Indigenous Peoples' Sunday 2024

Rev. Steve Hayward

"Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? … (Jesus replied) go, sell everything you have and give to the poor…." Mk 10:17, 21

When I was six years old my family moved from the relatively cozy environment of Rocky River, Ohio, on Cleveland's west side, to take over management of my grandmother's farm outside of Sikeston, Mo – 150 miles south of St Louis and 150 miles north of Memphis, TN. The 640 acres, a section of land, was property paid to my grandmother's family for her great-uncle's service during the Indian wars early in the 19th century. It lay 14 miles west of the Mississippi River which, at one time had been the western limit of Native American lands, and then later the eastern boundary as European immigrants crossed the Appalachians, and on the Trail of Tears the Cherokee, Seminole, the Choctaw, Chickasaw and others were driven on to Oklahoma to make way for the continuing influx of migrant Europeans. Among those receiving land grants were soldiers led by Merriweather Lewis who became governor of what was then called Upper Louisiana. It was Andrew Jackson's "extermination" policy that led to the mass migration, that Trail of Tears, and the deaths of some 15,000 Indigenous people along the way. 150 years later as members of the Boys Scouts of America, my brothers and I hiked 23 miles of the Trail of Tears several times – 23 miles of the more than 5000 miles walked by the Seminole and Cherokee peoples as they were forced from homes in Florida and Georgia and sent to their new homes. Still later, Dr

Arthur Hayward, an older brother of mine, followed that Trail of Tears to become a medical practitioner in the Indian Hospital at Tahlequah, Oklahoma, providing free medical care to the indigenous Cherokee – perhaps a small pay-back to a dislocated people.

"Giving back" is a common theme between Mark's Gospel, the story of Raven sharing that shiny orb to lighten the world, and perhaps the gift of medical care as we acknowledge Indigenous Peoples' Day, an understanding that all that we have, all that exists, are gifts inherited for a time, and gifts that are to be shared with the whole world. We continue to live in an age of the world when recognizing our common ancestry, our common humanity, is in short supply. Wherever we look there are conflicts and wars with no seeming end in sight. The only possible conclusion appears, again, to be the annihilation of one enemy by another. It is reminiscent of President Andrew Jackson's "Indian Removal Act" in the 1830's that began with the forced movement of indigenous tribes from the eastern United, moving them from their ancestral homes and cleared farmlands in Florida and Georgia to a land between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River – and then on westward. Jackson even called for the extermination the native nations. The instigating factor for the westward flow seems to have a been a gold rush in the mountains of western Georgia. For their trouble, the tribes were promised $500,000 dollars. The ensuing Trail of Tears led to removal of some 100,000 people and the deaths of those 15,000 members of the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole nations.

But long before Andrew Jackson took his action, the earliest Europeans to establish relations with the peoples of the North American continent had already instituted the practice of disenfranchising the native American. Along the northeast coast of Cananda and the United States both the French and the English waged war against a people who initially welcomed them, established a significant partnership of trade, and taught them about this new land. A war between neighboring tribes in 1615 – the Abenaki, the Mikmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot tribes decimated their numbers, and one of the first "gifts" of the Europeans settlers was a pandemic that killed 70-90% of the Algonquin natives. Forever after, those years between 1616-1619 were referred to as "the great dying". It was just a year later, in 1620, the Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts – again tentatively welcomed by natives who helped shelter and feed them through that first winter. But by the 1680's, fearing their extermination, the northeastern tribes gathered to trade wampum belts to seal a truce among their nations and to protect each other from the European arrivals and against their natural enemy, the Iroquois around the Great Lakes to the west. The Dawnpeople, or "people of the Light", became a more cautious folk.

It is hard to find historical episodes in which people from two very different cultures found it easy to share their resources in the manner that Raven shared the sun. Much of it has to do with an understanding of possessions – something even the disciples apparently had trouble with. When Jesus told them they needed to be ready to share everything they had, they "grieved" – it was almost more than what they could bear. They were

heart-broken to think that for all they had had given up, it wasn't enough. They were being asked to give up everything – their whole life.

During negotiations with the French, the leader of the Abenaki tribes sought help from a Jesuit priest – trying to understand why the French and the English required them to give up the land on which they had been living. In his speech to the French general, the said, "…thou must live peaceably with me. Is it living peacefully with me to take my land against my will? My land which I received from God alone? …. My land is not thine either by right, or conquest, or by grant or by purchase." The land that God had given was not something to which they held a title, not something they could give away or sell. It still belonged to God. It was not in the power of the Wabanaki to give or sell something that was meant to be shared by all. Raven understood that the gift he received was for sharing, not a possession to be held tightly in one's fist.

In the modern world we continue to see this struggle to contain, to own, to drive out, to annihilate, to control or accumulate - all being the primary motivation of not just nations but of individual human beings. And yet, in the midst of it all, there are those who do cry out in the wilderness like John the Baptist. One such unlikely voice was that of Nelson Mandella. I say "unlikely", because he was the orchestrater of the ANC, a violent and angry force in the movement to bring democracy to South Africa in the last half of the 20th century. And yet, it was his action, his commitment and change of heart that led to the eventual, mostly peaceful, transition from the rule of white supremacy to a shared, democratic rule in his country. From the docket where he was sentenced to years of internment, he said this: "During my lifetime I

have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." (Statement from the dock at the opening of the defense case in the Rivonia Trial. Pretoria, South Africa. 20 April 1964.) Nelson Mandella spent the next 27 years in prison, and when he was released, and was elected President of a free South Africa in 1994. He then stepped aside after a single term to let democracy move forward.

There is a word for what we seek in our estranged world. It is the atonement – at-one-ment. When we hold things too tightly, thinking it all belongs to us, we prevent God from using those things we have been given. We hold them to tightly. We need to loosen our grip. Raven put the sun in the sky. Nelson Mandella and Desmond Tutu and others gave a nation back to its people. We have our hands full of things to share with God's world. Do not grieve as some disciples did, but be brave, open your hands, share what you have, and rejoice. Do Justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Amen.