

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Newcastle, Maine
17th Sunday after Pentecost
September 24, 2023

Living into Christ's Great Commandment, Our Baptismal Covenant, and the Biblical Imperative
to Do Justice: How Do We Stand in Solidarity with Wabanaki Nations?
John Dieffenbacher-Krall

readings

Genesis 1:11-12, 20-22

Psalms 104:25-32

Revelation 5:11-14

Matthew 13:31-32

Season of Creation

Overall theme "Let Justice and Peace Flow"

This Sunday "advocate"

I thank Steve Ward and the Rev. Dr. Suzannah Rohman for inviting me to preach this morning. My sermon is titled "Living into Christ's Great Commandment, Our Baptismal Covenant, and the Biblical Imperative to Do Justice: How Do We Stand in Solidarity with Wabanaki Nations?" This is the tenth congregation that I have preached to within the Episcopal Diocese of Maine spanning from Cumberland County to The County.

Though we find ourselves in the midst of the longest liturgical season of the year, Pentecost, we are also celebrating the Season of Creation. All the lessons we heard this morning reverberated with the theme of creation, God's animating life force, and how thankful we should be for God's creation. The theme for this year's Season of Creation is "Let Justice and Peace Flow." I most certainly want to talk to you this morning about justice. You may be aware that each of the Sundays within the Season of Creation has a theme. For this Sunday, it is advocate. In addition to justice, I will talk to you this morning about how we as settlers can be effective advocates to stand in solidarity with Wabanaki Nations.

I preach to you today conscious of rising public expressions of hate, anti-semitism, white supremacy, and racism within the State of Maine. All of the beliefs, ideas, and meanings associated with those words or terms run counter to the core of our faith, to love our neighbor, to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being,” and “to do justice.” Though we haven’t heard of many reports of hate directed at the Wabanaki, don’t believe for a second that they are not vulnerable to this same violence.

If you don’t recognize those references to our faith, I am referring when citing “love our neighbor” to the Great Commandment which you can find in three of the Gospels, [Matthew 22:35–40](#), [Mark 12:28–34](#), and [Luke 10:27a](#). As it appears in Mathew, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

The passage “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being” constitutes part of our Baptismal Covenant when we answer in response to the celebrant’s query, “I will, with God’s help.” We don’t pledge sometimes, when we feel like it, when it is convenient. We say, “I will.”

We have all of those faith-filled prophets of the Old Testament calling us to “do justice.” I began a sermon that I preached at St. Anne’s Episcopal Church in Calais in June 2018 with multiple references to prophets exhorting us to “do justice” in case anyone in the congregation was thinking, why is this guy bringing this liberal political stuff into our church? Recall at the beginning of this sermon I told you the theme for this Season of Justice is “Let Justice and Peace Flow.” It is inspired by Amos, “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24)

Many of us are fond of that passage from Amos. But we can find that same message from other prophets.

Micah 6:8 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Isaiah 1:17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

I assume all of us gathered here this morning strive to follow the example of Jesus Christ and call ourselves Christians. According to Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_by_country), Christianity has more adherents than any other religion in the world estimated at 2.38 billion people out of a human population of 8 billion. Yet we know Christians have a range of views about key tenets of our faith. Some read the Bible as the literal Word of God. Others, including Episcopalians, read scripture as the inspired Word of God with a faithful reading of Gospel passages requiring reason, historical understanding, and prayer. Biblical texts have deep meanings at time requiring more than an instructions-manual or cookbook approach to understanding them. We well know interpreting Biblical passages can be challenging. Yet we have movements within Christianity rejecting what some of us might believe constitute core principles of our faith.

National Public Radio conducted an interview earlier this year with Russell Moore, formerly one of the top officials of the Southern Baptist Convention. In an excerpt from a story filed from the interview, he says:

It was the result of having multiple pastors tell me, essentially, the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount, parenthetically, in their preaching —

"turn the other cheek" — [and] to have someone come up after to say, "Where did you get those liberal talking points?" And what was alarming to me is that in most of these scenarios, when the pastor would say, "I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ," the response would not be, "I apologize." The response would be, "Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak." And when we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive to us, then we're in a crisis. (NPR, "He was a top church official who criticized Trump. He says Christianity is in crisis," 8/8/23 <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/08/1192663920/southern-baptist-convention-donald-trump-christianity>)

Human beings have often selectively quoted from sacred texts to justify their actions. Does anyone remember this chilling dialogue from the 1982 movie *Sophie's Choice*? To remind you, Sophie's Choice depicts the horrible decision thrust on the title character when a SS officer asks her to choose her son or daughter to be exterminated in the Nazi gas chambers.

