

First Reading: An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

“North America in 1492 was not a virgin wilderness but a network of Indigenous nations, peoples of the corn. The link between peoples of the North and the South can be seen in the diffusion of corn from Mesoamerica...had North America been a wilderness, undeveloped, without roads, and uncultivated, it might still be so, for the European colonists could not have survived. They appropriated what had already been created by Indigenous civilizations. They stole already cultivated farmland and the corn, vegetables, tobacco, and other crops domesticated over centuries, took control of the deer parks that had been cleared and maintained by Indigenous communities, used existing roads and water routes in order to move armies to conquer, and relied on captured Indigenous people to identify the locations of water, oyster beds, and medicinal herbs. Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) historian Jean O’Brien names this practice of writing Indians out of existence “firsting and lasting.” All over the continent, local histories, monuments, and signage narrate the story of first settlement: the founder(s), the first school, first dwelling, first everything, as if there had never been occupants who thrived in those places before Euro-Americans. The continuity between invading and occupying sovereign Indigenous nations in order to achieve continental control in North America and employing the same tactics overseas to achieve global control is key to understanding the future of the United States in the world.”

Second Reading: Micah 6:1-5

Hear what God says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of God, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for God has a controversy with God’s people, and God will contend with them. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

For thousands of years, First Nations people have walked on this land; their relationship with the land is at the center of their lives and spirituality. We are gathered this morning on the traditional territory of the Peoria, Potawatomie, and Miami Nations and acknowledge their stewardship of this land throughout the ages.<sup>1</sup> We remember the

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<sup>1</sup> “NativeLand.ca,” *Native-Land.ca - Our Home on Native Land*, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://native-land.ca/>.

1833 Treaty of Chicago that stripped them of this land, on which this very sanctuary was built just 39 years later.<sup>2</sup>

We also need to acknowledge that Evanston is both the name of our community and an example of O'Brien's 'firsting and lasting'. Our community's indigenous roots have been erased under the name of a military man who helped orchestrate the Sand Creek Massacre.<sup>3</sup> We gather this morning to worship in a place with complicated roots. We come together in search of communal belonging, on land that never should have belonged to us. Yet here we sit, stand, and pray, 147 years later.

On this cold November morning of 2019, we are grappling with climate change, racial injustice, rising poverty, gun violence, and countless other injustices while Thanksgiving looms on the horizon, a political holiday built on mythology. In the late 1800s the story of the Puritans and Wampanoag nation sharing a meal together went viral, and by the 1930s, had earned itself a spot in children's history books. But that celebratory meal 382 years ago in 1637 was not to honor friendship and a bountiful harvest. The first Thanksgiving was proclaimed by Massachusetts Colony Governor John Winthrop to celebrate the safe return of heavily armed young white male colonists. These men volunteered to travel into the Connecticut territory and massacre 700 Pequot people. 700. The first Thanksgiving was to celebrate a mass shooting.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "The Treaty of Chicago | Central Michigan University," accessed November 10, 2019, [https://www.cmich.edu/library/clarke/ResearchResources/Native\\_American\\_Material/Treaty\\_Rights/Historical\\_Issues/Relocation\\_the\\_Potawatomi\\_Experience/Pages/The-Treaty-of-Chicago.aspx](https://www.cmich.edu/library/clarke/ResearchResources/Native_American_Material/Treaty_Rights/Historical_Issues/Relocation_the_Potawatomi_Experience/Pages/The-Treaty-of-Chicago.aspx).

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Calhoun, "Remembering the Sand Creek Massacre: The Past Is Always With Us," *Westword*, last modified December 1, 2015, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.westword.com/news/remembering-the-sand-creek-massacre-the-past-is-always-with-us-7387126>.

<sup>4</sup> "The True Story Of Thanksgiving," *HuffPost*, last modified November 25, 2010, accessed November 10, 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-true-story-of-thanskg\\_b\\_788436](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-true-story-of-thanskg_b_788436).

We have been talking about gun violence for several weeks now but we would be remiss if we thought this was a new phenomenon. I was in third grade when Columbine happened and my entire education was haunted by school shootings after that, but the gun violence crisis is older than anyone here. It is older than this church. It is older than this nation. Gun violence is rooted in who we are as a country and it bears awful fruit.

Violence is traumatic for both the victim and the perpetrator. As humans, we are born with brains wired for connection but when we experience trauma, our brains are rewired for protection. This change is behavioral, neurological, and can occur as deeply as our DNA. It is an inheritance that, if unhealed, gets born into the next generation biologically and socially.<sup>5</sup>

When we seek to protect ourselves instead of build connections with others, we seek connection from other things. We fill the hole in our hearts and psyches with food, possessions, substances, wealth- more and more stuff in order to feel less and less pain. We sacrifice our relationships with the land and others in order to consume more. Violence and consumption are intrinsically connected. It makes sense Thanksgiving feasts and Black Friday have blurred into each other. Racial injustice and the climate crisis are interconnected symptoms from the same wound. We cannot heal one without the other. When we look frankly at what is rotten in our society, let's have the courage to dig deeper.

