

Sermon, September 25, 2022

Isaiah 43:14-19

“Saving the Gospel from the Cowboys”

I have to begin this morning by confessing that I stole the title of this sermon from the late Richard Twiss, a Native American theologian and activist, whom I owe largely for much of my thinking on this subject. The full title is - “Saving the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way”. It focuses, in part, with placing Christian faith within a Native framework.

There are some in this country who would like to sweep the uglier parts of our history under the carpet, things such as slavery, the Jim Crow era, and the genocide and displacement of the American Indian. We are a great nation with many things to be proud of, but like all other people we are not perfect and have done things we should not be proud of. But recognizing and understanding the sins and mistakes of the past can help us forge a better future.

When Columbus first arrived in the so-called, “New World”, (although there had been people living here for thousands of years), the estimated Native population was around twenty million. By the end of the 19th century there was about 232,000 remaining. Most had been killed off by war, by western diseases for which they had no immunity, and starvation. To add insult to injury they were also displaced, placed on reservations, and, in many ways, robbed of their culture.

In 1879 a federal law was passed that said the Indian children were to be forcibly removed from their homes, and placed in boarding schools, where they were to be assimilated into Anglo-European culture. Their hair was cut, they were dressed in western clothing, made to eat western food. They were also severely punished if they were caught speaking their native language and were not allowed to participate in pow-wows, sweat lodges, or any other Native rituals. At one point there were 415 of those boarding schools across the land, remaining well into the twentieth century. The general philosophy behind this was “Kill the Indian, save the man”. One truly sad aspect of it was that most of those schools were founded by Christian denominations, which often forced the children to convert to Christianity. Is it any wonder that many Indians today want nothing to do with the Church!

However, there are among them those that have embraced the Jesus Way, but, again, are denigrated by some for including drums, chants, sage burning, and such, in their worship, calling such things as demonic.

What we sometimes fail to understand that is the Church has always been multi-cultural, with theology and forms of worship expressed within different cultural frameworks. In the first

century Christianity began in Israel, but quickly moved into other parts of the Middle East and Europe, as well as Northern Africa. Christian thought and ritual took on different forms in these diverse places. I, personally, can attest, having served as Senior Pastor in a large multicultural church that the faith finds different means of expression within different cultures.

And that is the way it should be!

In the Book of Genesis, we are told that us two-legged creatures, both male and female, were born into the image of God. That includes all people of all different races, cultures, and ethnicities. As Richard Twiss points out, there can be no true unity without diversity. We see this in the Godhead itself, with the Creator seen as Trinity. God is One, because God is three!

Of course, when we speak of Native American culture and spirituality, we cannot see them as a monolithic entity. Although they may share some things in common, Iroquois culture is different than Seminole culture, which is different from Apache culture, which is different from Lakota Sioux culture. Even within the Sioux you have different cultural forms. There is Oglala Lakota, which Red Cloud was, as well as Crazy Horse. Sitting Bull was Hunkpapa Lakota, and Chief Touches the Clouds was Miniconjou Lakota. There are other Lakota branches.

Within Native reservations today there are major problems. Some reservations are in counties that are among the most poverty stricken in the nation - poverty that leads to alcoholism and drug abuse, domestic violence, and a high rate of teenage suicides.

On a more positive note, many are recovering some of their cultural past, including a re-learning of their native language and spiritual rituals. And those who are Christian are incorporating those things into their form of worship, something that should be encouraged and respected.

Now, I am by no means expert on Native forms of spirituality, but I am learning. Going back to the issue of unity in diversity - in a recent meditation I used a Lakota phrase, 'Mitakuye Oyasin' which means "we are all related". This is not restricted merely to human beings, but the whole of creation - including all that is, all that has been, and all that will be. This leads to another way of relating to nature- ways that could be of value at this time as we deal with our ecological crisis.

This leads to the idea that I most want to express today. In the past we were adamant about assimilation, forcing them to learn how to be like us. Perhaps, now, we are well past the time when we should be listening and learning from them!

Amen.

**Let us pray:** O Wakon Tonka, Great Spirit, Creator God, we thank you for this day and all that it is filled with. We are grateful that you have called us to walk the Jesus Way, to live lives of love and compassion, and to be a healing presence in a broken world. We thank you for the great diversity that you have created and seek your help and guidance in search of a greater unity. Help us to find peace among all people and show us how we may walk more gently upon Mother Earth. Today, we ask for your special blessing upon the indigenous people of this land, praying for their well-being, and celebrating the beauties of their culture. Help us to understand within this vast multicultural world that we are all related and learn to embrace the value of such diversity. I thank you personally for having given me the opportunity to live among so many people different from myself and opening my eyes to the richness of other cultures. As we pray for those in need let us remember our Native brothers and sisters, and for your special aid for the people of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic , and Jamaica, as they recover from great damage from the Hurricane, and help us to be prepared for the one coming our way... we also lift up before you, and for healing for... Amen.