

“Every Nation, Tribe, Clan, and Language”

Revelation 7:9-12

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November is Native American Heritage month, so that is what we decided to celebrate today. Just so we are on the same page with terminology, The United Methodist Church states in the 2016 Book of Resolutions #3321, “The US government and many tribal governments use the term “American Indian.” We understand the words “Native American,” “Indigenous people,” and “First Nations people” to be interchangeable terms.” So I will be using these terms almost interchangeably.

As I was trying to think about what to preach on today, I found it hard. I found it hard to come up with an idea that I felt God calling me to deliver to you. I found it hard to believe that I would do justice to any topic for today. Before we begin, I must apologize. I must state that I am sorry. I am sorry for what was done to the Indigenous People of this land. I am sorry for the broken promises and the broken treaties. I am sorry for the biological warfare that took place as blankets infected with small pox were given to Native Americans as gifts. I am sorry that Native Americans were forced off of their land because settlers saw the benefit of creating colonies and stripping the land of the natural resources. I am sorry that many Native Americans died as they were forced to make long and arduous trips to less desirable locations - being placed on reservations. I am sorry that entire tribes were slaughtered because they stood in the way of American progress. I am sorry that today many Native Americans deal with racism, poverty, unemployment, fewer educational opportunities, inadequate health care, and struggles with basic rights and freedoms that many of us take for granted. I am sorry that Native American language and culture are on the brink of extinction. I am sorry.

Like it or not, as settlers arrived to the continents of North and South America, horrible things were done to the people that were found living in this new land. For the First Nations people, generations upon generations lived on this land. They enjoyed what the earth gave to them. They sought to live in harmony with creation. Yet that all changed as settlers came to bend creation to their will and create the American dream where all who sought freedom could come and live and pursue their own happiness. And yet we offer platitudes by having rivers and mountains maintain the names given to them by the Native Americans. We name our cities after the tribes that first inhabited the land. But yet we have also taken the idea that Native Americans were vicious warriors and we use this stereotype by painting them as the mascots of our sports teams. Only recently have we been realizing how hurtful this can be, and have been taking steps to change this perception in sports and other areas around our nation.

Can you imagine living in your home - maybe one that your great grandparents had built with their bare hands - and someone comes along and tells you that the land now belonged to them and you needed to find some place else to live? I cannot imagine that, which is why I found this sermon so hard to write. I cannot imagine the type of mistreatment Native Americans have faced throughout history and even today.

Today, we in the church try to look at ways we can be in ministry to others. We try to help those in need. We try to bring awareness to combat the evils of racism. We are called to fight to right the wrongs that injustice brings. But throughout history, the Church has not been blameless in how it has treated Native Americans (or other cultural or racial groups).

Missionaries have gone out into the frontier to convert Native Americans to Christianity - sometimes through gentle means, but other times by force. And all of this occurred as the land was being stolen and pillaged by explorers. And while missionaries may have thought that Christianity would lead to a safer and kinder alternative than being subjected to those conquering the land, their land was stolen all the same. So while we can apologize all we want, but it still will never be able to fix the damage that has been caused over the last 500 years.

While it is hard to know for sure, it is estimated that in the 1400s (before Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue) there were anywhere from 2.1 million to over 18 million Native Americans just in what we know as the United States. (Upwards of 90 million for all of North and South America.) By 1800, the population in the US declined to approximately 600,000, and by 1890, it had declined further to about 250,000 people in the whole country. Since then, there has been an increase in population. Today, Native Americans account for 2.09% of the US population (a little over 9 million). This is roughly the same number in population as the state of New Jersey. There are 574 federally recognized Native American tribes.

And while numbers may have increased, problems for the Native American people still exist. I am telling you all this today because it is important that we understand what has happened throughout history to our Native American siblings. It is important to know that racism still exists today. It is important to see that there are hurdles that are in place for Native Americans that many others will never see. And it is important to understand that we as the Church should look to speak up for and support our First Nation siblings.

As I was researching for this sermon today, I found it interesting at just how hard it was to find information. Searching the internet I found a slew of websites, each looking at various parts of the history of this country and the Native American people. But much of that information was limited to just a paragraph or two if that, and it was watered down to negate the severity of the mistreatment that Indigenous people have faced.

With all of that being said, I am not trying to point a finger at you. I am not blaming YOU for specifically mistreating others. I am also not trying to change what has happened in the past, because that is not possible. What I am trying to do is to show you that there is a people group out there that has been tossed aside and is all but invisible to many people. And we have a responsibility to show God's love to not only them, but to the entire world.

As I was thinking about what scripture to use today, I came across the scripture from Revelation 7:9-12, read to us today from the First Nations Version of the New Testament (all of the scriptures I will use today are from that translation). In this scripture we are given insight into the end of days. We have this picture painted of a host of people standing before the throne of God. "After this I saw a great crowd of people, too many to count, from every nation, tribe, clan, and language. They were standing before the seat of honor and before the Lamb, dressed in pure white regalia, holding palm tree branches in their hands." I'm sure that this vision was an amazing sight, and when this happens it will be an amazing thing to experience. To see all of the peoples of the world come together in front of one God, each holding palm branches - a symbol of victory, triumph, peace and eternal life - acknowledging God as ruler of all. This vision shows us the worship that will ensue as the spirit-messengers (the angels), the elders, and the spirit-animals (the four living creatures) humbled themselves before the Lord - bowing to the ground and giving honor and respect that God deserves.

