

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting
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Making Covenants of Peace and Safety
Genesis 31: 43-52

Scripture Genesis 31:43-55

Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, ‘The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about their children whom they have borne? Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.’ So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsfolk, ‘Gather stones,’ and they took stones, and made a heap; and they ate there by the heap. ⁴⁷Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha:- but Jacob called it Galeed. Laban said, ‘This heap is a witness between you and me today.’ Therefore he called it Galeed, and the pillar- Mizpah, -for he said, ‘The LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me.’

Then Laban said to Jacob, ‘See this heap and see the pillar, which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor’—the God of their father—‘judge between us.’ So Jacob swore by the Fear* of his father Isaac, and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country.

Early in the morning Laban rose up, and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home.

Message- Making Covenants of Peace and Safety

Laban said to Jacob, “This pile of rocks will remind us of our agreement.” That’s why the place was named Galeed. ⁴⁹Laban also said, “This pile of rocks means that the LORD will watch us both while we are apart from each other” ... “I must never go beyond them to attack you, and you must never go beyond them to attack me...” (Genesis 31:48-52).

When Isaac, Jacob’s father was old, and about to die, Esau, his elder son, did not want to share space with his brother Jacob, because Jacob had taken all his blessings. Instead, Esau was secretly planning to kill Jacob (Genesis 27: 41-45). Jacob fled to Laban, his uncle. While there, he served Laban for twenty years

(Genesis 31:38) to earn Laban's daughters and livestock. Laban was a selfish businessman who did not want to share space with Jacob unless he owned everything including all that Jacob had earned. To ensure he got everything, Laban exploited Jacob's vulnerabilities. He made agreements with Jacob but refused to honor them. He changed Jacob's wages for all the time Jacob served him.

Jacob fled from Laban, but Laban pursued him and overtook him. Then they started a difficult conversation confronting issues that they struggled with while sharing space. Jacob claimed that Laban was an oppressor who was now hunting him down for nothing. Laban claimed that he still owned everything that Jacob had earned. However, Laban called for a covenant of peace and safety between him and Jacob.

The struggle to share space is the struggle that we can relate to. We can either identify with Laban who believed what belonged to him was taken away, or Jacob, who believed he was not given what he earned, then he was hunted down for nothing. We can also identify with the call to make a covenant to protect everyone.

The Southside of Belize City, where I work, is the most densely populated part of the country, with limited resources and socio-economic opportunities, especially for young people. People here live under extreme hardship. They compete over a limited space for survival. The area is also a remarkably violent. Gangs recruit vulnerable youths into organized crime while girls are recruited into prostitution rings. It is a place where the vulnerable are oppressed daily. Almost over the last three years, the area has been placed under security state of emergency after every few months, to contain gang related murders and extortion of traders.

The kind of resource scarcity and poverty here is a clear indication that the economic system disadvantages majority of the people while giving advantage to a few wealthy people, who own almost everything like the Biblical Laban. Everyday, I interact with young men and women, who like Jacob, are trying to run away from exploitation by trying to get ahead in life. They are often overtaken by those who control the economic and political power.

The public discourse about sharing the social, economic, and political space in Belize sounds like the discourse between Laban and Jacob. Those with economic and political power feel that they legitimately own everything. They control all the space. They advance policies and practices that entrench inequality in society. The marginalized are working hard trying to get ahead. They don't have access to jobs. Those who at least have some work, don't even earn enough to put food on

the table. Traders on the streets lose the little daily earnings to gang extortion or run-away robberies. Children drop out of school. Dreams are buried.

In my conversations with young people on the Southside, I have heard repeatedly, the desire to run away from exploitation. I have witnessed young men happily playing in the yard, run away into the church because they saw a Police patrol truck passing on the road. They are running from exploitation. I have had numerous conversations with young people about what they want to do after school. Most of them want to work, so that they can help their mothers generate enough household income. However, their job prospects tend to be one supermarket in the city which hires black young men and women. They are trying to find a place in an economic space there their prospects are limited by design.

In this often-difficult conversation between the powerful and the marginalized, there is a ray of hope, which is mostly likely possible, when those with power, call for a covenant to protect everyone. In my work as a pastor and community organizer, I often see the work of Friends in the world today, as witnesses who seek to be involved in the call to make covenants that protect everyone. The community safety project, and the campaign against human trafficking projects we have conducted in Belize over the last two years, seek to build ties between youth and police officers, and youth from rival gang territories. We hope that these new relationships will be the pile of stones, that will invoke the ethic of care. We pray that these relationships will grow, so that individuals and communities will have the ties that bind them to protect the other.