

# A Dish with One Spoon

Hespeler, November 10, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Remembrance Sunday

[Genesis 13:2-12](#), Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:24-28, Mark 12:38-44

**T**omorrow at 11 o'clock we will solemnly remember an event that no living person can actually remember. It happened 106 years ago. There are maybe about half a million people alive today who are over 100 years old, but only a small fraction of them would be over 106. And of course, none of them would have been old enough to be aware of what happened on November 11, 1918.

What happened then? That was the day that the bombing and the shooting and the killing stopped following the most devastating war that the world had ever seen. And I don't think that any of us could possibly imagine the feeling of relief that swept over people as the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month tolled and the fronts that had been filled with so much death finally fell silent.

## No One Living Remembers

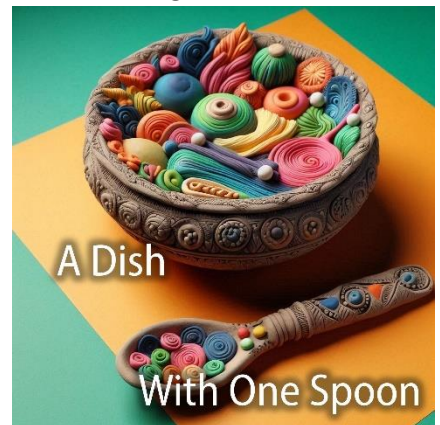
And you might find it odd that we still observe an armistice that no one can remember. And part of that is, I know, that the meaning of that day has transformed since then to become a day to remember those who have served in many wars that came after the "War to End All Wars." It has become a day to pray and work for peace for all.

But I also think that it is significant that we celebrate that particular armistice and the Treaty of Versailles that codified the peace about a year later. Treaties matter; they shape our world. In fact, I would argue that the treaties of the past have had more influence on the world we live in today than the wars. And that is certainly true for the Treaty of Versailles (which was not particularly successful at ending all war). I would suggest that we ignore treaties to our peril.

## Indigenous People and Settlers

So, I would like to tell you about a treaty that you may have never heard of, but that I believe we are all called to honour today. When European settlers first came to this place, as you know, they found it to be already inhabited. That did not prevent them from claiming the land as their own possession, of course. They had this false "Doctrine of Discovery" that allowed them to dismiss the inhabitants as mere "savages." But their first concern was not really for the possession of more than little bits of land. Their first concern was for that constant goal of Western civilization: profit.

And they definitely saw the indigenous people here as a useful tool for driving that profit. They persuaded the indigenous people to go out and use their considerable skills to extract valuable resources from the wilderness around here, most valuable of all being, of course, the furs and the pelts.



A Dish

With One Spoon

## When Trouble Began

This strategy of wealth production was enormously successful. It was most successful, as always, for the European investors. But the indigenous people also did very well and were able to gain valuable trade goods, at least at first. But as also often happens, problems began to crop up. In the beginning the resources were abundant, but the drive for profit soon began to see them dry up. Some species were pushed into extinction in easily accessible regions. This forced people to hunt and trap farther afield. It also pushed First Nations into competition with each other. And this led to environmental destruction and to war between the various nations.

I know that we are not generally very aware of these fur wars because the settler colonists weren't really directly involved. But, like all wars, they were devastating both to the people and to the natural environment. The need for peace for all those who were involved became extremely urgent.

## Settlers in Canaan

That is a part of the history of the place where we are now sitting. Well, you're sitting and I'm standing but you get the idea. One thing that particularly strikes me about that history this morning is that it strongly parallels our reading from the Book of Genesis. It tells the story of two men who have come to the land of Canaan from far-off Mesopotamia. Their names are Abram and Lot.

And, like the colonialists who came to this place, they came to get very rich. They measured their wealth in terms of herds and cattle instead of furs, but it is basically the same old story. And just like happened around here, they didn't do the manual labour themselves. They hired the local indigenous population to be their herders. Indeed, the story explicitly mentions, while talking about problems among their workforce, that **“at that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.”**

## The Land Could Not Support Them

But there was a problem. And it is a problem that often arises when we pursue ever-growing profits as more important than anything else. The Bible puts the problem like this: **“the land could not support both of them living together because their possessions were so great.”**

When we relentlessly pursue extraordinary profit, the result is often that the land cannot bear it. Natural resources begin to be stretched. And this has devastating effects on the land. In their case, the resources being stretched were not beaver and bison pelts but rather ground water and grazing land, but apart from that, the story is very much the same and, again, is as old as time!

