

Wisdom From Lakota Sisters and Brothers

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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When I first went to live near Eagle Butte, South Dakota, I found mixed reviews regarding the early Congregational missionaries who carried the Gospel to that region. Some Lakota people expressed gratitude for Thomas L. Riggs and others who introduced them to Jesus. But some of the Lakota people expressed resentment for the missionaries' insistence on letting go of their traditional language and spiritual practices.

The longer I lived on that Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, the more I could see the possibilities for dialogue, for Christianity and Native American Religion to learn from each other, to respect each other, to celebrate each other's sacred stories, and to benefit from the wisdom of both religious traditions without being in competition, without trying to eliminate the other. To this day, there is significant tension between those promoting the Gospel and those claiming the ancient heritage.

This morning, I wish to lift up what I consider to be the common ground, perhaps a basis for being in partnership for the sake of peace in God's realm. First, I learned right away about the Vision Quest. A Vision Quest is an ancient ritual for discerning God's hope for an individual's life path or for discerning God's wisdom regarding a particular decision. After a time of fasting, a man or a woman, a teenager or an elder goes off alone to a place apart. It might be a mountain peak such as Bear Butte or an isolated pond or a cave in the deep woods. In that place of retreat, a Lakota seeker opens him or herself to the wisdom of God, to the calling God intends.

This Vision Quest is a time to acknowledge the spiritual gifts God has bestowed and to commit oneself to using those gifts for the sake of peace, for the sake of the wholeness of the community. Traditionally, one remains in this wilderness place for as long as it takes to find clarity. Upon the return to the village, one shares whatever has been revealed.

In our Christian Scripture, we find Jesus often slipping away to a place apart for prayer or for meditation. Just as his earthly ministry is about to begin, Jesus spends forty days and nights in the wilderness where he wrestles with his calling, where he questions his vocation, where he struggles with conflicting voices. It says he remained there forty days which means 'long enough,' long enough to find clarity for his life's mission. The Rev. Jonah Little Wounded, reading that Biblical text, would say Jesus had been out on a Vision Quest.

Do we not conduct our own modern forms of the Vision Quest? We take long walks listening to meditative music. We participate in guided meditations. We walk along the shoreline mesmerized by the ocean waves, perhaps anticipating a sign. We sit in the first position on a Yoga mat. We pray on our knees at the bedside. We go off to Africa on a sabbatical.

Traditional Native American Religion and Christianity share this impulse to step away to a place apart, to make ourselves naked, that is, vulnerable before God, to open ourselves to that Wisdom that is beyond human experience, that wisdom that is of God.

This morning, we heard from the Book of Job. When Job has lost everything he cares about: his family, his wealth, and his health, he goes to a place apart, a dung heap, in search of God! He is totally confused about how so many bad things could happen to such a great guy.

He goes out to the dung heap to wrestle with God and ultimately to open himself to God's wisdom. I find the Vision Quest an important point of common ground. As our high school seniors spend time in the guidance counselor's office browsing college catalogues, they might do well to spend equal time in a place apart, on a Vision Quest.

Then I learned about the Sweat Lodge. The Sweat Lodge is also an ancient ritual. It is a prayer lodge where small groups of faithful people meet to pour their hearts out to God. The prayers in the Sweat Lodge begin with words of confession. The door keeper of the lodge has brought red-hot rocks into the center of the lodge and has closed the flap over the opening. This door keeper now sprinkles water over the hot rocks. Steam fills the prayer chamber. Everyone begins to perspire profusely. The body is ridding itself of all its stored up impurities. Simultaneously, the prayers of confession are uttered aloud. The soul releases all that stored up guilt.

‘I’ve been a lousy dad!
I drank too much last night.
I changed the oil in my Ford and I poured the
old oil into a crack in the earth.’

The door keeper finally opens the flap and a cool wind blows upon our faces. It is the breath of God, and we know in that refreshing breath we have been forgiven. The body and the soul are both clean.

In our Christian Scriptures, we find Jesus calling the community to repentance, to get real about the ways we injure one another, to move beyond the denial that we wound the ones we love, to name our need for forgiveness, to fess up to our complicity in oppressive schemes. We have that story about the woman who meets Jesus at the well and pours out to him all the sordid details of her miserable life.

