

Sermon:
Sunday, October 13, 2024
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

When English colonists first arrived on Virginia's shores, they encountered a landscape they had never seen before. Virginia's rivers flowed to the bay, and along these rivers lived the people led by the king Powhatan, whom the colonists called Powhatan Indians. The Powhatan cleared the forest through strategic burning. This made hunting easier and prepared the ground for plantings of corn, squash and beans. Instead of the bare, even rows the English were used to in their agriculture, Powhatan agriculture was a mix of plantings for food amidst tobacco plants. Historian Charles Mann describes the landscape as "charred stumps, hummocked land, and overlapping crops (47)." The land had no fences; America had no large domesticated animals, so the Indians didn't need fences to keep them out of fields. Between the crop fields, the Powhatan maintained fallow meadows for common use, thick with grains, medicinal herbs, and foraging greens. There were no roads (because there were no horses); the Indians used canoes in the rivers, which were their thoroughfares.

In those Powhatan fields, rich with crops, the squash vines and bean runners ran rampant. To us, now familiar with these new world crops, it would look like a prosperous garden. To the colonists, it looked like nothing—they didn't even recognize it as agriculture. "These people aren't even using this land," the colonists thought. "It must be here for us."

This way of thinking, repeated in so many times and places throughout the encounter between the Old world and the New, led to deep conflict between the

Jamestown colonists and the Powhatan. At first the two communities bartered, negotiated and forged a shaky peace. The Powhatan traded food, which the colonists desperately needed. But in 1609 newly arrived colonists attacked an Indian settlement, burning the homes and stealing their wealth. This meant war. By that winter the colonists had locked themselves inside their fort and were starving to death rather than risk contact with the Powhatan. Here in Massachusetts, the initial contact was more peaceful, but by the 1670s the English were engaged in war with the Wampanoag and Narragansett nations. Looking back, we can wish for it to have been different. There was room in North America for both American Indians and European immigrants. They could have built on each other's strengths, like the three sisters leaning on each other for support. But the encounter was so foreign to both parties, and the illnesses the Europeans brought with them so devastating, that the possibility of cooperation was overwhelmed by fear and chauvinism.

It's easy to look back on history and see the faults. Harder is to do better, ourselves, today. Fear of difference still drives division and violence between people. People still, in America today, look at a cultural group they don't understand and think, "They must not really be a person like me." Take the false rumor, spread by Senator Vance, that Haitian immigrants in Ohio were eating pets. Not only are there no reports that this has actually happened, this fear has been tied to one immigrant group or another since at least the 1980s. Then, it was fear of Vietnamese immigrants; today, it is aimed against legal Haitian immigrants in Ohio. This kind of fear is being weaponized in this election season. Fear drives donations. New communities of immigrants are coming to America, as they have since those first encounters on Virginia's shore.

Political leaders encourage fear of those immigrants. Adults and young people are exploring new ways of expressing their gender and sexual orientation. Election ads invite fear of these personal identities. Political divisions in America are deeper than ever. The Pew Research Centers report that 90% of partisans in both major parties say that if the opposing candidate wins, our country will suffer serious harm. We like to think that our advancements since the 17th century have given us a more enlightened perspective on history. We like to think that we now would do better in that first contact with native Americans; we could build peace. Yet humans today are still subject to fear, and fear may come to our hearts before curiosity or understanding.

It's ironic, because like the Three Sisters, our system of government itself is built on a strong and diverse philosophical base. The democracy that grounds the election we're about to have is built on a partnership between European enlightenment thinking and native American practice. Europeans had learned through hard-won experience that the right to decide what should happen to the community and the nation belonged to more people than just the king. First it was the landed nobility who could be counted on to protect the kingdom in times of war. Then those fighting men themselves demanded a say; they didn't have land but they had their lives to give, and that was worth something. By the time Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, he was ready to declare that "all men" were created equal.

Imagining the Constitution for the new United States of America, Ben Franklin drew on the practice of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is the oldest governmental institution in North America. Six different nations in the Great Lakes region came together to draft and maintain a peace for

centuries. Called the Great Peace, their society was matriarchal and consensus-based. It involved an intentional balance of power among men, women, young people and old. Responsibilities and privileges were shared among those six nations. It is from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy that we get the separation of powers in the Constitution.

