

Confess and ReDress
A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, October 15, 2023
Unity Church Unitarian

Their names were Morgan Harris and Mercedes Myran and they had been missing for seven months. Their families had taped up missing person posters and canvassed the area around Winnipeg, Manitoba but no one had seen or heard from the two women. But it wasn't the story of the missing women that caught the attention of the Winnipeg Free Press – and that caught my attention this past summer while visiting my relatives in Manitoba. It was the story of their deaths that made front page news for a while. Morgan Harris and Marcades Myran were members of the Long Plain First Nation, and the police discovered that they had been the victims of a serial killer who preyed on Indigenous women. Investigators had determined that their remains had been dumped in the Prairie Green landfill north of Winnipeg.

The controversy was not around their deaths, even though over 1,000 Indigenous women in Canada have disappeared or were murdered. The headline of this tragic story was the demand of the victims' families that the landfill be searched and that their remains could be brought home – to their families – to their tribe for a proper burial.

The Winnipeg Police Forensics chief said that searching the landfill for their bodies was not operationally feasible, concluding that it was unsafe for those who would conduct the search and likely not provide the closure that the victim's families so desperately wanted.

The newspaper blew up with differing opinions. The mostly white Canadians who wrote letters the editor sided with the Police Chief – that the safety of the searchers was more important; and that given the enormity of the cost of the search – it wasn't worth the risk. But members of the Long Plain Nation felt otherwise. One of the victim's sister, Jorden Myran, said "Canadian officials have made so many promises to Indigenous people. This is just showing that nothing has changed...If this was a white woman in the landfill, there would have been no question that there would have been a search." When a nation of people has been traumatized for centuries; when their land is stolen, when their culture and traditions are suppressed, when their legitimacy is denied, and when the most vulnerable among them – namely women – go missing – it's not difficult to believe that the dominant white culture is less interested in justice. Cathy Merrick, grand chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs said "We can easily talk about reconciliation, but there's no action with it, so it's meaningless."

Not too long after the posters went up for Morgan and Mercedes, red dresses began to appear around the site of the Landfill. The REDress project began as an art installation to draw attention to the more than 1,000 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. I first saw the display created by artist Jamie Black at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. It's stunningly simple and hauntingly powerful. Red dresses – like the ones you encountered on the way into church this morning, hung on trees, serving as a visual reminder of the staggering number of women who are no longer with us. The installation evokes a presence through the marking of absence. The red dresses point to the need for something to be done – attention must be paid. Redress is required.

It's a brilliant play on words, because to redress something means to remedy or set right an undesirable or unfair situation. Redress also means a remedy or compensation for a wrong or grievance. As we look at October's theme of "Confession," and as we dive into the UU Common Read, Danya Ruttenberg's book "On Repentance and Repair," our work this month is both individual and collective. We examine not only what repentance and repair looks like in our personal lives, today we explore what that looks like on a national level. Repentance and repair are the first stage of the process; and the next is reparations.

When U.S. Representative John Conyers first submitted a proposal to study and develop reparation proposals for African Americans in 1989, it was seen then as tilting at windmills. Conyers sponsored that bill every year until his death in 2019. No one believed that reparations to the descendants of chattel slaves were ever going to happen. But increasingly, the idea that the United States could confess their racism and then pay reparations for the lost wages, opportunities denied, the creation of a persistent underclass that permeated all aspects of American life, from housing to economic advancement to segregation and –that maybe to repair this original wound some form of reparations must be enacted. So this month of Confessing is intended to look at both the harms done to other human beings and how to repair them AND it's exploring the harm done to people – not just in the past, but the harm that is perpetuated throughout the nation to this day and to take steps to try to heal and repair that harm. This is Confession and Redress, writ large.

Before I continue, I want to acknowledge that you cannot talk about reparations for descendent of chattel slavery and reparations for Indigenous tribes all in one sermon. To do so would be a disservice to both. They both require serious study and deep reflection.

