

“Dominion, Resistance and Resilience in North America”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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As a child I recall quite well being told and taught that Christopher Columbus discovered America. When I was young I thought that what I was being told and taught must be true. All of the adults in my life claimed it was true so who was I, a mere child, to question it. I am wondering if I can get a show of hands of those in this room who were once taught and believed the story about Columbus discovering America. Thank you. Seeing so many hands raised is reassuring. It helps me feel less gullible. Today I know that the story I was told and taught was a lie. In my twenties I came to the realization that Christopher Columbus didn't discover America. He couldn't have discovered America for a very obvious and simple reason. There were already millions of people living on the lands he supposedly discovered before he was even born. Yet in spite of this fact many if not all of us were taught this patently false story.

So how is it possible that so many people believed, and even continue to believe, the lie that Columbus discovered America? The key to answering that question lies in understanding what “discover” means and has meant for centuries. The word “discover,” you see, is foundational to the “Doctrine of Discovery” which is still part of our legal system to this day. I realize it is quite likely that many of you are unfamiliar with the Doctrine. For those of you who are interested in learning more about this Doctrine, you might want to consider registering either for the common book read group or the “Roots of Injustice” program that are listed in today's announcements.

Here is a very brief introduction. The Doctrine of Discovery has its origins in the writings of fifteenth century Catholic Popes. In 1452 Pope Nicholas V issued a statement declaring war against all non-Christians throughout the world, and specifically sanctioning and promoting the conquest, colonization and exploitation of non-Christian nations and their territories. In 1455 Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bull known as *Romanus Pontifex* in which he directed King Alfonso of Portugal to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed...and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery...and...take all their possessions and property.” From this language it seems clear to us today that the Pope viewed non-Christians as inferior and dispensable.

When Columbus set sail in 1492 he clearly understood that he and his sailing mates were superior to people of other races and religions. Then in 1493, after Columbus returned to Spain following his first trip to this supposedly unknown part of the world, Pope Alexander VI issued another papal bull. This one giving dominion over an immense segment of the world to Spain. Here is a small portion of what he wrote.

“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.”

Notice here that the words “discovered and to be discovered” are important in this statement. These words assume that the people on these lands are inconsequential. That perspective is counter to my beliefs and values as I imagine it is for you as well. So as Susan and I were planning today’s service, I shared with her my sense of discomfort with the first hymn. The hymn’s reference to concepts contained in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, makes me quite uneasy. For it is in Genesis that the story of humans having “dominion over...every living thing that moveth upon the earth” begins. My unease comes because I am aware of how the concept of dominion has been used by people past and present to subjugate people, just as the Doctrine of Discovery has done and continues to do in this country and around the world.

I am certain all of us are well aware that many people were brought to this land as slaves. What a significant number of people in this country don’t know is that indigenous people of this land were also taken as slaves. On Columbus’ return trips to Spain his “cargo” included hundreds of native people he had captured and later sold as slaves in Spain. This is just one of innumerable injustices perpetrated upon the indigenous people of this land.

Initially the indigenous peoples of the land greeted the visitors from far away with friendly gestures, only to find that the visitors had no intention of respecting them or responding in kind. Time after time the European visitors took advantage of the people they encountered here. From Columbus on, those who arrived here from Europe exhibited a pattern of behavior that was abusive of and unjust toward the native peoples they encountered. The indigenous peoples of this land didn’t passively accept the maltreatment they received however, they put up resistance in a variety of ways.

One of the ways they resisted was through making agreements. The native peoples were well versed in bartering. They knew all too well that making and keeping agreements was an essential part of the bartering process. Such agreements were not only for their own personal benefit or even just for the benefit of their people. These agreements were frequently intended to be of benefit to the people they were making the agreement with as well. This kind of bartering practice was intended to build trusting relationships and also avoid the possibility of warfare. Frequently, the indigenous peoples would first strive to make agreements with the people who had come from Europe. These agreements were often in the form of treaties and many of these treaties recognized that the indigenous people held ownership of land areas, sometimes very large land areas. But of the hundreds of treaties that were signed by those who represented the rulers in Europe, and later, by those who represented the U.S. Government, the overwhelming majority, if not all, were broken. They were broken in order to do just what Pope Nicholas V had decreed in 1452—to “take all their possessions and property.”

Making alliances was another approach the indigenous people would utilize to resist oppressive or unjust treatment. Sometimes these alliances were tribe to tribe. These kinds of alliances provided groups of tribes a stronger bargaining position when dealing with the people who had more recently arrived to this land. The Iroquois Confederacy is one example of such an alliance. Other times a tribe or tribes would form an alliance with one group of Europeans, such as the English or the French, in order to gain favor with the hope of being protected or even treated fairly. This approach

typically didn't work well for long. Eventually these alliances would disintegrate and the indigenous people would again find themselves being taken advantage of.

