

## Making Peace with Our Past

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Sunday, September 23, 2018

Numbers 14:11-19/Mark 9:30-37

You may be wondering why on earth a Presbyterian Church in New Canaan, Connecticut is observing Native American Sunday. It is a fair question, so let me offer you three reasons:

1. First, it is a Presbyterian special day, and, despite what some people may think, I am trying very hard to be a good Presbyterian pastor.
2. Second, two longstanding core values of this congregation are inclusion and racial justice.



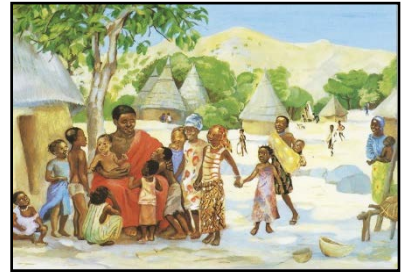
I do not believe that we want simply to give lip service to those values, so we should seize every opportunity to expand our circle and our souls. By including the stories, music, and rituals of **all people**, we are living into our conviction that **all people** are genuinely welcome here and we are including them in our worship.



Because of our geography and the demographics of our town, this church may never be as diverse in our pews as we might wish, but, by seeking to make our services as diverse as possible, we open our souls and widen our welcome. In a very real sense, when we honor and celebrate other traditions, we are inviting people into our hearts, even if we don't have a chance to welcome them into our building.

Because of where we live, our children may grow up in a church in which the congregation is mostly white/European, but they don't have to grow up in a church in which our worship is. It is spiritually healthy for our children to learn the spiritual cultures, values, and worship styles of all God's people, not just the ones whose ancestors came from Europe.

If what Jesus said about children in this morning's Gospel lesson is true, then it is spiritually healthy for all of us to sing songs and tell stories that are not our own, and we do well to listen to the wisdom of sisters and brothers long oppressed. We try to join our souls with theirs in the struggle for freedom and justice, and to bring the realm of God to earth as it is in heaven.



If we sing only white, Presbyterian music, or order our worship only according to European traditions, or study only about ourselves, then what we are saying is that we are valid and valuable, and they are not, or that we know better, or, worse, that we have nothing to learn from celebrating the rich diversity of all God's beautiful multi-colored family.



So, we observe Native American Sunday not because we have indigenous members whom we should honor, but because our native brothers and sisters have a word that **we** need to hear so we can grow and be helped by them to be better.

3. The other reason that I think it is important to observe Native American Sunday is that we need to repent of the genocide committed by our ancestors.

Now, I know that no one in this room took land that belonged to indigenous people, but our ancestors did. None of us wrapped Native Americans in straw and burned them alive because they would not convert to Christianity, but missionaries of our faith did. None of us took blankets from people who had died of smallpox and gave them to Native American children to deliberately infect them so we could take their land, but our government did.



The list of atrocities committed against the indigenous peoples of North and South America is horrific. When Columbus landed, there were 50 million people living in the Americas. Just more than 100 years later, 80 percent of those whose land they took were dead. It is the largest genocide in human history, and it wasn't necessary.

When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking an odd language the indigenous people had never heard, the natives ran to greet them, bringing them food, water, and gifts. Columbus later wrote of this in his log:



*They ... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks' bells. They willingly traded everything they owned. ... They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features. ... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane. ... They would make fine servants. ... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.*

These Indians were remarkable for their hospitality, their belief in sharing, remarkably human and humane people destined to be slaughter in the quest for gold and in the name of Christ.



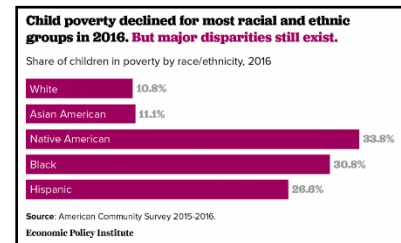
I don't know about you, but I didn't learn that in school. Even today, because the Texas State Board of Education, the largest purchaser of textbooks in the nation, decided their children should not hear this history, publishers decided our young people will grow up ignorant of this history.

My image of native Americans largely came from westerns in which swaggering white men like John Wayne were the heroes and Indians were bloodthirsty savages. That propaganda was powerful, and it took me decades to learn, and admit, the truth.

Today, the United States is one of the richest countries on earth, but we seldom acknowledge that we got that way by stealing the original people's land and cultivating, mining, and exploiting it for more than 300 years with slaves, and then for another 100 with economic servants.



Of course, you and I didn't do any of that, but we have been the beneficiaries of it. People of color and indigenous peoples are still the poorest people in our country.



Because the sins of our fathers have never been acknowledged, let alone atoned for, no real effort at peace and reconciliation has ever taken place in America because the winners have never acknowledged the price the losers paid and still pay.

I do not say this to exacerbate our white guilt, but simply to call us to a keener awareness of our history and of the way many of us continue to benefit from white privileges, while others of God's precious children continue to suffer. We cannot change the past, but we can have a healthier relationship with it, both as a nation and as individuals. We can learn from it and grow from it. By acknowledging the wrongs of the past, we who benefit can take the first steps to creating a healthy, holy family with those who have been harmed by it. Whether as a nation, a family, or an individual, until we acknowledge the past, even the most painful parts, we will continue to be its victim as will our children. That is what the Hebrew reading meant when it talked about the sins of the fathers being visited on their children for succeeding generations.

Native Americans tried to teach us about hospitality and sharing as a society. How different would this country be today if instead of slaughtering them we had learned from them?

We live in a world in which Americans throw away enough food to end starvation on the planet, but we continue to seek gold and treat those who would share as losers to be dominated.

Native Americans tried to teach us how to treat the land as sacred, but we act as though the earth is something we can own. The wonderful song "Colors of the Wind" from Disney's animated film "Pocahontas" reminds us that there are so many things that we don't know we don't know:

*You think I'm an ignorant savage  
And you've been so many places  
I guess it must be so  
But still I cannot see  
If the savage one is me  
How can there be so much that you don't know?  
You don't know*

*You think you own whatever land you land on  
The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim  
But I know every rock and tree and creature  
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name  
You think the only people who are people  
Are the people who look and think like you  
But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger  
You'll learn things you never knew, you never knew*

*Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the blue corn moon  
Or asked the grinning bobcat why he grinned?  
Can you sing with all the voices of the mountains?  
Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?  
Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?*

Perhaps the remarkable lack of humility by our leaders in politics, industry, and even our churches is a symptom of a hubris that doesn't know that we don't know.

Because we have neglected the past, we act as if we **deserve** all that we have, never thinking about or even knowing the price that others paid so we can have it. To me, that is like trying to walk through the empty tomb to new life without ever knowing there was a cross that paid the price for that tomb to be empty.