However, for this Sunday, knowing that next month is Native American Heritage Month, and building on the fine program of this past Wellspring Wednesday on the Doctrine of Discovery or the Doctrine of Domination as it is more correctly named - and the comments of filmmaker Sheldon Wolfchild and Steven Newcomb, I wanted to use this Sunday to consider more deeply how we may confess and redress through reparations the grave injustice that has been done in the past and continues to permeate the present of the Indigenous peoples in this land – the land we inhabit. To lean into that conversation, I want to go back to a powerful reflection that was written by former worship associate Ray Wedemeyer, which in part, inspired my own thinking for today’s sermon. Ray wrote a piece called “Reflection on Place”. I quote this excerpt, with Ray’s permission.

Ray writes: *“On the Sacred Sites Tour here in the Twin Cities led by Jim Bear Jacobs, a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Nation--I again heard the history of indigenous peoples in Minnesota but I was also visiting the land where that history took place. It was during that tour that Jim Bear spoke very simply and clearly about the broken promises, the broken treaties that would remove the vast majority of indigenous peoples from the land that is now the Twin Cities and eventually how they would be removed almost totally from Minnesota...*

...During that tour I realized that I was now part of the story. I own land in St Paul on the homelands of the Dakota and Ojibwa nations. And I own land in Wisconsin a mile or two from the scattered bits of the St Croix Chippewa reservation where 3.8 square miles are all this group have left of their original homelands that once covered thousands of square miles in northern Wisconsin.”

Then, later in the reflection, Ray asks himself – and us: “ How do I move from discomfort to right action? Do I give back the land? Do I pay tribes rent on the land I now own? Do I find other ways of giving back that aren’t about money? How do I work to create relationship with those who have been harmed? How do I honor and respect their culture and make proper amends?”

It’s the same question that many of us would ask ourselves – and in fact, we need to have a national conversation about what would meaningful reparations look like? How would the country be different? What would those of us who are not native to this land have to give up? I want to commend the work of our Indigenous Justice team and Becky Gonzales Campoy, who have written extensively in our newsletter about reparations and indigenous justice. In their series last year, the question that kept haunting us is “What does it mean to take responsibility for a past that’s not past?” Minnesota Dakota professor and activist (Wah-zee-uh-tahw-in) Waziyatawin offers one response.

She looks not necessarily to divest white Minnesotans of their private land holdings so much as to find other ways to enfranchise the Dakota community today.

The first place to start begins with the critical role of public confession – of truth telling – in repentance work for harm caused at the national level.

Waziyatawin writes “to many Minnesotans, truth telling may seem an unnecessary educational goal because there is no awareness of a denial of truth...this means that well-intentioned people, who ordinarily would be horrified at the notion of being complicit in the coverup of genocide and the ongoing denial of justice for Indigenous peoples, have done just that.”¹

But then, she goes on to say “*truth telling has the potential to alleviate the burden that all of us carry – Dakota people who carry historical trauma and the pain of ongoing oppression and white Minnesotans who carry the burden of maintaining oppressive systems. Truth-telling allows us to relieve those burdens and take the next step towards justice.*” So the critical role in confession “*is in its potential to liberate victims of great harm – marking the end to the denial of their experience and the affirmation of the legitimacy of their suffering.*” **But Rabbi Ruttenberg also notes that this process can also be liberating for the perpetrators.**

¹ Ruttenberg, Danya. *On Repentance and Repair*, pg. 133-134,

She says this “ *It engages the possibility that what was done was not what had to be done; it enables those who acted wrongly to engage with the immorality of their actions; it opens the door to accountability and repentance—to becoming different. We cannot change the past, yet we can change the future, but only if we are honest about what has been – and who was harmed and who caused that harm.* ” ²

It is hard to have a national conversation about repentance and repair and how to redress the wrongs done, if our nation refuses to acknowledge harm. The State of Florida is leading the movement to ban lessons on race and gender identity from public schools and workplaces that may make some people feel guilty. The national movement to ban conversations or teachings about Critical Race theory, which addresses systemic and institutional racism in the United States has gained a following. Under Florida’s Individual Freedom bill, the definition of discrimination is broadened to include making another person feel uncomfortable over historical actions by their race, nationality or gender. If this is not the very definition of white fragility, I don’t know what is! And likewise, is the belief that telling the truth about the horrors of attempted genocide of millions of Indigenous peoples would be forbidden because it could make some people uncomfortable or even feel bad about American’s past is a dangerous and harmful movement that must be countered forcefully.

