



Lent and the Doctrine of Discovery

The third Sunday in Lent: Is the Lord among us or not?

In Exodus 17:1-7, Moses led the people out the wilderness of Sinai. When they found that there was no water at Rephidim, the people quarreled with Moses. Their struggle for physical survival became a struggle for spiritual survival, prompting the people to ask, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Questioning and arguing with God is nothing out of the ordinary in the Bible. We see that God responds to the ungrateful and those who repeatedly test God (Exodus 17:5-7). How much more then, will God stand with those who persists in the midst of oppression from without and within?

In looking at the Doctrine of Discovery and the brokenness it rendered across generations, American Indians and indigenous peoples rightly ask, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

In John 4:10, Jesus promised “living water” to quench the thirst of humanity. But the Doctrine of Discovery has left many American Indians ponder: was the gospel “water” missionaries brought more satisfying than the “water” embodied in their traditions? Such is the difficult quest faced by many American Indians who are Christian and have internalized the terrible injustice of cultural racism imposed on their ancestors through the Doctrine.

Reflection

“Is the LORD among us or not?” There is no easy answer for American Indians who find that they are called to faith by a Church that historically justified their demise, which partnered with early settlers to destroy their language and culture, and placed the survivors of this effort on reservations. But the question is asked in the hope that we will all hear and heed God’s calling the Church to accountability and to action to mend the brokenness and trauma created by the Doctrine of Discovery.

“Is the LORD among us or not?” Among the American settlers, a few tried to witness to their Christian faith, to make peace, and offer the Native Americans a decent place where they could live and be safe. Such responses were rare however, in part because the many settlers aligned their faith with their European-American culture, which in its theological machinations, justified the killing of “savages” and “pagans.”

Lent is a season for deepening of one’s spiritual life through penitence. Looking through the Doctrine of Discovery, Lent can be a time to unsettle our indifference. When one acknowledges the terrible sin of “what we did to the American Indians,” the hope for Easter demands that we renew our mission to repair some of the wrongs of history, for many of us live comfortably from the benefits of our settler ancestor’s perfidy.

“Is the LORD among us or not?” Excessive poverty, teenage suicides that outpaced all other ethnicities, extreme incidences of Type II diabetes, unemployment rates that rank among the highest in our nation – these are some of the deadly realities of American Indian life.

Today, how will you and your congregation take responsibility for the continuing impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery?

The Lenten season is a time of repentance, reflection, and preparation for Easter. Therefore, it is fitting to continue on the journey of Sacred Conversations on Race during this season to deepen our understanding of repentance from racism. For the five Sundays in Lent the United Church of Christ has created a series of reflections on selected lectionary texts, using the lens of the doctrine of discovery. We invite you to engage with them as you prepare to the encounter the risen Christ anew this Easter. Learn more: <http://bit.ly/lent-dod>

Thanks to Norm “Jack” Jackson for his assistance in crafting this reflection. For more information on the UCC Council of American Indian Ministries (CAIM) visit caimucc.org.