

"The Doctrine of Discovery"

Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

"The Sacred Hoop" Black Elk

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all
and round beneath me was the whole hoop of the world.
And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell
and I understood more than I saw.
For I was seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit.
And the shapes as they must live together like one being.
And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that
make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight.
And in the center grew one mighty flowering tree
to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.
And I saw that it was holy.

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The Doctrine of Discovery. How esoteric and dry can a sermon topic possibly sound? At first glance, how whacky can an entire denomination seem for taking to task a doctrine that came into being in the 15th century?

In answer to the first question: very esoteric & dry but only until you scratch the surface and then you're not going to believe how crazy relevant is the topic today.

And in answer to the second question: it's not the first and won't be the last time that UUs seem whacky to our faithful kin.

Who cares?

It's more important to know that taking up this issue was at the request of Native American and immigration justice partners in Arizona where the 2012 Justice General Assembly took place. So, the attention paid to the Doctrine was responsive, respectful and as many came to understand, absolutely necessary. It was the equivalent of looking up the river to see exactly why the babies were floating down the river. For, the Doctrine of Discovery is what set it all in motion: the displacement & genocide of indigenous people – those who had been settled here for God knows how long by "1492 when Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

What's it all about, exactly?

The 15th century xenophobic attitude won't surprise you. After all, these were not people enlightened by all that we moderns have come to value about multiculturalism.

This information is shared by the Unitarian Universalist Association:

The Doctrine of Discovery ... has its roots in a papal decree issued by Pope Nicholas V yes, in the 15th century ... that specifically sanctioned and promoted the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian territories and peoples. Hundreds of years of decisions and laws continuing right up to our own time can ultimately be traced back to the Doctrine of Discovery—laws that invalidate or ignore the rights, sovereignty, and humanity of indigenous peoples in the United States and around the world."

Further, the doctrine is rooted in the belief that these indigenous, non-Christians lacked souls and therefore, it was perfectly acceptable, Biblically-sanctioned, in fact, to claim the land that had been settled by others long before the Europeans claimed discovery.

It's appalling, but in response we tend to reason that this policy was put in place centuries ago by those who were less socially evolved than we are today, right?

You and both I know that's not quite right.

What is shocking is that the "Doctrine of Discovery dominion, and domination" – and as one Native American scholar calls it, (Stephen Newcomb) still influences the federal control of Native American land. Native Americans are not permitted to sell or trade land without the approval of Congress – a vestige of laws put into place by Thomas Jefferson to pave the way for the Louisiana Purchase. Thomas Jefferson who so elegantly wrote the Declaration of Independence, with its soaring prose and righteous decrees.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

And then you'll remember that what follows is a list of complaints against the king. One of the complaints ... buried in the soaring prose and righteous decrees ... goes like this:

[The King] has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

And with that, the whole “all men are created equal” idea is somewhat diminished.

The idea of dominion over soul-less savages was an effective strategy for the Declaration of Independence's purpose as it functioned to justify all manner of unjust treatment for indigenous people thereafter.

Suddenly it's not so esoteric and dry.

And that's only part of why it matters.

Ultimately, we have been deprived of the full story, our full history. Tragically for this country's first settlers, the story of our nation's founding was spun on a belief that ultimately altered the true story. Of all the Doctrine of Discovery's deleterious effects, this effect is the one that most matters. The one that continues to keep us as Americans from living into the values we hold most dear. Like all people, we want to be proud of our nation and so we tell stories that bolster our pride. But generation after generation has been fed an incomplete history of the United States. When we finally learn the truth it is a bitter pill to swallow. It is difficult to accept.

Several times a day every day I pass by the statue of Christopher Columbus, just about a half mile from here. It was erected by a proud Italian-American community in 1928 in the center of what was once the heart of New London's Italian-American neighborhood. (This was nine years before FDR designated Columbus Day as a federal holiday, by the way.) To make clear the explorer's heritage, “Columbo” is the name engraved on the stone. The year it was dedicated, there was a big parade and celebration and then every year for many years that followed. Like many a Columbus Day celebration, it is less about Columbo and more about Italian heritage and pride.

These annual celebrations have always made me personally uncomfortable as an Italian American. I have seen the rage of my people at the suggestion that early American history is not what we thought. This rage is on display currently in the immediate wake of the Seattle City Council's decision to designate the holiday as “Indigenous Peoples' Day.” Nationally, Italian Americans have been swift to respond:

National Italian American Federation (NIAF) President John M. Viola, weighed in: *“The increasingly frequent efforts to defame Christopher Columbus are no less than an abandonment of our core American value which holds risk and courage as the fundamentals of success.”*

Try telling those proud immigrants in 1928 and now their second, third, and fourth generation descendents that the story is actually a terrible one, one for which atonement should be on the table, yes, all these centuries later. And atonement offered by the American government as this emerging

understanding, long overdue, is not the fault or reflection of a particular ethnic group but rather an injustice that all Americans must now make right.

