

The Year of Discovery, Part Four: Listening to Native Voices

A decision way back in 1493 by Pope Alexander VI, titled “Inter Caetera” divided the newly discovered lands of the New World and Africa (Australia was still unknown) between Spain and Portugal. This papal bull continues to this day to form the basis for international law and the legal foundation for the United States’ relationship to its indigenous native people. We take this so much for granted that the “Discovery Doctrine” is hardly ever mentioned in American history textbooks, or for that matter in scholarly discussions of the story of American settlement and land policies. The fact that the churches of the United States have decided to address this issue in the past 20 years is a result of listening to the voices of our Native American brothers and sisters, especially since the 1992 observance of 500 years since Christopher Columbus’ first voyage.

Those voices speak to all of us who today live on lands that belonged to native nations who have been here for at least 30,000 years. George Tinker, a member of the Osage Indian Nation and a Lutheran theologian at Iliff School of Theology, asks Lutherans to think seriously about how we ended up taking over so much prime Indian territory in states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. When we realize that our homes and our churches are built on land that belonged to others before we arrived, and whose descendants are our neighbors today, we may be moved to compassion and solidarity with the Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Menominee, and Sioux nations that owned this land before us.

We need, of course, to make sure this does not simply become a romantic longing for the days before the Indian wars removed our Native brothers and sisters. On several occasions at Calvary we have read the words of Chief Seattle at our worship services:

The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. . . . But we will consider your offer, for we know if we do not . . . the white man may come with guns and take our lands. . . . How can you buy or sell the sky— the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. . . . Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. . . . When the buffaloes are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of many men, and the views of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires, where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone.

But if those words only make us feel a wistful kind of nostalgia, we are missing their message for our own time: how can we continue a political system that denies native Americans the right to own the land they live on, and the right to determine its best use?

Part of the challenge for Lutherans in places like the U.P. is to realize that much of what we have been taught for more than two centuries has deliberately obscured the pain and suffering that our national history has caused time and again to the original inhabitants of our land. I have learned a great deal from Robert J. Miller, who teaches law at Lewis and Clark University, and is a member of the Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma. His *Native America, Discovered and Conquered*, makes a persuasive case that many of our most revered American stories are complicit in the wholesale domination of the native peoples. Men like Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, James Monroe, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, even saints like George Washington, all participated in this effort to appropriate the land of Native Americans using the legal justification of the “Right of Discovery.” Frederick Jackson Turner’s *Frontier Thesis*, which informs so much of the American history taught in our schools and colleges, claimed that the end of the frontier, the closing of the “uninhabited wilderness” of the west in 1890, marked a crisis in our history: no longer would free land and unclaimed resources be available to American settlers. Of course, that free land and resources had owners, the native tribes of the American continent. Turner just didn’t think they mattered; the ones who mattered were the white Christians who “discovered” their lands.

Finally, we need to hear the voices of Native Americans who were not only deprived of their homelands, but also deprived of their homes and families. Under the policy of assimilation into white Christian society, children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to “Indian Schools.” The slogan for this policy was “Kill the Indian, Save the child.” Much of this work was actually done at church run schools, both in the U.S. and also in Canada. Charlotte Black Elk, a Lakota Sioux, told of life at the church schools in South Dakota:

All of a sudden we were told: ‘Not only will you not be able to practice your religion, but you shall also gather all all your sacred objects, and we shall have a great bonfire. Every little thing that told us we were Lakota, and that was tied into our culture, our social fabric, was outlawed. The boys all had their hair cut off. We have long hair we only cut our hair when we are in mourning...It was just saying what you are is bad, everything about you is bad. Everything about our culture was systematically to be destroyed, marriage, family, language, everything.’