

Our Home on Native Land
October 8, 2017
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Over in the hallway by the side entrance of the church, by the office, near where the nametags are, there's a sign that says "Take What You Need," and underneath it are cut outs on paper, like you sometimes see with someone's phone number for a business or something, except it's not a phone number, it's words. Love, Hope, Faith, Understanding, Peace, Forgiveness, Patience, Courage, and Strength.

This sign has been there since I came to visit you, for the first time, secretly with the Ministerial Search Committee, back in February. At least I think it has. I've never been the best with attention to details.

In any case, a colleague of mine who was meeting with me at the church this past Wednesday noticed it and immediately took off three things: Hope, Courage, and Strength.

And so, as I thought of our worship theme this month, I ripped off "Love" and I could tell that I the first one to do so. What, you don't need love?

And it got me thinking that we come to church to get all of these things, right? Or maybe it's not just to get these things, maybe it's also to give these things, right?

Friends, when I woke up on Monday morning like many of you did and opened the news and read about what happened in Las Vegas, my heart sank. I'm sure you know the feeling. It's literally right here in my chest. And unfortunately, that heart sinking, stomach aching feeling isn't that unusual. Not this week, not this month, not this year. And I find myself needing all of these things listed on that sheet of paper: Love, Hope, Faith, Understanding, Peace, Forgiveness, Patience, Courage, and Strength. Maybe more than usual. Whatever usual is.

When I heard the news this past Monday, they reported it as the deadliest shooting in "modern" American history (whatever they meant by "modern"), where 59 people were shot to death at a country music festival, I'm reminded of the last deadly-ist shooting in "modern" American history, the Pulse Massacre.

And I'm reminded of going to church that Sunday morning and hearing about it, but not realizing the impact until I got in my car to drive home and heard that number, 50. "Oh my God, oh my God," I said outloud.

I prayed the entire drive home that day. Or rather, I lamented.

And yet, I'm aware, very aware, of how both of these were reported in the media. "Largest mass shooting in American History," with or without that "modern" thrown in.

The thing is, in 1890 white men murdered what is estimated as 200 Lakota Native Americans at Wounded Knee in South Dakota with Hotchkiss guns in what is considered the last standoff between the white folks and Native Americans in this country.

For me, this begs the question of why so often the “deadliest shooting in American history” is thrown around for Pulse and now for Las Vegas.

Are the deaths of certain people considered more “deadly” more “American?”

In the years leading up to this massacre at Wounded Knee, the US government was seizing land from the Lakota people. Which, if you’ve been paying attention, are some of the same people at that Standing Rock reservation, where just last year at this time protest erupted over the Dakota Access Pipeline that was built through the Standing Rock Indian Reservation’s water supply, that damages sites of historical significance to the Sioux tribe that resides there.

This modern seizing of land, for so-called economic reasons is part of a long line of seizing land and water the lives from the indigenous people who lived on this continent, that was in part started by a man named Christopher Columbus, whose “legacy” we celebrate this weekend.

Or whose legacy we mourn, depending on who you ask.

I’m sure the reasons that Columbus Day is a controversial holiday are clear to you. He’s credited as a discoverer, but a discoverer of a land that already had people living on it. Which serves to dehumanize those who lived here. And the truth is that Columbus himself did not see them as full humans.

According to Historian Howard Zinn, author of *The People’s History of the United States*, Columbus spearheaded the enslavement of many indigenous people on this continent.

He was a perpetrator of genocide of the people who lived on this continent. Something that was, sadly, continued by many other European “explorers” throughout history, and continues with our own government to this day.

The title of my sermon, “Out Home on Native Land” makes reference to a line in the Canadian National Anthem - the country I was born in and where those who looked like me took land away from the First Nations people of that land. First Nations being a term used primarily in Canada to honor the fact that the indigenous people of this continent were literally the *first* nations on this land, not the Canadian or US governments that are in place now.