As I read this, I kept thinking about what eternal life will be like and how amazing it will be. But I also kept coming back to the idea that we are to share that eternal life through God with others. It is obvious that when the time comes we will all stand before God. But people need to

hear about the love of God to receive the benefits and the blessings that comes from God's forgiveness. As Romans 10:13-14 tells us, "For anyone who calls out to our Great Spirit Chief 'Creator Sets us Free' will be set free and made whole. But how can anyone trust in or call out to the one they have never heard of? And how can they hear if no one told them? And how will his message reach their ears if no one is sent?"

God's love is for everyone. God's forgiveness is for all people. Jesus Christ died on the cross for the entire world - for all people and for all time. But how can people know about what God has done for all of us if no one tells them? As Christians, as believers in Christ who put our faith in what Jesus has done for us and who follow his commands and his example, we have been told to share what we have learned with others. Jesus gives us these instructions in Matthew 28, "So now I am sending you into all nations to teach them how to walk the road with me. You will represent me as you perform the purification ceremony with them, initiating them into the life of beauty and harmony represented in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You will then teach them all the ways that I have instructed you to walk in."

We have been told to go out into all the nations and spread the Gospel. We are to exhibit what it means to follow after Christ and teach others to do the same. The problem is that throughout history, Christianity has not always done this effectively. There have been points in time where Christianity has met opposition and how we have stepped up to that opposition varies greatly. In the beginning Church, as it faced Roman persecution, Christians met secretly to keep themselves safe. Yes, they still tried to witness to others but it was done in a much more subtle way - trying to stay below the radar while still sharing God's love with each other. It wasn't until the late 200s that Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, making it the dominant religion in Rome.

As Christianity grew, we took our responsibility to share Christ with others incredibly seriously. So seriously in fact that we fought wars to further our mission. Beginning in the 11th century, we fought in the Crusades to recapture Jerusalem back from the Muslims - all in the name of God. It is estimated that there were anywhere from 1 to 9 million killed over that 200 year period.

We can't forget about the various Inquisitions throughout history, where the church sought out heresy by putting people on trial in the name of God. We had the Medieval Inquisitions of the late 1100s, the Spanish Inquisition in the late 1300s, the Portuguese Inquisition in the mid 1500s, and the Roman Inquisition in the mid to late 1500s. These put tens of thousands of people on trial, leading to thousands of executions and life sentences. And these were only the major occurrences.

So you can see, it was not a pretty aspect of our Christian history. Because instead of loving people who did not see eye to eye with the doctrine of the Church, they were imprisoned. And on top of that, we have sent missionaries into various areas throughout the world where we have sought to convert people to the Christian faith. And those methods were not always morally correct - here we have tried to strip people of their culture and heritage because they may have been seen as pagan and savage. And I'm sure many of our Native American siblings have been subject to this/

But that is not what Jesus meant by going into the world to make disciples of all the nations. He meant that we needed to go and show people what it meant to be a Christian. To love God with all that we are and love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus told his disciples in John 13:34-35, "I am giving you a new road to walk," he said. "In the same way I have loved you, you are to love each other. This kind of love will be the sign for all people that you are walking

the road with me.” People will know that we follow Jesus by our love, not by how many people we strong arm to be called Christians. It’s not a competition about how many people can we say are now Christians because of our actions. However, it is a matter of life or death, where eternal life is on the line. But the truth is WE are not called to save people. Only Jesus can do that. We are called to spread the Good news of what Jesus has already done and that is that he died on the cross for our sins.

Each one of us are called to follow Christ. Christians are those who have chosen to accept what Christ has done and follow him. By following Christ, we are expected to live like Christ as best as we can and to love like Christ. Christ loved us so much that he gave of himself. He gave his very life to save the souls of all people. And we are instructed to share that news with others to be the example of Christ’s love so that others may come to know him.

Our track record of this has not always been good. We have failed. We have failed in big ways at that. We must acknowledge how we have failed and do all that we can to move forward in a better way. Instead of judging others for their culture and how they worship, we should see the beauty in another way to view and experience God. Instead of perpetuating racial stereotypes, we should actively break them down - helping our fellow humans have the same basic rights and opportunities that others have. We should do all that we can to live in such a way that others will see God and come to love God as we have.

I am glad though that things have been getting better and for quite some time at that. The Church has seen the need to be God’s love and so there has been aid going out all around the world. There have been movements to better show the people of all nations, tribes, clans, and languages the true God that we serve. We have created schools and hospitals, not to convert by force, but to love and to teach. We have drilled wells to provide water while sharing the good news of the Living Water. We have tried to help where help is needed through various organizations and groups like UMCOR. But there is a lot of work to do and we should not give up. We share this world with a world of people, and God loves them all. We should love them too.

As a church, we have been working at setting up an ongoing relationship with two Native American United Methodist Churches - the Dallas Indian Missionary UMC and Chihowa Okla UMC. In the very near future we will be joining with them via zoom for regular prayer meetings. We will be sharing videos of our church and they of theirs with us. And we are going to be looking at ways that we can be in ministry with each other. In fact our November Mission of the Month will go to help Dallas Indian Mission with the restoration of their mural, which has been altered to help better depict their cultural connection with God. And it will help Chihowa Okla UMC with much needed items as it is a new church start.

I pray that as this relationship progresses and we are in greater contact with one another, that many of us here at Christ UMC will learn a bit more about these siblings of ours. And that we will see the beauty in what they have to teach us about our God. God speaks to us in a multitude of ways. He has created us all to be special and unique. May we see our differences - not as an obstacle that divides us - but as a tool that we can use to better share God with others. And may God be glorified in all that we do, and may all that we do bring more people into the glorious Kingdom of God.