

Honoring Indigenous People©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Dee Brown began the first chapter of her 1971 book, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, by stating, “It all began with Christopher Columbus...” As I read those words for the first time many years ago, I recall thinking about what I had learned in grade school. As a young boy I was taught that Columbus discovered America. With that understanding and perspective the statement that it all began with Christopher Columbus made sense. Brown’s first words initially seemed to match what my teachers had told me. As I read on however, it became apparent that what she meant was very different than what I had learned as a child. Her statement, “It all began with Christopher Columbus...” meant something very different than what I had been taught. Her book details what we now know about Columbus, his journey and the devastation he and those who followed him brought upon the indigenous people of this land.

As I first read the book those many years ago, I frequently had to put it down. I had to put it down until my tears would subside enough that I could see the words on the page again. It was a very painful book to read. The book completely shattered much of my understanding about this country and my place in it. It also started me down a path of learning and growth that significantly changed my life. Today I have deep gratitude for those who helped open my mind and my heart to a new perspective on the history of this land and its people.

With that gratitude in my heart this morning, I invite us to contemplate the national holiday that we are on the eve of. Tomorrow, our Nation commemorates and celebrates Christopher Columbus. I am here this morning to suggest instead of commemorating and celebrating Columbus tomorrow, that we honor those who were here long before he was born. I would invite us to join with a growing number of people, organizations and communities in this country who are calling for the name and the focus of tomorrow’s holiday to be changed. Those of you who read the announcement about today’s service are already aware of the proposed name change, Indigenous Peoples’ Day.

Changing a national holiday is no simple or small task. And while Columbus Day has only been a national holiday since 1934, celebration’s of Columbus’ voyage to this continent date back to 1792. That is a very long history to override. Some might suggest that it would be easier to work to advocate for Indigenous Peoples’ Day to become a new holiday, which would be celebrated on a different date. That would definitely be a step, but it would be woefully inadequate and I assert, inappropriate. Taking such a step would avoid dealing with some very difficult and painful truths— truths that I believe this country needs to face if it is ever going to do the reconciliation and healing work that is so desperately needed.

The reconciliation and healing work I am talking about is most visible today in the reemergence of the white supremacy movement at a period of our history when the Black Lives Matter movement has been raising people’s awareness of racism in our country. Can you imagine how a person of color who has African heritage would respond to a suggestion that statues of Confederate war soldiers should remain on public land? The presence of such statues sends a very clear and powerful message to

people of color. That message is, remember your place and don't you dare get out of line or we will deal with you. The same can be said about the Columbus Day holiday.

You might wonder why I bring up the Black Lives Matter movement when my topic is honoring indigenous people. I do so because the Black Lives Matter movement has, at its very foundation, a historical connection to the plight of the native people of this continent. What connects them, as well as Columbus' efforts to find a western route to the East Indies, are several papal bulls. For those of you who aren't conversant in Catholic terminology, a papal bull is a type of public decree, letters patent or charter issued by a pope of the Roman Catholic Church. A series of such papal bulls dating as far back as 1436 laid the foundation both for the slave trade and for the multitude of injustices that the native people of this land have experienced since Columbus first arrived. These papal bulls are the foundation of what today is referred to as the Doctrine of Discovery.

Here are some examples of the language in these papal bulls. In 1452, the papal bull *Dum Diversas* instructed the Portuguese crown "to invade, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens, pagans, and other enemies of Christ, to put them into perpetual slavery, and to take away all their possessions and property." A subsequent papal bull, *Romanus Pontifex*, written in 1454 extended the reach of the previous papal bull to lands in Africa. This papal bull legitimized the slave trade in that part of the world and beyond. After Columbus returned to Spain, a 1493 papal bull dramatically expanded the two I just mentioned. This one gave significant power and land to the King and Queen of Spain. Let's hear some of what that document states.

"We ... by the authority of Almighty God ... give... to you and your heirs..., forever, all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered, towards the west and south, ... from the Arctic pole ... to the Antarctic pole And we...appoint... you and your said heirs lords of them with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind."

