

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Courageous Accountability”

Rev. Sam Trumbore October 9, 2022

Call to Celebration

Tomorrow is Indigenous People’s Day. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations have begun the practice of doing a land acknowledgement. The purpose of this statement is to show respect for indigenous peoples and recognize their enduring relationship to the land. Practicing acknowledgment can also raise awareness about histories that are often suppressed or forgotten. Our congregation sits on land originally occupied by people who call themselves the People of the Waters That Are Never Still, the *Mub-be-con-ne-ok*, today called Mohican. Last year I contacted the Mohican surviving tribal community. They have formally authorized this statement.

“It is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people who are the indigenous peoples of this land. Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from here, today their community resides in Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.”

Let us give respect and honor to the Stockbridge-Munsee Community and all Indigenous groups as we join together in the celebration of life.

Reading

2 Samuel 12:1-13

[T]he Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor.

The rich man had many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.

Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him."

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul;

I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more.

Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.

Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun.

For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun."

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Spoken Meditation

As Biblical stories go, the story of David, Bathsheba and Nathan is one of the great stories in the Bible. It is especially important for those who have a significant amount of power and the temptation to abuse that power. And it is also important for those who are victims and sinned against. David doesn't get away with it. Justice is possible.

Who do you identify with in the story? David? The Rich Man? The Poor Man? The ewe? Nathan? Bathsheba? Uriah the Hittite? The Ammonites? The Lord witnessing your chosen one sinning?

Allow yourself to enter this iconic Biblical story as we have some silent meditation time to ponder it.

Sermon

Indigenous People's Day is a good day to begin to muster the courage to be accountable for the wrongs done by generations of European immigrants against Indigenous people. Nathan's parable is a powerful metaphor for the harm that was done, the story of David and Bathsheba is an instructive allegory.

In case you don't know or remember it, here's the back story of David and Bathsheba. Late one afternoon, David is surveying his kingdom from the roof of his palace. He saw a beautiful woman bathing. David sent someone out to inquire about her and found out she was Bathsheba married to Uriah the Hittite. David sent for her and slept with her even though she was ritually unclean. Later, she conceived and sent word to David that she was pregnant.

Uriah the Hittite was one of David's brave soldiers. David had him sent home from war and asked him for a war report, likely as a cover for his return. Then he magnanimously said, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." (This odd expression was permission to go home, eat, drink, be merry and sleep with your wife)

Uriah didn't go home but rather slept on the doorstep of the king's house with the servants. When David asked why he didn't go home, he reported he could not do so while his fellow soldiers were on the battlefield at war with the Ammonites. Then David got him drunk and tried send him home again but that didn't work either. So David sent him back to the battlefield and gave orders to his field commander Joab that Uriah should be exposed in battle so the Ammonites would kill him. Joab did as he was commanded, Uriah was killed, and David took Bathsheba into his household as a wife.

Second Samuel, the book of the Bible where this story is found, is silent about how Bathsheba felt about all of this. We might want to cast her as the abused victim of David's lust for her. There are other interpretations. She might have seen this as a way to increase her social status. We don't know what kind of a husband Uriah was either. He might have been abusive.

Yet that doesn't matter for the story. David is king. He has complete power over her. He is the one responsible for his actions. He is the one violating the law of Moses that transcends his kingship. His crimes were severe enough he should pay with his life.

Yet for all Israel knew at the time, David was generously protecting the wife of his loyal soldier Uriah and caring for their new, soon to be born son. "What a great guy," they might think.

Nathan, the Prophet, knew better.

Nathan breaks through David's denial of his evil doing. Remember that David is showered with praise, even today, as the greatest king of Israel. This is the hero of uniting the 12 Tribes, vanquishing Israel's enemies and building a strong state. This is the courageous little guy who slew Goliath. Christians go to great lengths to associate Jesus with David as inheritor of his lineage.

Yet, this story should be enough to get the guy canceled for all of eternity. What David has done is pure evil.