## The Treaty of Lot and Abram

And what was the result of that in old Canaan? Exactly the same as what happened here: strife and conflict – not between the wealthy men but amongst those who were working for them. **“Thus strife arose between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock.”**

Now, to Abram and Lot's credit, they recognized that this was a problem. Even though they were not the ones suffering, they decided to fix the problem, and they did so by creating a treaty between the two of them. It wasn't really a treaty that solved the root problem because they just

decided to separate so that they could continue to relentlessly exploit the land. But at least they did something to alleviate the suffering among their indigenous workforce.

## The Strife Right Here

Things didn't quite work out so well in this area. The lords of the fur trade, it seems, didn't mind the strife among the various First Nations who were providing them with their furs. As good capitalists, they probably thought that the competition was good for their bottom line. And so, the strife spread.

In this area, the Mississaugas, an Anishinaabe Nation, were pushed out of their traditional territories by the Haudenosaunee and fled north and west. But then, a few years later they return in alliance with the Odawa and the Chippewa and it seemed that open war against the Haudenosaunee was inevitable – a war that would quickly spread and would be devastating to all indigenous nations.

But wisdom prevailed and a treaty was made. This treaty was not created by the wealthy fur companies like what happened in Canaan. In fact, they did not like the idea at all and never officially recognized the treaty.

## A Dish with One Spoon

No, the First Nations understood that they would have to make their own peace. And they did so according to an ancient indigenous concept: a dish with one spoon. There is evidence that the idea of a dish with one spoon may be at least a thousand years old. It is one of the foundational concepts that governs indigenous people's relationship to the land.

Now, I am not an indigenous person, and I would not presume to speak for them. Indeed, I would love to hear more about this from native elders some day. But my pretty basic understanding is this. They see the land as being like a dish. And all the things that the land produces are there to feed and support people and animals. And everyone can have a share of that bounty.

But they recognized that, if everyone takes from the dish without limit, especially in a relentless pursuit of profit, that would not be sustainable. That's where the one spoon comes in. Instead of everyone eating at will with their own, consumption would be limited by the need to share one spoon. It is a simple concept, but a very powerful and important one. It had been foundational to how the indigenous peoples lived on this land.

## The Treaty that Shaped this Area

So, the First Nations made a treaty which they called, fittingly, the Dish With One Spoon Treaty. The treaty was formally adopted in Montreal in September of 1700. They did not sign the treaty in the European fashion. Instead it was solemnized in the traditional fashion by the creation and presentation of a wampum belt.

But even if it was adopted in Montreal, it changed everything here. It brought peace. As part of the treaty, the Mississaugas, who had claimed this land where you sit since ancient times, agreed to give up their exclusive claim and share it with all nations according the law of the Dish with One Spoon.

I know that the world has changed a lot since 1700. About eighty years later, this land right here was given away by the British Crown to the Iroquois of the Six Nations (a Haudenosaunee people) as a part of a treaty for another war – the American War of Independence. The Crown did not own the land that it gave – it had been shared with all by the Mississaugas in the previous treaty, but apparently the crown was not concerned about that.

## All Treaty People

Have you ever thought about that – that there is an incredible history of various peoples living on and relating to this land where we have our houses, do our work, live our lives. And these treaties are a very important part of that history. I know we often only think of treaties as applying to the indigenous people. Their ancestors entered into these treaties but they are still bound by them. But our ancestors entered into them as well. Are we not also bound by them? If we live on land that was shared or given by treaty, is there not some sense in which we ought to be living according to that treaty, or at least according to the spirit of that treaty?

And yes, I know that our history has made that question very complicated, especially those parts where our ancestors did not keep the treaties that had been made. But I think that there are some very important lessons that we ought to take to heart from the story of the treaty made between Abram and Lot, and the story of the Treaty of a Dish with One Spoon. Let these treaties remind us that our relationship with the land that we live on is fragile. If we exploit it in ways that forget the dish with one spoon ideal, if our only concern is a relentless pursuit of profit, we may well find, like the two patriarchs did, that the land cannot support us.

## Living as Treaty People

And the result of that is that it will lead to conflict and suffering. And who will suffer? Abram? Lot? The wealthy fur barons? No, don't worry about them; they'll be fine. It will be the people of the land who will suffer – the herders, the indigenous nations, the low-wages workers and ultimately the great majority of people.

I hope that the stresses we continue to put on the land through the relentless pursuit of profit will not lead to new conflicts and the need for new treaties. I just know that that is what has happened many times before. But could we perhaps avoid that eventuality by deciding to learn from the biblical treaty between Abram and Lot. And perhaps we could avoid that by learning from the treaty that saved this very land from becoming a field of slaughter over 300 years ago, by teaching us that this land is a dish and that we all need to share the spoon.