

Indigenous People and Us
UUSS - October 11, 2020
Rev Lucy Bunch

Invocation

In our invocation this morning, we acknowledge the land which we occupy as the traditional home of the Nisenan, Maidu, and Miwok tribal nations. These sovereign people have been the caretakers of this land since time immemorial. Despite centuries of genocide and occupation the Nisenan, Maidu, and Miwok continue as vibrant and resilient tribes and bands, both Federally recognized and unrecognized. We take this opportunity to acknowledge the generations that have gone before as well as the present-day Nisenan, Maidu, and Miwok people.

Homily

When I think about what I learned in school about the great colonization of the United States of America, the words that come to me clearly are manifest destiny. Does anyone remember those words? Manifest destiny was a 19th Century belief- acted on by our government- that the European expansion to colonize the entire continent of North America was both justified and inevitable. And it was ordained by God. In school we learned about the heroic pioneers who forged a new life in the wilderness or crossed the prairie to the western states. They were indeed heroic. Many of my ancestors were among the first settlers in Missouri and later Texas.

What we did not learn was what happened to the people that were already here. We learned some, sitting bull, Custer's last stand, the trail of tears. But the story we learned – smoothed over the rough parts – a few skirmishes here, and raid there, a few treaties and voila - we're here and they are not.

The true story is one of American Imperialism – American conquest. We wanted the land that the natives lived on and we took it – we killed them, we killed the buffalo that they needed to survive, we moved them to lands that we didn't want, and then moved them again when we wanted the new land. We forced assimilation on their children.

We took what we wanted by any means and then pretended that it didn't happen.

But it did happen. When we look at racial injustice in this country, sometimes we Californians can feel some pride because we were never a slave state. But as Karen described, slavery for native Americans was sanctioned by our state government.

I remember reading about the Tulsa Race riots where hundreds of African Americans were killed by white rioters at the turn of the 20th century. Again, I thought that didn't happen in CA. Wrong. Wikipedia lists 17 massacres of at least 50 natives in California between 1846 and 1871. Several were over 100 and one was over 1,000 killed. The militias who engaged in this genocide were sanctioned and funded by the state government.

One of our members has a anti-racism sign in her yard that was defaced by a sticker from a white supremacist group that said "not stolen- conquered." Indeed. I have to say I agree with the white supremacists - Conquered is the correct word – we did not steal the land from the native Americans we conquered it and them - by whatever means necessary.

However, unlike the racists groups I am not proud of this history – I am ashamed. I want no part of this history of conquering, of imperialism.

But I do have a part in it whether I want to or not. My house sits on lands that was once occupied by the Nisenan people. My ancestor's journeys west allowed them to expand their opportunities and create a new life. At the expense of the life and culture of the peoples who were already present on the land.

I know that some of you are likely feeling upset by what has been shared today – and that is a good thing, we should feel the pain of this great tragedy. But it is disrespectful to ignore it or push it away. Its disrespectful of the natives who have strived to maintain their tribes and culture despite what has been done to them by European Americans.

Last year Governor Newsom issued an apology on behalf of the citizens of the state of California (us) to all California Native Americans, for instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect. He also established a truth and healing council to record, examine documentation and hear native American stories in order create a comprehensive narrative of the experience of natives in the state of Ca.

This is good and appropriate – apology is only a start towards accountability– you must be clear with people you have wronged, exactly what you are apologizing for.

Another way to rebuild relationship is to honor their wisdom. The NYT times reported on how CA forestry officials are turning to native Americans for their knowledge of fire management principles. "Now, as more Americans are being forced to confront the realities of climate change, firefighting experts and policymakers are increasingly turning to fundamental ecological principles that have long guided Indigenous communities. "

So where do we go from here? Us as individuals. The Governor's apology only includes us if we take it to heart. Tomorrow is indigenous people's day – a replacement for Columbus day. Instead of honoring the conqueror, Columbus, we turn our attention to those who were the natives of this country before he arrived. We honor them by putting aside our stereotypical understanding of native Americans and expanding our knowledge of their history and culture. As Carol says – "Native Peoples are resilient and alive, not a thing of the past.: We have much to learn from indigenous cultures and people, if we approach them with respect and humility.

So may it be.