Nathan drew David in with a story of the abuse of power by a rich man who takes the property of a poor man. It isn't just some impersonal property that was taken. The little ewe was beloved of the poor man almost like his daughter. Nathan touched David's heart, got him to acknowledge the evil of the rich man then turned the tables on him with his accusation. David could not escape because he was trapped in his recognition of his own sin through his empathy.

This is a powerful story to consider on Indigenous People's Day. A lot of beloved lambs have been taken. Remember our Wisdom story today. Think of the Indigenous people's children taken away to be indoctrinated in Indian boarding schools. It is a powerful story to consider when reflecting on the 400 years of racism and exploitation of people of African Descent. Think of generations of children sold at the auction block who hardly knew their mothers or fathers. It is also a powerful story for any of us who either have abused power for personal gain in our lives or have been abused by the powerful.

We don't have kings in America but our government is just as capable as David in committing and supporting horrific crimes. The story of our nation's genocidal attacks against the indigenous people of this nation cannot stand up to any moral scrutiny. There have not been enough Nathans who

have condemned the actions of our governmental representatives. Yet those people committing those crimes were convinced they were doing what was right.

Indian Boarding Schools are an instructive case to consider.

First and foremost, remember the mindset of the European colonizers who appropriated the land from Indigenous peoples. They believed they had the only God given religion and the superior culture based in Christianity. The heathen who lived here should become Christians to save their souls. Jesus commanded it. Not only did they believe they had a superior culture but a better economic system with a scientific foundation. The Christian missionaries had all this to offer the children who were living in squalor, in tents or rickety structures eating strange foods. It was for the children's benefit it was done. While Catholics were already well practiced in missionary work, Protestants joined in, even Unitarians were involved in a couple of schools for what they thought at the time was a morally uplifting purpose.

They thought those schools would benefit Indian children. They thought it would benefit them to assimilate into the superior colonizer culture. Once European dominance was established throughout the United States of America, why would Indian children want to hold on to their inferior culture? Cut their hair, change their dress, cut off contact with their parents so they will gradually come around to the better way prepared for them. It would be to their benefit to leave behind their old archaic ways, enter the modern era and assimilate into western society. There would be no future for them on the reservation. These missionaries promised success and prosperity for them if they abandoned their old language and customs.

What is missing in this story of course is any respect or appreciation for the dignity, heritage and culture of Indigenous peoples. Sadly, that lack of appreciation is built into the culture of white supremacy, into the very language we speak.

And that colonizer mindset still lives on in many of us. The place I connected to that mindset that still remains in me was listening to Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

If you aren't familiar with her, she is SUNY professor of Environmental Biology in Syracuse, New York, a mother, a decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Author Elizabeth Gilbert praises her as:

“... a writer of rare grace. She writes about the natural world from a place of such abundant passion that one can never quite see the world in the same way after having seen it through Kimmerer's eyes. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she takes us on a journey that is every bit as mythic as it is scientific, as sacred as it is historical, as clever as it is wise. She is a great teacher, and her words are a hymn of love to the world.”

I don't have a fraction of the time I'd want this morning to discuss how she has affected my colonizer mindset. The one example relevant for today I'll lift up is the effect of losing one's native language as happened in Indian schools.

Kimmerer discovered her connection to her culture as an adult going to yearly tribal gatherings. In that process she was exposed to the Potawatomi language. She writes of attending a gathering of all

the people who spoke the language: nine elderly people sitting on folding chairs ... the last hope of preserving their language. One said,

“We’re the end of the road. We are all that is left. If you young people do not learn, the language will die. The missionaries and the U.S. government will have their victory at last.” A great-grandmother from the circle pushes her walker up close to the microphone. “It’s not just the words that will be lost,” she says. “The language is the heart of our culture; it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world. It’s too beautiful for English to explain.” (p. 50)

Her words increased Kimmerer’s motivation to learn.