² Ibid, pg. 134

For a meaningful conversation to happen nationally about reparations, we – as human beings – must see ourselves as both perpetrators of harm and those who can change it.

That’s what this entire month of Confessing is all about. If you’re a white person or non-Indigenous person, I want to say clearly – this is not about making you guilty for the sins of your/our ancestors. It’s about ownership of the truth. It’s about soul searching. And it’s about building the capacity to hold conflicting truths in your heart and mind. If you are a white, non-native Minnesotan, it’s about your willingness to confront the human capacity for greed, for bias, for genocide, for evil. Because we make ourselves the hero of every story, we make someone else the villain. Those natives were savages – our ancestors tell us, they must be civilized. So we will strip them of their culture, we will put their children in Residential Schools, we will take them from their land, we will Christianize them and insist that they be grateful. When we make ourselves the hero of the nation’s narrative, we say that slavery is part of the Biblical narrative, and that we are simply doing God’s will. By doing so, we other another and we justify harm. When we question the police’s interaction with a young black man, we wonder “why didn’t he do what he was told?” or a woman’s assault, “why was she walking home, all by herself?”

You see, these are spiritual questions with political ramifications. But when we human beings can say “I am a part of all that is – I am the beauty of the fawn and I am the wolf that attacks the fawn” then – and only then may we make meaningful redress for harms committed. Again, I refer to Rabbi Ruttenberg, when she says “truth telling must not be a single event but rather a part of the ongoing work of becoming different, of transformation.”³

That’s what we’re doing here – each and every Sunday and throughout the week. We don’t have all the answers. We don’t profess perfection. But each time you question your own reactivity; each time you try to believe yourself to be innocent, the act of confessing is a helpful and necessary corrective. It keeps us humble – to know that despite our big brains; our intellect, our wisdom and knowledge; despite our technology and advancements – there exists within the human heart a complex truth – a knotty DNA of power and control; of greed and benevolence; of lies and justification and truth-telling and honesty.

For those among us who, as Ta-Naheshi Coates says “believe ourselves to be white” we have the opportunity to write a different narrative. Those who have been granted power by white supremacy culture can also be the same ones to wield that power for good. We can continue the work of repentance, in places where it is ignored, denied, limited, or circumscribed on a national level. We can be accomplices who are complicit in the struggle for liberation.

³ Ibid, pg. 136.

Those among us who are people of color – who are Indigenous – can ask those of us who believe ourselves to be white - to be accomplices and allies – to support the movement for land return or reparations or deeper engagement with Indigenous justice even when it requires sacrifice of the way things have always been.

What does this look like? I don't yet fully know. But I do know the willingness to have our assumptions challenged; to be partners in the struggle for justice; can only result in a more inclusive and just nation. I wonder, as Rabbi Ruttenberg does: “Will the United States ever hold a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for slavery, for structural racism, for Indigenous land theft, genocide and oppression? Will it ever look with curiosity at what making amends, repair and true transformative change might look like?”⁴ She concludes those questions with “I don't know. I hope so.”

I hope so too. What I do know, is that as a nation – we build walls out of fear to keep out the other – the stranger – the non-Christian – the non-Native born. Our ancestors built reservations to limit the power, potential and culture of Indigenous peoples. We build physical walls out of fear that this nation does not have enough resources to accommodate those who seek a safe harbor, and we build emotional and political walls against the idea that white Americans owe anything to people of color – to indigenous communities.

⁴ Ibid, page. 141.

It is hard work – it is heart work – it is the work that is needed for us to do – for if not us – who? And if not now – when? What is at stake is not only a historical reckoning, but the entire structures on which this country was built. And that is, indeed, a very threatening prospect for those who benefit from white supremacy. And yet – many of us are yearning for a different way of being – for a new vision of how to structure a country – and hopefully a world – that is literally built on equity and justice, instead of greed and domination. That’s a world that’s worth fighting for. That’s a dream worth achieving. That’s a life worth living. That’s a nation, worth building – one that is not yet achieved. May we each and every one of us, be partners in the work together.