

The Northern Great Lakes Synod Council recently declared May 2020 to May 2021 as a “Year of Discovery.” It is a call for our synod members to better understand and appreciate the history, heritage and culture of Native American peoples, to reflect on the historical content of the Doctrine of Discovery, and to engage in dialogue with Native American siblings. Some time at the online Walking Together events will be dedicated to educating ourselves during this “Year of Discovery.” Additional plans for this “Year of Discovery” are still being worked on. Join the ZOOM Walking Together events to begin your “Year of Discovery!”



A Year of Discovery

Over the past couple of years, I have been taking courses at Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College. Last spring, I enrolled in a class called Anishinaabe Values and Philosophy. The sage that burned before each class to clear the air also opened my heart and mind to Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being. The best way to know someone is to step into their worldview and the world I stepped into went far deeper under the surface of any ground covered in American History classes about Native Americans. While sitting week after week at the tables circled around a large round rug woven with the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, I made some profound discoveries.

Discovery #1 – Land is not simply occupying a space to live on and care for. The whole of creation, all elements of the earth and people’s relationship to them, is seen as holy, a sacred

relationship. A blade of grass, an ant, a mountain, a human or a molecule of oxygen are all infused with *one* thing: the life force. It is similar to how Paul Tillich referred to God as the “ground of all being.” Everything is one and all are related because they come from this same source. All are infused with this divine mystery. The Anishinaabeg call this life force Gitchie-Manitou (Great Spirit).

Discovery #2 – Human beings are the most dependent of all beings in creation. We are born from the Earth; even the Christian creation story will tell you that we are formed from the dust of the Earth. The Earth is our Mother. We do not own her nor are we superior to her. She is very nurturing and gives of herself for the well-being of all creatures. That is why tobacco is offered in humble gratitude when harvesting anything taken from the ground or when brother deer sacrifices himself to give life to others. Human beings depend on all of creation to survive: plants, animals, materials for shelter, water, etc. Plant and animal life could get along just fine without us, but we cannot live without them.

Discovery #3 – Land is not something to be owned, but rather something one belongs to. Belonging to a specific place, one’s homeland, means it is not only home, but an extension of the people themselves. One is a “natural” part of that area and religion is geographically bound to sacred spots integral to spiritual practice. For thousands of years diverse groups of Indigenous peoples lived on this continent. Because all tribes held this value of specific home ground, respect for the other as *other*, with all the rights and privileges one holds for one’s own, was understood. Each group was uniquely responsible for the use and management of their birth home. Surplus in one area became the stuff for trade in others.

The fact that tribes understood respect for the other as *other* is revealed by the reception the Europeans received from Indigenous groups when they first arrived. It is said the Europeans saw them as a peaceful people easy to subjugate. To subdue was necessary because they were considered enemies of Christ – pagans. Yet it was

the Native American who showed them what to eat and how to harvest the food the land provided which Europeans had no knowledge of. They also granted the newcomers with places to which they might adapt themselves. Ideas of ownership and accumulation of lands, behaviors exhibited by the Europeans, were alien concepts among Indigenous people.

To the Europeans, it appeared that since many tribes had no apparent name for their divinity, they must not have one. Further, Indigenous people often acknowledged and thanked the natural world; in European eyes, these people worshiped the false gods of nature. Such behavior, they reasoned, indicated a people devoid of a religion or having beliefs not worthy of consideration. In fact, it was not uncommon for Europeans to declare that Native people were a godless people.

To the Europeans, the acquisition of land meant expanding the empire. The inhabitants of the “developed” world have a “right” to go where they please, regardless of the desires of the inhabitants of other occupied areas. The entirety of Mother Earth’s resources goes to those with the might and power to do so.

European Christians brought with them a sense that their religion was superior, their values more moral and advanced than anything they saw, or shall I say “understood,” in the “new land.” Such beliefs allowed them to develop policies and laws which would further their causes.

Europeans also brought with them the idea of property rights, limits, restrictions, and prohibitions. Because land to the Europeans was a commodity, ownership became a fundamental concept underpinning the law. Throughout this process, westward expansion, economic development and religious beliefs became inexplicably intertwined in order to take over the “New World” regardless of the negative consequences for Indigenous people.

As you can see, given the incompatibility of worldviews between Indigenous and European peoples, alienation between the two became inevitable.

Taking into consideration how the Anishinaabeg see themselves as an extension of the land, belonging to a specific place where everything is sacred and holy, and Mother Earth cares and gives of herself for the survival of humanity... how can one be removed from life (physical and spiritual) itself? How can one be cut off from one’s bloodline? How can one survive?

Obviously, one cannot. The loss of life itself, the Anishinaabe way of knowing and being, crippled the spirit and wounded the soul. It stabbed at the very heart of who they are and as a result: emptiness, depression, and loss of identity, culture, spirituality, and sense of purpose. The loss of one’s homeland never leaves us. Not any of us, but especially for the Anishinaabeg and other Indigenous people.

While sitting week after week at the tables circled around a large round rug woven with the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers in my Anishinaabe classes, I discovered a people who yearn to rediscover themselves, after so much has been lost. A people who desire to know the teachings their ancestors knew. A people who want to live with Mother Earth in care, respect and honor. A people whose spirituality is rich in grace and gratitude. A people who want to reclaim who they were created to be.

We, as a church, can stand with them in this endeavor. This Year of Discovery seeks to understand how the Doctrine of Discovery has had a critical part in our American and religious systems and how these systems have harmed and continue to harm our Native siblings. It is my hope that this Year of Discovery also takes you to a sacred place...a place of discovering a valuable culture worth learning from, a spirituality filled with grace and gratitude and an awareness that we are all related.

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