Separation of powers from one culture and individual rights from another. These form the hybrid strength of our system of government, like the bean plants thriving on the cornstalk. Since the founding of the United States, rights have only continued to expand. All white men, and then, after the Civil War, all men. One hundred years ago, women. In 1971, 18-20 year olds. Now every adult citizen, with the exception of some people who have committed felonies, has the right to vote and participate in our democracy. This is the vision of America we uphold every time we vote.

That expansion of rights seems to me, also, to borrow an insight from American Indian culture—not government, this time, but the spiritual outlook of the Potawatomi people. We heard this morning from Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation. She wrote that essay after she had learned from a master basket weaver how to make a black ash basket. The man she learned from, John Pigeon, is part of the renowned family of Potawatomi basket makers. His family's baskets sit in the Smithsonian as works of art. From John, Robin learned to choose the right ash tree. She learns to remove the bark and wedge strips off the log, then splitting them into long splints. Then she is ready to weave the basket, adding decorative curls at the end. All the way along she is taught gratitude for the life that makes the basket possible: the life of the forest and the tree, the life in her body and the life in the community that preserves this art and wisdom. It is when she goes home that she sees

this life in all the objects in her kitchen, from jam jar to pencil. Everything has something to say about life on this earth. We humans get a vote, but all life speaks.

I discuss my sermon at the Tea with the Minister Zoom I host on Thursday afternoons, and one participant had a very insightful comment this week. They said that both fear and curiosity were drivers for humans to learn about something new. Not seeing the garden because there is no fence is ignorance. Starving to death out of fear that the Powhatan will kill you is fear. Believing immigrants are eating pets is fear. Giving thanks for the components of a basket is curiosity and respect. How can we cultivate curiosity and grace in our interactions with one another, and in our world?

I think our spiritual commitments can help us. We encounter the holy in many places in our tradition. It's not just in the Bible; it's not just in Christianity; it's not just in one language or one culture or one right way to believe. We affirm the presence of the spirit in many peoples and many beliefs, in many scriptures and many prayers. We affirm it in the natural world of growing things and the whole human community. We affirm that each person's conscience is able to understand what is right and good in the world. This plurality of pathways to truth is at the heart of our religious commitment to democracy, and we know our democracy is strongest when many voices are heard. We know that the Spirit is already at work in the world, even in cultures not our own, even in landscapes we don't understand. We're not here to save the world, but to befriend it.

As individuals and cultures, there is so much more that unites us than divides us. When the English first encountered the Powhatan living on their riverbanks, they could have recalled their own villages and towns, settled on England's flowing rivers. They could have remembered the teachings of their scripture, which said that God's

abundance should be for all people. Despite the political divisions of today, there is just as much that unites us. Yes, 90% of partisans express deep fear if the “other side” wins. But according to an Associated Press survey, 90% of Americans also affirm that “the right to vote, the right to equal protection under the law, and the right to privacy are extremely important or very important to the United States’ identity as a nation.” We need more encounters that bring us together. We need to remember that powerful people profit off of our fear. We need not fear, but hope in the promise of the diverse American experiment.

In preaching about American Indians, there is always the danger that I will treat native communities as though they only existed in the 17th century. Native communities thrive in North America today. So I want to leave you with a promising story of cooperation between the U.S. government and the Chumash nation in California. A section of coastline has been sacred to the Chumash for centuries. They successfully protested the building of a liquified natural gas terminal and wind turbines. In 2014, a Chumash leader proposed the coast and the waters off of it for a National Marine Sanctuary. Today, in a partnership between the Chumash and the federal administration, these 7,000 square miles of ocean could become the “largest marine sanctuary in the coastal United States.” The Chumash would be co-managers of the sanctuary with the U.S. government. The strength of our peoples and our country is built on this kind of cooperation. It is not fear, but peace, which builds a way forward.

We do not face the existential risks faced by either the colonists at Jamestown or the Powhatan people. We’re not starving to death or dying of smallpox. The fear is still part of our DNA, but our spiritual commitments can help us do better. In this election

season, I invite you to stay true to your values in the ballot box and in your interactions with others. Curiosity and cooperation will take us further than fear. I love you all. Amen.