

MORNING MESSAGE: A Columbus Day Weekend Challenge

Cincinnati Friends Meeting

10th Month, 8th Day, 2017

By

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WHITE SUPREMACY: Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and the Sin of Racism

Introduction:

Not only is tomorrow my daughter Angela's 41st birthday, but according to the American cultural calendar, it is also Columbus Day. While she was a student at Cincinnati's School for Creative and Performing Arts (SCPA) in the early 1990's, Angela was assigned to write an American history paper for Columbus Day. I introduced her to some creative resources from progressive groups such as Sojourners, The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America (BPFNA), The Christian Century, and others, that exposed the injustices of the Doctrine of Discovery with its violent history of white supremacy, European domination, land theft, religious evangelism, indigenous genocide and African slavery, etc. Angela wrote a splendid paper of which I was very proud. On the day she submitted the paper, she wore a BPFNA shirt illustrated with a rendering of Columbus greeting indigenous people on an ocean beach. In the caption, Columbus tells the natives they have just been discovered, and the natives respond that they did not know they were lost. Unfortunately, Angela's teacher, who was apparently entrapped by common cultural teachings and interpretations of popular American history, was not impressed. Angela's grade was not very splendid.

As progressive minded Christians, you and I read the Hebrew and Christian scriptures with open minds in the Presence of the Light. We take seriously, words for example, in Exodus 20: 1-21 to worship God and to not kill, steal, covet; words in Psalm 37: 11 to be humble; words in Matthew 5-7 to be meek; words in Matthew 4: 1-10 to worship God. Progressive Quakers and Baptists, along with other progressive Jews and Christians, interpret these words to inspire nonviolent peace and religious freedom, as expressed in respective cherished testimonies, principles and teachings. Thus, those of us from white European heritages hopefully strive to confront our privileges of white supremacy, and in turn repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and the Sin of Racism, products in part of a series of Papal Bulls from the 11th – 15th centuries that granted white European explorers and their respective ruling monarchs the right to 'discover' and claim land in non-Christian territories, simply by setting foot on them. Unfortunately, in spite of our spiritual teachings, white supremacy has existed throughout American history, and it continues even today. Let us consider some denominational, continental, and national stories.

Denominational Stories:

During the mid-1990's, I was privileged to serve as the minister at Cincinnati's Hyde Park Baptist Church, and American Baptist Church founded in 1790 by the Rev. Dr. Stephen Gano as Cincinnati's original Columbia Baptist Church - the first protestant congregation in the old Northwest Territories. What is now known as First Covenant Presbyterian Church was soon to follow. Located where its Pioneer Cemetery still exists today across from Lunken airport, and containing graves of Cincinnati founders such as Benjamin Stites, the original Columbia Baptist worship house, which no longer exists, had upper level windows, which as I understand, were used to shoot at 'Indians' who might be 'threatening' worshippers. (The original building of a similar Baptist church still stands today on its original foundation in Indiana, with its upper level porthole openings for shooting 'Indians' - now bricked in, about an hour's drive from Cincinnati in Cedar Grove on Highway U.S. 52.) The history of the Columbia / Duck Creek / Hyde Park Baptist Church contains a story about a family in route to church one Sunday morning who were killed by 'Indians'. In the past I have often referred to this story as an example of how pioneer church goers were willing to worship in 'hostile' environments, in contrast to today's church goers who, without a 'pioneering spirit', seem to prefer to worship in 'safe' neighborhoods. Today I must use the story to ask an ethical question. What was going on at that time that led the indigenous people to become 'hostile'? Could it just be that those pioneer Baptists were in town, along with others, stealing land?

In today's meeting house of Cincinnati Friends Meeting, another 200+ years old Cincinnati congregation, on the wall just outside the meeting area door to the right of where I am now standing, is an artist's rendering of a group of Quaker worshippers from a former time, worshipping quietly and peacefully in their meeting house as they are being attacked by 'hostile' Native Americans, with aimed native weapons of war in hand. While I am certain that the intent of the rendering is to portray the 'calm, cool, and collected' spiritual response of Quakers in the face of adversity, today I must use this rendering to ask an ethical question. What was going on at that time that led the indigenous people to become 'hostile'? Could it just be that the Quakers were in town with the Baptists, Presbyterians, and others, stealing land?

Well, our religious pride prompts us to insist that our group of Christians, with spiritual social justice saints such as John Woolman, Clarence Jordan, Levi Coffin and Will Campbell, etc., would not steal land. Baptists like to point out that Roger Williams, founder of the First Baptist Church in America in Providence, Rhode Island, and the state of Rhode Island, based on principles of religious freedom, (which eventually led the way to Baptist contributions to the adoption of the first amendment of the United States Constitution), paid the Narragansetts for land, even though the British Monarchy, to whom Williams apparently maintained some

loyalty, eventually had a voice in the actual boundaries of the Rhode Island colony. Likewise, Quakers like to point out that William Penn, though originally granted Pennsylvania land by King Charles II, for a 'religious experiment', also later paid the indigenous peoples. Let's be honest. Land in the Americas did not become 'real estate' to be bought and sold until after our European ancestors arrived. Europeans did not find 'for sale' signs in front of any properties. The land was not for sale. The indigenous peoples did not have a practice of private land ownership. We now know that the indigenous peoples really did not have a choice about what happened to the land. It is my sincere belief, that ultimately, in American practice, the land was stolen. True history bears this out. With integrity, we need to be honest and admit it. As is noted by a current "Exiled: Ohio's Indian Removal" display at the Heritage Village Museum, located in Cincinnati's Sharon Woods Park, and publicized by a bulletin insert, Ohio's Indians were removed by a tragic and traumatic 'Trail of Tears' process. This morning we are worshipping in what appears to be a very safe neighborhood, known locally as 'Indian Hill'. I look around and see beautiful human populated hills, but I see no 'Indians'. I refer you to the story in today's 'Centering Down' meditation inserted in the bulletin, written by a Cherokee descendent and a professor at a Quaker school, Randy S. Woodley, in which he intentionally acknowledges that the settlers still have the land.