A third approach was warfare. Many times since Columbus first arrived, indigenous people have turned to mortal combat to defend their human rights and the lives of their people. There were times when turning to battle was a successful strategy for a brief period of time. Lt. Col. George A. Custer gave his life and the lives of the soldiers under his command because he seriously underestimated the abilities of the Lakotas and the Cheyennes to mount a defense of their land. But eventually, every tribe that went to war with people of European descent living on this continent found that warfare was not sustainable or effective in the long run.

What was done to the indigenous people of this land based on fifteenth century religious decrees is recognized by many people today to be unconscionable. I think it is important that I name it for what it was, genocide. But in spite of all of the forces and efforts that were brought to bear on the indigenous peoples of this land, they were not exterminated. Native people still call this land their home. Gerald Visenor, an award winning author and enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, coined the term "survivance" to describe how indigenous people have not only survived, but how they have exhibited and continue to exhibit resilience in the face of incredible oppression and persecution.

Now I want to have us consider a few examples that demonstrate the resilience of the indigenous people of this land. A very recent example involved a Montana tribe. In December of this past year, the Little Shell Tribe became the 574th federally recognized tribe in the U.S. The tribe has more than 5,000 members. Yet in spite of their size and their nearly 130 years of seeking recognition, they didn't get what they deserved until all of the Montana legislators in Washington, D.C. agreed to put the matter of tribal recognition in a defense spending bill—a bill that was certain to pass and be signed by the President.

Another example of resilience can be seen in the Cobell v. Salazar court case. Again, this example has its roots right here in Montana. In 1996, Eloise Cobell, filed a class-action lawsuit against two departments of the U.S. Government: the Department of Interior and the Department of the Treasury. When the suit was initially filed it was titled Cobell v. Babbitt—Bruce Babbitt was the U.S. Secretary of the Interior in 1996. The suit alleged mismanagement of Indian trust funds. Estimates of the number of people who were negatively impacted by the mismanagement range from 250,000 to 500,000. The case drug on for 13 years, through three Presidents and four Secretaries of the Interior. It was settled in 2009 in favor of Cobell and all those she claimed had been harmed. The U.S. government agreed to pay \$3.4 billion. A portion of the \$3.4 billion is being used to return to tribal ownership and control what has been called "fractionated" land interests. These lands were lost as a result of the Dawes Act of 1887. A scholarship fund has also been set up for Native American and Alaska native students.

And just last Sunday we heard from Shane Doyle about a very important example of the resilience of indigenous people. My guess is that few of you recognized it when you heard it, so I will tell you what I am talking about here. During his talk last week, Shane mentioned that he did a vision quest in the Crazy Mountains. In preparation for that vision quest he underwent a purification ceremony that some people

call a “sweat lodge” ceremony. Both the vision quest and the purification ceremony are religious practices that, from the early 1880’s until passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978, were illegal. Think about that for a minute. Article 1 of the U.S. Bill of Rights states; “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof...” Yet for more than 90 years there were laws on the books stating that the indigenous people of this country couldn’t practice their religious or many of their cultural ceremonies. If a native of this land participated in any number of their religious or cultural ceremonies during that 90+ year period, they ran the risk of being arrested and imprisoned. But after many long years of repression, indigenous religious and cultural traditions not only survive, they thrive. What do I mean when I say they thrive? How many of you have ever attended a pow wow? Many of the dances that occur at pow wows were illegal until 1978. Today the dances are done at pow wows all over the country. There will be one on the MSU campus in April.

Clearly, the indigenous people of this land have shown and continue to show resilience in the face of prejudice, discrimination, repression and even attempts at extermination. And along with resilience many of the indigenous people continue to exhibit hospitality to members of the dominant culture—the dominant culture that has dispossessed them of their land and their way of life.

Here is an example of the hospitality I am talking about. In 1983, just five years after indigenous people of this land were legally allowed to practice their religious ceremonies again, I was invited to participate in sweat lodge ceremonies and undertake a vision quest. I didn’t know then what an incredible privilege and honor that was. Today, with a heightened sense of awareness, I ask myself a question. If my faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism, was declared illegal, and no one was allowed to hold any UU religious ceremonies for 90 years, would our faith tradition and its practices survive? And if our faith tradition and our practices did survive, how welcoming would we be to members of the culture that had tried to bring an end to it? I wonder. I hope you wonder too.

So may it be.