

Sermon

October 10, 2021

Scriptures: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15, Psalm 90:12-17, Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-31

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“Seek good and not evil, that you may live, and so the Lord, the God of hosts will be with you...Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.”

“Establish justice in the gate.” It is a curious phrase. “In the gate.” In ancient Israel, the city gate was an entrance into the walled city, and what humans might call “civilization.” The walled city provided laws and cultural patterns that preserved life, and kept out enemies and any outsiders who might murder, steal and plunder. The gate was a liminal space, a border space, a “narthex” if you will between the sacred and the profane. It was where judgement occurred or legal and economic transactions took place. It is where Boaz negotiated the marriage of Ruth, and Absalom rendered God’s judgment and turned dissidents away from his father, King David.

Today’s lessons remind us of God’s call to justice and righteousness and God’s mercy and grace while we seek it. They invite us to a sacred journey of truth-telling, confession, forgiveness, healing and redemption. “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

This sword pierces my heart today. California calls tomorrow Columbus Day. I’ve only begun to scratch the surface of what this means. When I was a child, teachers taught us about Columbus’ daring voyages to the new world. We might have had a bulletin board with the title “The Age of Discovery,” and pictures of the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria. However, textbooks would not tell us how Columbus enslaved native Taino peoples in what is now Haiti and brought them back to Queen Isabella of Spain. She was rightly horrified at what he had done and immediately freed them. I am grateful that with many others, The Episcopal Church names tomorrow “Indigenous Peoples Day,” and has advocated for its declaration as a federal holiday.

I spent the past two weeks on a spiritual journey to understand our church’s vision. As part of that I read a book last week, “The Land is not Empty,” by a Christian Pueblo Indian, Sarah Augustine. Global explorers claimed lands that were not empty, but homelands of indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Sadly, Columbus’s tragic missions (and those of John Cabot, Sir Francis Drake and

others) were encouraged by the church. In 1455 Pope Nicholas V issued an edict, the Romanus Pontifex, that would become **The Doctrine of Discovery**, a theological, philosophical and legal framework for colonization of the world by Spain, England, France, Germany and other European nations. Specifically, it granted the Portuguese king the right to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed,” “to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery,” and to “apply and appropriate to himself and his successors,” all these peoples’ sovereign lands, possessions and goods. Whatever happened to “do not steal,” “do not covet” or “do unto others as you would have them do unto you?”

Here in the U.S. the 1845 doctrine of Manifest Destiny, or the idea that the United States is destined by God to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent, furthered the Doctrine of Discovery. Tragically, white supremacy was woven into all of this. In the 1850’s California’s Governor Burnett tried but failed to pass laws banning black people from our state, but was successful in dominating California’s indigenous people. Burnett signed a law that enabled whites to force Native people from their lands into indentured servitude. He set aside state money to arm local militias against Natives and, with the help of the U.S. Army, distributed weapons to the militias, who were tasked with raiding tribal outposts and scalping and killing Native people. This they did in the 1850 “Bloody Island Massacre” of Pomo men, women, children at Clear Lake.

An alternative to extermination of native Americans was relocation to reservations and assimilation, which became the favored federal policy. President Grant announced in his first inaugural address, “I will favor any course towards natives that tends to their civilization, Christianization and ultimate citizenship.” The President and the Congress drew churches into a drive toward assimilation. “Christianization” meant the creation and federal funding in the early 1800’s of what would become 357 boarding schools for native children in partnership with 13 denominations including the Episcopal Church. By 1926, U.S. Indian boarding schools enrolled nearly 83% of native children, half on their reservations, but half a long journey far away. Many as young as 6 years old were forcibly separated by government authorities from families and tribal communities for years, a form of cultural genocide.

Recently, a Cree Chief, Wilton Littlechild, a consultant to the World Council of Churches, told the U.N. how assimilation in schools began when students arrived. Furs and boots that were made for the children of their village by their parents to

protect them from harsh winters were taken and burned by school administrators, and replaced by European dress. Braids were cut from the boys. Children were punished for speaking their native language or practicing their traditional spirituality and culture. At a school in the Dakotas, half the school day was vocational training supporting a patriarchal nuclear family that would farm—boys studied plant production and animal husbandry, and girls domestic arts like cooking and sewing. Research has shown that tuberculosis and other diseases, malnutrition, neglect, assault and abuse were rampant. Recent discoveries of graves at the oldest boarding school in Oregon are a sign of tragic things “done” and “left undone.” We don’t fully understand the mortality and intergenerational trauma left by these school.

This year, Bishop Curry called for a report for the 2022 General Convention in a new commitment to the work of truth and reconciliation around Episcopal boarding schools. He pledges the church will spend time with “our indigenous siblings, listening to their stories and history, and seeking their wisdom about how we can come together to terms with this part of the church’s history.” Tomorrow the National Episcopal Church will be holding a panel discussion with Indigenous Episcopalians at an internet event "Native Voices: A Response to The Episcopal Church’s History with Indian Boarding Schools (2-3:30 pm Pacific time).

Today the Episcopal Church advocates in Congress to preserve Indigenous people’s rights. Since the early 1990’s the Church has officially opposed drilling within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a matter of justice, a sacred trust that honors and preserves the life, culture, and spiritual integrity of a people. It advocates against Pipelines running through lands that assure food sovereignty of tribes in the Midwest. But we must also reconcile with the darkness caused by the church’s past under Doctrine of Discovery. We have come to a gate, a gate between a painful past and a future of redemption, a gate between the sacred and the profane, a gate between death and eternal life. To face our privilege and open our hearts to new life in Christ takes courage but the letter to the Hebrews assures us, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Clint McKay, a local member of the Dry Creek, Wappo and Wintun tribes led a hike this week at Pepperwood. As we looked over a valley to a mountain the white man calls Mt. St. Helena, he told how on that sacred mountain animals here before us asked the Creator to create humans. We are here by their invitation. Wappo spirituality rejects the notion of human “dominion” over land, animals or one another. St. Francis understood this too. In his Canticle of the Sun he praises God

for Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Stars, Brothers Air and Wind, Sister Water and Brother Fire, indeed all of creation. With deep humility he loved all Creation. He had the courage the man “with many possessions” in today’s Gospel lacked to leave his wealthy family and nobility to follow Jesus.

Just as animals invited man into being, later at this service we will bless the animals who invite you into being. They are brothers and sisters who share the Creator’s love with us. Today we praise God for the unity of all Creation and pray that we might establish justice at the gate for the Pomo, Wappo and other tribes who stewarded this gracious land in the past, now, and in the future. Amen.

Please join me in an Episcopal prayer for Indigenous Peoples’ Day.

A Prayer for Healing and Hope

O Great Spirit, God of all people and every tribe, through whom all people are related;

Call us to the kinship of all your people.

Grant us vision to see through the lens of our Baptismal Covenant,
the brokenness of the past;

Help us to listen to you and to one-another,
in order to heal the wounds of the present;

And, give us courage, patience and wisdom to work together for healing and hope
with all of your people,
now and in the future.

Mend the hoop of our hearts and let us live in justice and peace,
through Jesus Christ,
the One who comes to all people
that we might live in dignity. Amen.