And all this history, this violence, colonization, genocide, enslavement of the Indigenous people of this continent, this hard to hear about. For many of us, especially those of us like me, who are of European descent, the weight of the crimes of our ancestors, or those who made the land “white” so our ancestor could move here, is shameful, it makes us

defensive, it feels out of our control. It IS out of our control. But for many of us, if our ancestors hadn't come here, hadn't been part of that colonization - if the First Nations of this continent hadn't been decimated as they were - our lives, our "land," our way of life wouldn't be as it is.

Even here, this wonderful city of Malden - for which this very parish was created because in that time you need a church before you could become a city - for example, was "settled" on land "purchased" from the Pennacook, one of the first tribes that the the European "explorers" encountered.

This tribe was decimated from infections brought over the European colonists, and rather than have more of his people die off, their chief Passaconaway, signed treaties in order to reduce those deaths. Yet, as their land was "purchased" and this tribe was moved farther and farther north, with white folks hunting them down and killing them.

And what did it means for the Europeans to purchase this land anyway - this land that we now call our home - from the Native Americans?

The concept of land ownership was very different for the Europeans than it was for the Native Americans. The Pennacook tribe that inhabited this area didn't believe in land ownership in the way that we do today. Which is not to say that that way of land ownership was less evolved - rather they believed the land was "owned" only in so much as it was "used" for the resources it had. So of course the Europeans could buy the land. It was a common resource, shared by all. Why would someone own it?

This, of course, speaks to larger issues of ownership at the time. Owning land, owning people. Concepts that made complete sense to the Europeans at the time.

The Pennacook ultimately lost their tribal identity. Some of their few remaining descendants are part of the Abenaki tribe in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Canada.

And for those of us who are white, there's this reality that, whether or not our particular ancestors were the ones who committed these crimes against this tribe, we benefit from our white privilege in that our ancestors could freely move here and have opportunities here. This history is part of the white supremacy culture that we are all a part of and responsible for, through no fault of our own.

And, it's hard, right? I have to tell you, that I love living in Malden. And I love this church and the people in it and everything about it. And if this all hadn't happened I wouldn't get the amazing opportunity to be your minister. So please know that I don't share this history to make you feel bad. And also know that this is certainly not unique to Malden or this church. Most UU churches in New England share a similar history with the towns they are a part of.

But just being aware of that history is important. It helps to not erase the realities of who we are and where we came from.

So how do we reckon with this history - for ourselves and for our country and for this continent?

It's a large question and there are no easy answers.

As we see violence, like in Las Vegas, and oppression and racism continue, as it does in Puerto Rico as they lack proper assistance as they recover from the hurricane, which, I'm just going to say it, is no doubt due to racism on the part of our elected leaders. How do we continue to answer the call of love?

I was at a meeting with some other UU ministers in the area a few weeks ago and we were split into discussion groups and our topic was "how do we do ministry in these times." But aren't these times, all times? Especially for folks of color?

Because it's all connected, from the violence against the indigenous people in this land, to a culture that allows people to use machine guns to kill 59 innocent people.

So where does this leave us? In the wake of yet more violence this week; in the realities of our history?

I do know one thing, and that is that this church, and it's rich and complex history, good and bad, shows us that change, real change, is possible.

Because we in this church are also all connected through our words and deeds as we strive to become better people.

Our church may come, in part, from a difficult history, but we, those who are currently within its walls are a people of love and hope, a people who believe in a resistance, a people inspired by the promise of God's universal love, a people who know that Black Lives Matter, and immigrants are welcome, and that women's rights are human rights. A people willing to take a stand against oppression, against violence, against white supremacy. A people actually willing to show up to church today, for a difficult topic, to hear the realities of our history and to reckon with it. A people who believe in the answer of a better tomorrow. That is doesn't always have to be there way. This I believe about you. And you give me hope and you help me to answer the call of love.

Love, Hope, Faith, Understanding, Peace, Forgiveness, Patience, Courage, and Strength.

You give me all these things. And I certainly need them, in these times.

So please, take what you need.

And as I end the message today, I have asked the worship associate to ring our bell in honor of the 59 people who lost their lives on Monday, and in solidarity with many other houses of worship who are doing the same thing this morning.

Bells ring

Let us say together, Amen.