Last month I attended the National Council of Churches Day of Remembrance and Lament marking 400 years since enslaved Africans were brought to these shores. We gathered on the spot in Point Comfort, Virginia where the first slave ship landed and

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<sup>5</sup> Bessel van der Kolk M.D, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Reprint edition. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015).

sold 20 Angolans to wealthy English planters. During the ceremony, civil rights activist Dr. Ruby Sales shared this message for white churches in the US today:

“Attend to your own wounds. Not how this injures people of color, but me. Where is the white theology that offers redemption? Do you believe white people are worthy of being redeemed? Are you willing to locate that thing in you that makes you despise other white people? Are you willing to touch, to heal that shame? Where is it inside of me? Can I break with empire culture? There have been books upon books written about how racism has hurt black people, but how has it damaged the psyche of white people?”

Dr. Sales questions are bigger than this sermon, bigger than any one of us can answer alone. But I share them today to lay them on your heart as we enter this holiday season. We have all been traumatized by violence in some way, and our healing requires connecting through reflection and ritual, through rewriting our stories of who we are. do this hard work, theologian Dr. Septemmy Lakawa reminds us, “The Spirit breathes life to the survivors of trauma and allows them, from within their wounds, to inhale the breath of life and to exhale this breath through their testimonies to the possibility of life even when justice is deferred.”<sup>6</sup>

One key difference between individuals who become defined by their traumas and those who thrive despite them can be measured in shame resilience, finds Dr. Bréne Brown. “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” Shame feeds on silence, secrecy, and judgment. The body feels this social rejection the exact same way it feels

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<sup>6</sup> Septemmy E. Lakawa, “Changing Landscapes of Mission: Challenges and Opportunities,” *International Review of Mission* 103, no. 1 (2014): 47–56.

physical pain. Shame resilience then, is the ability to protect our social connections- our connection to ourselves, our connection to others and creation, and our spirituality- the sense that we are connected to something greater than ourselves. “A social wound requires a social balm,” Brown tells us, “If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can’t survive.”<sup>7</sup> If we can tell the story of Thanksgiving honestly, and frankly, we can start healing a culture of violence.

Our Micah reading today leaves us with some tough love. Sometimes you have to set boundaries to protect your loved ones. This passage follows the form of an ancient legal document. God is suing God’s people for failing to uphold their end of the covenant. They have failed to love their neighbor and care for creation. In the complaint, God reminds God’s people of their divine rescue from oppression, their compassionate and righteous leadership, and how divine justice overcomes any obstacle.<sup>8</sup>

Overseeing these court proceedings are the mountains and hills. The enduring foundations of the earth preside as judge and jury. Humanity is on trial, and we are held accountable by the land we inhabit. The land that has born witness to it all. The land that knows our secrets and the things we wish to hide in shame.

This is the opposite of who tend to think holds the power in our world. When we dehumanize people, we try to make them earthier. We use pejoratives like provincial, rustic, hick, bumpkin. Femininity is often discredited for its connection to nature- the female body is dirt-y. People of color are called dirty too, as well as savage, beastly, and animals. The closer you are to the land the less power you hold, empire tells us.

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<sup>7</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, 1 edition. (New York, NY: Avery, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn J. Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets for Today* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

Indigenous people make up 5% of the world's population, protect 80% of global biodiversity, and experience the highest rates of violence, oppression, incarceration, illness and poverty than any other group in the world.<sup>9</sup>

That is not how God tells us creation is designed to work. It is unholy.

Three years ago this week, the Standing Rock Sioux taught me what holy accountability to the land looks like. Over 524 clergy from 20 different denominations and faith traditions gathered, with less than 6 days' notice. We arrived as guests before the sacred fire at the camp the Standing Rock Sioux had built to support their water protectors. For three days they showed us that God's transformation occurs in community meals, prayer, song and dance despite walls of militarized police barricades. It is butchering a buffalo, sorting clothes, changing tires, and serving soup while surveillance drones fly overhead. It is standing together in joy and pain in the bitter cold. It is an outpouring of love, donations, food, and clothing from all parts of the world to a reservation in the middle of nowhere. It is unexpected hugs, tears, and laughter from strangers.

The night of our arrival to Standing Rock, a Lakota grandmother stood in front of the many faith leaders assembled to tell us of her community's struggle. She said to me, to us, and in turn to each of you: "You are my ancestors' wildest dreams come true. We have been praying for this for hundreds of years. Your presence here represents a commitment on behalf of the Church to not just say some nice things today and post it online, but to bring about authentic, systemic change and transformation for all people."

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<sup>9</sup> "Indigenous Peoples Defend Earth's Biodiversity—but They're in Danger," accessed September 30, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/11/can-indigenous-land-stewardship-protect-biodiversity-/>.

We are accountable not just to each other, but to the mountains and hills, the rivers and oceans, the flowers, fruit, grains, and the air we breathe. Reconnecting with the created world allows us to reconnect with the deepest parts of ourselves and each other. As you leave the sanctuary after worship today, you are invited to reconnect with a tiny corner of creation at this table up front. Play with the dirt, wet your hands, pick a flower, watch the flame, take a vegetable with you. It is your space and your time. And as we continue to dig through the violence and injustice in our world, when we encounter something rotten, may we have the courage to dig deeper. Blessed be.