It might seem that these ancient documents have little relevance today. How I wish that was the case. These documents continue to hold significant influence not only to our history but also to our culture and how we relate to one another. What these documents set in motion, namely slavery and dominion ideology, continue to be prevalent in our country.

Even current U.S. law acknowledges and affirms some of what these documents state. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes about this in her book, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. She writes,

In 1823 the U.S. Supreme Court issued its decision in *Johnson v. McIntosh*. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice John Marshall held that the Doctrine of Discovery had been an established principle of European law and English law in effect in Britain's North American colonies and was also the law of the United States... Indigenous rights were, in the Court's words, "in no instance, entirely disregarded; but were necessarily, to a considerable extent, impaired."

How that kind of logic can possibly be considered congruent with what the founders of this country wrote in the Declaration of Independence is difficult for me to comprehend. I am sure you are familiar with these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The only way these two perspectives can possibly be compatible is if indigenous people are perceived to be something other than fully equal. The opinion written by Chief Justice Marshall basically affirms that the indigenous people of this land should be held in a type of perpetual slavery, just as it states in the papal bull I previously mentioned. And lest we believe such logic no longer exists in our legal system today, as recently as 2005 the U.S. Supreme Court reaffirmed elements of the Doctrine of Discovery.

While our highest courts as well as public officials continue to institute aspects of the Doctrine of Discovery, a significant number of religious bodies have taken public stands in support of the indigenous people of this land. Organizations such as the World Council of Churches, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church as well as many Quaker meeting groups have disavowed the Doctrine of Discovery. Our national body, the Unitarian Universalist Association, has been actively addressing and confronting vestiges of the Doctrine for over 50 years. In 2012, the delegates in attendance at the General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona, overwhelmingly passed a resolution condemning the Doctrine of Discovery. Dunbar-Ortiz writes this about that resolution.

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) resolution regarding this is particularly powerful and an excellent model. The UUA “repudiate(s) the Doctrine of Discovery as a relic of colonialism, feudalism, and religious, cultural and racial biases having no place in the modern day treatment of indigenous peoples.” The Unitarian(s) (Universalists) resolved to “expose the historical reality and impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and eliminate its presence in the contemporary policies, programs, theologies and structures of Unitarian Universalism, and... invite indigenous partners to a process of Honor and Healing (often called Truth and Reconciliation).”

And at the General Assembly held earlier this year in Kansas City, Missouri, the 2012 resolution was invoked as another vote was taken. The delegates at the Assembly voted almost unanimously to adopt an Action of Immediate Witness honoring the Indigenous-led Water Protector movement that began in the spring of 2016 at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Some of you may recall that members and friends of this Fellowship worked to send needed supplies to the Water Protector camps as they attempted to prevent the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The peaceful Water Protectors were met with armed force and a good number were incarcerated. This was yet another example of the Doctrine of Discovery in action.

The time has come my friends for all of us to become informed about the many ways the malignant Doctrine of Discovery infests our country and harms its people. And as we become informed about it we will discover steps we can take to challenge and counter it. The steps may be as simple as no longer celebrating Columbus Day and

instead celebrating indigenous Peoples' Day. Or you might want to become involved in some of the multiple campaigns to have sports teams and schools change the mascots or names they have that are demeaning or offensive to native peoples. And please, if you have apparel of the National Football League team located in Washington, D.C., dispose of it in such a way that it will never be seen in public again.

As we go forth from this place today, let us remember that we didn't initiate the Doctrine of Discovery, but we have all, in one way or another, been effected by its destructive effects. It is my hope that as we go our ways, we will all discover how we might begin to expose and dismantle the spread of this pernicious Doctrine. From this day forward may we seek not only to actualize, but to expand, what the founders of our country wrote in the Declaration of Independence—"that all men (and I would expand this to all people) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Together, we have the ability to end the destructive reign that the Doctrine of Discovery has held over this land for more than 500 years. Together, we can bring on the dawn of a new era, an era in which the indigenous people of this land are given the respect, the honor and the justice they rightfully deserve.

So may it be.