is someone you care about and help, but you also want to allow them space and freedom to do their own thing just like you need space to do your own thing

In the Haudenosaunee language, the term this kind of getting along is *kaswentha*. It means neighbours agree to travel their own self-determined path as equal parties and with mutual respect for the rights and needs of the other. Indigenous neighbours are still waiting for settlers to honour the agreements our ancestors made so long ago. That is a fact we peoples who came later really need to take to heart if we want to love our neighbours like Jesus did.

Today, let's recommit to being good neighbours. The first step in doing that is to confess that we have not always been good neighbours. Let's come before God and ask for forgiveness for the ways we have not been good neighbours, so that we can learn to do better.

Let us pray ...