How can we utilize indigenous principles of 'Restorative Justice' to 'make things right'? Can we utilize circle processes for education and dialogue?

Continental Stories:

Very briefly in summary, the White Supremacy and the Doctrine of Discovery proceeded as follows in the Americas. In 1492 Christopher Columbus 'sailed the ocean blue' and landed in the Caribbean Islands, where it is reported that the native Arawak peoples suffered the fate of genocide. Spanish and Portuguese explorers, who were in search of gold and other valuables, also understood that part of their Doctrine of Discovery mission was to convert non-Christian peoples in lands they conquered to Christianity. The order of the day was to convert or be victimized and/or enslaved. No doubt most of us have encountered the historical stories of rape, enslavement, murder and genocide. Loss of land was accompanied by loss of culture and life. Though he technically never visited the shores of what is now the United States, it is reported that Columbus was closely connected with the African slave trade that eventually became economically productive for predominately white industrial and plantation business owners in the Americas.

As Christians, we need to ask, "How do we account for the Church being the origin of the Doctrine of Discovery", and, "How do we account for the Church sharing responsibility for such a violent loss of land, culture and life?"

National Stories:

Further, to summarize briefly, to the north in lands that would eventually become the United States and Canada, indigenous peoples suffered essentially the same fate at the hands of the British and French conquerors as had the peoples to the south at the hands of the Spanish and Portuguese. As a result of the Doctrine of Discovery principles adopted by British and French monarchs, first the European colonists, and then the United States and Canada, removed the indigenous peoples who had survived disease and war from their lands, destroyed their culture through war, 'trails of tears', removal of children to white run schools, supervision by church sponsored Indian Agents whose support included Quakers and Baptists, and captured African peoples were enslaved on plantations and otherwise, etc.. The cultures of the respective minorities suffered destruction and genocide.

Whereas the United States and Canada extended the practices of the Doctrine of Discovery, the southern United States, and the home of the Confederacy where I was born and raised (though many of my ancestors immigrated to these shores from the British Isles), epitomized the practices of the Doctrine of Discovery. Southern plantations on lands formerly populated by Native American people became economically enriched through the enslavement of African American people. Whereas the Civil War, or the War Between the States, depending on whether one is from the North or the South, and the thirteenth amendment ended legalized slavery, and it was replaced by what is known as 'Jim Crow', which was slavery by another name. Now, 'Jim Crow' that was ended by Martin Luther King, Jr's civil rights movement, has been replaced by what Michelle Alexander has called the New Jim Crow, or mass incarceration, as a result of the so called war on drugs.

There is a lot of discussion these days about the removal of Confederate monuments and symbols that are said to promote racism. My thinking is that the Confederacy was a subset of the Doctrine of Discovery. White Supremacy is not just a Southern problem, but an American problem as well, that includes all of us - not just Southerners. If we are concerned about Confederate soldiers who fought to preserve slavery, we should be just as concerned about Union soldiers who fought to remove and/or kill Native Americans. So, whose statues do we remove, and does removing these historical symbols really erase white supremacy and racism? Were the Confederate President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee really any more dangerous as White Supremacists than the Union President Andrew Jackson, General George Custer, and President Ulysses S. Grant? My thinking is that the carved historical Union images on Mount Rushmore in South Dakota are just as offensive to Native Americans as the carved historical Confederate images on Stone Mountain in Georgia are to African Americans. Should we remove one and ignore the other? Maybe today we need to focus more on educating and

transforming the minds and actions of white supremacist folks who are flaunting controversial symbols and advocating racism against people of color.

Conclusion:

In his book, "The Four Vision Quests of Jesus", Steven Charleston, a Choctaw Native who is an ordained Episcopalian Bishop and seminary professor, expounds on Jesus' four visionary experiences in the wilderness of temptation, the mountain of transfiguration, the garden of gethsemane, and the hill of Golgotha, as experiences similar to those of Native adolescent sons who brave wilderness survival experiences in search of their life missions. In the third temptation of his first quest, according to Matthew 4: 8ff, Jesus was tempted through a mountain view of the world's kingdoms to gain possession of them through evil practice. Jesus rejected evil in favor of good. According to the beatitudes contained in his sermon on the mount, in Matthew 5: 5, Jesus is credited with saying that it is the meek who will inherit the earth.

We may perceive ourselves as innocent, in spite of having inherited unjust and sinful systems of land management, in which we descendants of ancestor settlers still have the land. Those of us of white European descent, whose ancestors took lands from the indigenous peoples through the imperialistic force and violence of the Doctrine of Discovery, and who now benefit from the privileges of white supremacy, are presently challenged to do what Jennifer Harvey, in "Trouble the Water: A Christian Resource for the Work of Racial Justice", calls our 'White Work' in the journey of racial justice. She says that we need to get specific about our 'whiteness' and 'white identity'. As Thandeka says in her book, "Learning to be White", we have indeed learned to be white. In light of the contemporary political climate and rhetoric in our country, which advocates controversial immigration restrictions on, and deportations of, people 'not like us', I think that this 'Columbus Day' might just well be an appropriate time and opportunity for each of us to begin our own respective Vision Quests, in which each of us can do our 'White Work' to confront our inherited privileges of White Supremacy, which we can now unlearn toward repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and the Sin of Racism.

Friends, we are still being called to walk in the Light of Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality...and Stewardship/Service (SPICES). We know well what these cherished Quaker Testimonies mean. So, let's just do it.