She pours out her story as if it were perspiration pouring out through the pores in her flesh. When Jesus offers her the Living Water, it is like the door keeper opening the flap. The Living Water is like a breath of fresh air; it is her assurance that her sins are washed away. She is a new creation!

This theme of confession and forgiveness is central to both Faiths. In the Roman Catholic tradition, we have the confessional booth. In Protestant worship, we have a unison time for confession. Among our Lakota sisters and brothers, there is the Sweat Lodge. How good it is to witness our common ground. How good it is to see how God's healing presence is honored in sacred rituals. Occasionally, when I'm working with someone who can not believe God could ever possibly forgive them, there's a part of me that wishes we could go out behind the High Street School, construct a Lodge of willow branches and buffalo hides, heat up the rocks, sprinkle the water, and experience the blessed release that can come with physically "sweating it out."

Then, I learned about the Give Away. The Give Away still boggles my mind. It is a 180 degree turn around from everything I grew up with. In all my life experience, prior to 1973, when it was time to divide up the possessions of one who had died, the family members would circle the house as vultures circle a carcass. Various relatives would secretly hope to receive grandfather's pocket watch or grandmother's necklace or uncle's stamp collection or auntie's French perfume. There would be this jockeying for position, this hoping to receive the deceased's stuff. I know I coveted my grandfather's Ferguson 30 tractor! I thought it would be just the thing for a 16 year old boy.

When a Lakota family member dies, the cousins and the uncles and the brothers and the sisters all gather. They come from every direction. They rally.

But when it comes to dividing up the possessions, they announce a Give Away, a literal giving away of every single thing the man or the woman owned. The family's work is to see that nothing is retained; that everything is shared with members of the community who may have need of it. The one who has died no longer needs the quilt or the radio or the blue jeans; it is likely that someone else does. I found this both shocking and refreshing! I found that it has loosened me up in a most liberating way! It has set me free from the burden of my possessions!

In our Christian Scripture we have the story of the rich young man who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. The man assures Jesus he has obeyed all of the Commandments. Jesus looks at the man's wallet. It is bulging with \$100 bills. He looks at the man's pockets. They are bulging with gold coins. He looks at the man's checkbook. It is bulging with deposit receipts. He concludes that the man's possessions have become his burden. Jesus invites the man to liberate himself from this burden. But this young feller is too attached to his stuff. He goes away, his countenance fallen.

The wisdom of our Lakota brothers and sisters echoes the wisdom of Jesus. There is a point at which our possessions become a burden to our spiritual walk. There comes a time to release them for the benefit of the wider community. When Bud Annis died, his son and four daughters announced a Give Away. The community gathered. I received Bud's saddle blanket. One day, it will become a burden to me and I will give it away to someone who actually has a horse and has need of it!

As I reflect on the common ground shared by Christianity and Native American Religion, I am instantly curious about the common ground we also share with Islam.

As we harvested corn two weeks ago and apples this past Wednesday, I watched a Christian mom and her children harvest food for the poor alongside a Muslim dad and his children. I originally heard about this ministry from a rabbi! Jennifer and Metin and David have the same compassion for those who do not have enough food.

I was pleased to hear that Jane Ailes is organizing a carload of South Church people to attend a feast at Harford Seminary honoring the end of Ramadan. There's nothing like food and appetite to find common ground!

At a time when it is all too easy to vilify other religious traditions, I find it compelling, instead, to stake out our common ground. This feels like a peace strategy in which we all could participate with integrity, not compromising what we believe, but opening ourselves to the wisdom that transcends creeds and cultures and sacred stories.

This past week at Wednesday School, the adult responsible for the opening devotions passed out sentences from various religious traditions. Listen:

Christianity: In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets.

Confucianism: Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.

Hinduism: This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.

Islam: Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.

Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary.

I am convinced that our world stands in a precarious place. It is a precarious time. It is a time for peace making. It is a time for naming and honoring our common ground. This I say in the greatest of hope! Amen!