For the sake of the nation, we must tell a different story. A truer story. There are leaders in indigenous communities who for a very long time have been trying very hard to have the Doctrine of Discovery formally revoked and all of the legal precedent and more subtle attitudes that it still influences. Just a few weeks ago the United Nations hosted the first World Conference of Indigenous People. This historic gathering came as a result of a UN Resolution adopted by the General Assembly in 2011 on the Rights of Indigenous peoples.

It should come as no surprise that indigenous people are on the front lines in the fight for immigration justice. For generations known as "the other" indigenous people's otherness makes for a natural alliance with immigrants. Both have been feared ... have been the "little bit scary people"* ... reviled in the same way Italians, Eastern European Jews, and the Irish had been at the turn of the last century.

Forces are joining in order to uphold the values upon which this country is based, were we only to keep clear that vision. Yes, values that hold that "risk and courage are the fundamentals of success." Change must come and it will.

Many of you are aware that I will be leaving for Arizona & Mexican border in 10 days. I will be traveling with about 25 other Unitarian Universalists, ordained and lay leaders both, to investigate and learn firsthand what is happening on our borders. I was inspired to go on this trip when I saw the images of the children stranded on our borders. Children and youth fleeing drug cartels, violence, broken economies and in some cases, torture. Fleeing in much the same way that immigrant children from Italy, Eastern Europe, and Ireland fled at the turn of the last century. Unchaperoned. Alone. Leaving behind desperate yet courageous parents who trusted that the risk was worth it for the chance at a better life ... at the life promised by the United States.

So, children on our borders is not new. And the politics is not particularly new. But the virulence and paralysis that surrounds this current crisis feels particularly deadly. I will be traveling the desert routes with advocates who have been tending to these immigrants' safety and care. Advocates who have been engaged with the legal and political processes. I look forward to telling you all about it upon my return. I'll be back in the pulpit on November 2. Stay tuned.

And the planets have lined up right here in New London, Friends. My newsletter column shares the idea of an immigration center that the Church of the City is attempting to get on its feet and my offer to support their vision. Toward that end I hosted on your behalf a gathering of leaders representing a range of social service agencies who work with undocumented immigrants. There were 20 people in attendance that included Rebecca Bryan, Jan Larson, and Karen

Either-Waring who was here wearing her Child and Family Services hat but when a Soul is at the table, All Souls is at the table.

Stories were shared, all profoundly heartbreaking. One after another. The story of the beaten woman who feared leaving her abuser because he was her way to citizenship. The story of the excellent student whose parents told him in his senior year of high school that he was not a citizen and therefore, did not have access to scholarships. The story of the homeless Asian women who were fleeing lives of servitude but unwilling to share much of their story for fear of recrimination. The story of a breast cancer diagnosis without access to care. Stories of vulnerability and lives lived in the shadows.

No agency or institution was without a story. The Alliance for Living, Higher Edge, Safe Futures, Child and Family Services, the Catholic Archdiocese, L&M, the Homeless Hospitality Center, Covenant Shelter. No one left that meeting without any doubt that the time for an Immigration Center here in our region is long past due.

Over 20 Souls have been gathering since last Spring to think deeply about what an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multi-cultural world would look like and more importantly, to consider our role as progressive people of faith in dreaming that world into being. This is it, Friends. This issue is the one that will bring us closer to that vision. Our marginalized neighbors have come to us asking for support. I know that we have the hearts, minds, and resources to answer that call as we did seven years ago when we were asked to open our doors to our homeless neighbors.

But in a way, this request asks more of us. This crisis is not as visible as is homelessness. It is more difficult to understand although no more complex than is homelessness, certainly. We are being asked to learn more. To extend ourselves more. To overcome whatever hesitancy we may harbor in the face of this little bit scary issue.

We took up this issue several years ago and it got little traction. That won't be acceptable this time around.

I hope that you will be part of it. Here are a few ways to lend your support ...

Rebecca and I are co-facilitating a curriculum called, "Building the World We Dream About". We're starting on Thursday. I'm asking you to come.

You were here today and learned about the Doctrine of Discovery. I encourage you to learn more.

Further, I encourage you to seek out the stories that will break your heart. Yes. I'm asking you to risk a broken heart because a broken heart is a great motivator. Break open your heart so that together with our neighbors at Church of the City and the good people who offer services throughout our region we

may be on the ground floor of creating a path to citizenship in a country that has much to offer and live up to. For one:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [human beings] are created equal, that [we] are endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

There is no better time to get started than this holiday weekend.

I am inviting you to do nothing less than
see in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit.
To see ... the shapes as they must live together like one being.
To understand that the sacred hoop of one people is one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight.
To see the center where there grows one mighty flowering tree
to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.

I am inviting you to recognize that center, that flowering tree as holy.

And to see yourself in the center of the hoop.

See you in two weeks, Friends.

And until then, blessed be ...

And amen.

* A reference to the Story for All Ages *The Little Bit Scary People* by Emily Jenkins

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