It wasn’t easy. Yellow post-it notes went up all over the house with their Potawatomi words on them. She also had her doubts. Who would she speak the language with? She lives far away from the reservation for her people. How could she master the subtleties without a native speaker to speak with regularly?

What kept her going was discovering how the language held within it a way of seeing the world that was foreign to English. There are several words for thank you but no word for please. Food is to be shared, a given, not something that needs permission. 70% of the language are verbs versus 30% in English. Words that are lifeless nouns in English are animated and have agency in Potawatomi. The world isn’t made up of passive stuff waiting to be manipulated as a raw material. A tree is a living being with a history. It must be consulted before it is cut down to be transformed into a basket.

But more have agency than plants, birds and animals, Kimmerer observes,

“ rocks are animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places. Beings that are imbued with spirit, our sacred medicines, our songs, drums, and even stories, are all animate. The list of the inanimate seems to be smaller, filled with objects that are made by people...The language reminds us, in every sentence, of our kinship with all of the animate world. (pp. 55-56).

This is just a taste of what is lost when a culture and a language disappears. This is just the beginning of the exploration of the harm done. What Kimmerer does so skillfully is animating the wisdom that remains from her heritage rather than creating a matrix of blame for what has been harmed. She honors the preservation of her heritage and persuasively shows us her interpretation of it in alignment with the scientific methods that can support and validate it. Both/and, not either/or.

So much harm has been done. Just opening to that destruction can be emotionally overwhelming. Yet to begin to address it, we must know it. We need Nathan, just as David needed Nathan, to show us that harm done. And David *did* recognize his crimes and take responsibility for them and acknowledge that he would pay a terrible price for them. God held him accountable. As citizens of this nation, we inherit the results of the actions of our government for good and ill. As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes in her new book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*.

Atonement works only if you've done the necessary work of owning harm and undergoing transformation—repentance. And if that harm has an interpersonal dimension, atonement is entirely impossible without repair, amends, and, in most cases apology. Atonement is available, but it's the last step after everything else is complete.

David suffers and atones. Remember that David remains celebrated as the greatest king of the Jewish people. He was more than his lust. Like David, we too are so much more than our worst moments. We are more than the crimes of our ancestors. We have great potential for both good and ill. We can grow and change away from the harms of the past and not support or reinforce them. We can acknowledge and repair the damage done in the past without diminishing our own humanity. We can grow together in the service of life and build beloved community.

May we be grateful Nathan shows us our faults *and* calls us back to our potential for good.

May we be grateful for the opportunity to atone for past wrongs and correct new ones that restore ruptured relationships.

May we be grateful for a pluralistic vision of inclusion that welcomes the wisdom of all peoples for no one has an exclusive lock on what is true and good.

Finally, may the rich man choose to dine together with the poor man on fried tofu and bok-choy with a nice peanut sauce over savory rice with his guests.

Prayer of Affirmation

An anonymous UU prayer

Spirit of life and love

We seek forgiveness this day
 forgiveness for our indifference to the numerous signs
 of your presence around us,
 for our inability to value the skies and the earth
 as our only home,
 for our inability to make the connections
 between our lives and the earth
 the source of every molecule of our body
 the destination of our remains
 when the power of our life force passes away.

We pray for a profound change
 in the hearts of all humanity
 so we may diminish the destruction
 of the ecological balance,
 the pollution of our air and water

the clearing of our forests
the stripping of nutrients from our soils;
so we may diminish the impoverishment
of the human spirit.

May we discover a way of being
Indigenous peoples have always known
that will help us find the balance
so the earth and all life may flourish.

So be it.

Benediction

This benediction comes from the Ojibway people of Canada:

Grandfather,
Look at our brokenness.

We know that in all creation
only the human family
has strayed from the sacred way.

We know that we are the ones
who are divided
And we are the ones
who must come back together
to walk the Sacred Way.

Grandfather, Sacred One,
Teach us love, compassion and honor
that we may heal the earth
and heal each other.