

September 27, 2020

John 17:2-23

In these times of great division, where everybody feels fearful of the other side, afraid of those who they disagree with politically or socially or theologically, Jesus's prayer in John's Gospel is possibly the only thing we can agree on. Oh, how we long, as Jesus does, to "all be one." Jesus, speaking directly to God, says that he longs for unity "so that the disciples may be one, as we are one."

Jesus sees the unity of life, the oneness; he lives it; he embodies it. Jesus does his best to bring others into an understanding of life's unity, its oneness. The disciples understood this oneness, for the most part. The Apostle Paul certainly understood it. His whole metaphor of the body with many members, yet one body was a brilliant anthropocentric rendering of oneness.

Still, as good as Paul's metaphor is, most of us just cannot accept or even imagine life as oneness. We are so caught up in the physical separation of things. You have a body. I have a body. My body is separate from the tree in my backyard; separate from my cat. Nevertheless, Jesus speaks of oneness, praying that we might be one as he is one with God.

In today's Question for Reflection quote Chief Seattle shares a Native American understanding of oneness when he says, "the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports." Our romanticized image of Native Americans is that pre-European intrusion they lived in harmony with nature, caring for and preserving the water, air, and land for future generations. It was a knowing that by taking care of their environment the environment would take care of them. How accurate this image is and how harmonious Native American life was, I am not certain, but I do believe in the sentiment. Caring for the environment is vital for our own well-being, since oneness means we are all interconnected.

This Sunday has been designated American Indian Ministry Sunday in our denomination, which is why, as we in worship this fall look at some of the ways we, as individuals and church, are

positively seeking to address justice issues, we are lifting up Indigenous peoples. In many ways they are the invisible injustice in our world. For the most part, Native Americans have been shunted off to reservations, off to lands the power brokers deemed unimportant, and then forgotten or ignored.

My focus on the Indigenous spirituality of oneness and the interconnectedness of all creation came to mind, because I am understanding the interrelatedness, the oneness of the various injustice issues being raised in our world today. This thinking brought to mind Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1967 speech at Riverside Church in New York called "Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break Silence". Dr. King received harsh criticism for seeking to combine the Civil Rights movement with the Anti-Vietnam War movement. In the liberal press his demands were seen as confusing a simple, outright righteous movement, Civil Rights, with a much more complex issue, the Vietnam War. Many in the Black community felt he was taking on a White community issue, which would move the focus away from the needs of the Black community, namely Civil Rights.

Time has helped us see how prophetic Dr. King was. His naming of the triple evils of racism, militarism, and economic exploitation has helped us see how these evils, these injustices are interconnected. It is a lesson that has not been lost on the next generations. The more I educate myself on the history of race and racism in our country and around the world, aided in my education by the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement, the more I have learned about the injustices perpetrated on Native Americans; injustices both past and present.

I have been very impressed how the Black Lives Matter movement has been willing to share the "limelight" with other groups facing discrimination, especially Indigenous peoples, and vice versa. In their support of one another they embody the understanding that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

The gradual process of the United States' domination of Native nations and peoples, a domination some would call genocide, has led to profound social disruptions that plague Native communities in the forms of poverty, substance abuse, disproportionately high health problems, substandard healthcare, and substandard education, to name a few things. For most Americans these profound social disruptions are unknown, partly because any history of our country's treatment of Native Americans has been either left out of our education system or the ugly truth of domination has been glossed over.

It is my hope that we will begin to learn history stories we weren't taught in school, begin to educate ourselves about the lives of those whose lives are not as privileged as ours. And, as we listen, read, and learn, I pray we will be willing to offer aid that allows the disadvantaged, the left behind and the left out, to move forward and improve their lives.

This is something our church and denomination is doing. Historically, the forebears of the UCC established churches and worked with Native nations in North and South Dakota, Wisconsin and northern Nebraska. These beginnings were far from perfect. We were colonizing Native Americans in every negative sense. But our denomination has publicly apologized, sought forgiveness, and offers aid to these churches. Today there are 20 UCC congregations on reservations and one urban, multi-tribal UCC congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

We, at Amicable Church, support financially this work. Our financial support is through the yearly all-church offering, Neighbors In Need (NIN). One-third of the moneys raised through the NIN offering goes to support our denomination's ministry among Native Americans, primarily in the western half of our country. The other two-thirds allows our denomination to offer grants to support the justice work churches are doing in their local setting.

Your financial support of our Neighbors In Need offering allows our denomination to support vital ministries in and through Native peoples. This support will have a ripple effect in the lives of Native peoples, but also in our own lives. For where we invest our resources, we will also invest ourselves, hopefully, by educating ourselves about past and present injustices and speaking the truths we learn to power.

And power brings me back to the beginning. All issues of injustice in the world have a common, unifying factor: The desire by someone or some group to have power. To have, to possess is power. The desire for, the striving for, the holding on to power injures, breaks the oneness in the world. In fact, breaking the oneness is what keeps someone or some group in power.

Just as injustice has a common, unifying factor – power, so does justice, which is living into oneness. That unifying factor is God's love. If we want to heal the divisions, we must allow God's love to flow through us. How?

When we carefully and care-filled listen to the stories of the disenfranchised, the cast off, the rejected of this world, when we take the time to study history more closely, we begin a process of breaking the destructive behavior of a system seeking controlling power. When we support the work of Native peoples seeking to help themselves, we are helping them break the cycle of the controlling powers' destructive behavior.

And, because this happens in the framework of love, of living into oneness, as we support the liberation of those oppressed by structural and systemic power, we begin our own liberation. It is a liberation from fear and anxiety; a liberation that allows us to let go, trusting that God, the Holy One, will see us through.

It is my prayer that God's Spirit will fill us with courage that we might seek, in and through love, to live into oneness. Amen.