SS officer: You believe in Christ the [redeemer](#)?

Sophie: Yes.

SS officer: Did He not say... "Suffer the [children](#), come unto me?" You may keep one of your children.

Sophie: I beg your pardon?

SS officer: You may keep one of your children. The other must go away.

I want to return to the social climate in our state. As these public demonstrations, race- and anti-semitic-related graffiti, and flyers become more common in this State, some people might dismiss them saying "they don't truly reflect us, at least the majority" or "this is not who we are in Maine." A recently published op-ed in the Bangor Daily News explored this premise.

As unique, and prophetically accepting as our state must be, if there is no place for white supremacy in Maine, why are there [so many](#) of them throughout the beautiful, mostly rural state of Maine?... If we do not want Maine to be a state that is a host to the parasite of hatred, how did we get here? Then, we pose: if possible,

how do we move forward? (Bangor Daily News, 9/15/23, Raymond Diamond, “If there are so many hate groups in Maine, maybe this is who we are”)

The prophet Isaiah has an answer to the writer’s rhetorical question, “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed.” (Isaiah 1:17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV))

What does the rising climate of hate in Maine have to do with the struggle to have Maine State Government and many other settler institutions fully and unconditionally acknowledge Wabanaki sovereignty or the right to self-determination? The attempted domination and destruction of the Original Peoples and Nations of this land we today call Maine was morally, religiously, legally, and politically justified by a concept that originated in Christianity, the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination, and it became accepted international law. At its core, the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination reflects a mindset of white supremacy and racism. I initially preached about it on the Sunday before Indigenous Peoples’ Day in 2006 when I called upon my home parish, St. James’ Episcopal Church in Old Town, the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, the entire Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Communion to repudiate it. The good news is the first three have taken that action.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination, it constitutes a worldview and legal concept that espouses Christians have a right and justification because of their religious faith to invade non-Christian lands not in the possession of any other Christians and take control of those lands and the property of those peoples and if the original inhabitants don’t submit to the Christian conquerors the invaders can enslave them and kill them. Sound shocking? Unbelievable? Skeptical? Thinking where did this guy get this from? I got it from the leader of Christianity at the time, Pope Nicholas V. In 1452, he issued the papal bull, think of a papal bull as a formal declaration from the pope, titled Dum Diversas. It grants the king of Portugal the Pope’s blessing to go to the western coast of Africa, and to ... “capture, vanquish and subdue the Saracens, pagans and other enemies of Christ, and put them into perpetual slavery and to take all their possessions and their property.” Several other papal bulls declared this same right of discovery and domination along with numerous charters issued by English monarchs, including the Cabot Charter issued in 1496 by King Henry VII.

As more people have learned about the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination, a growing number of religious bodies have repudiated it including the Episcopal Church in 2009 in resolution D035 (https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2009-D035). While many faith communities are grappling with the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination, it remains the foundation of Federal Indian Law, the:

treaties, statutes, executive orders, administrative decisions, and court cases – that define and exemplify the unique legal and political status of the over 550 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, the relationship of tribes with the federal government; and, the role of tribes and states in our federalism. (NARF: the Native American Rights Fund Indian Education Legal Support Project "Tribalizing Indian Education" Federal Indian Law and Policy Affecting American Indian and Alaska Native Education, Oct. 2000 (<https://www.narf.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/purple.pdf>).

Supreme Court Justice John Marshall used the concept in part as the legal reasoning for the 1823 Supreme Court decision *Johnson v. McIntosh*. The brilliant Indigenous scholar Steve Newcomb writes in *FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF INJUSTICE: The Legacy of Fifteenth Century Religious Prejudice 1992*, "Writing for the unanimous court, Chief Justice John Marshall observed that Christian European nations had assumed "ultimate dominion" over the lands of America during the Age of Discovery, and that-- upon "discovery"--the Indians had lost "their rights to complete sovereignty, as independent nations," and only retained a right of "occupancy" in their lands. In other words, Indian nations were subject to the ultimate authority of the first nation of Christendom to claim possession of a given region of Indian lands."

Wabanaki Nations, the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, the Mi'kmaq Nation, Passamaquoddy Tribe consisting of two communities, Motahkomikuk and Sipayik, and the Penobscot Nation, have been engaged in an epic campaign to have the State of Maine and many settler institutions recognize their inherent sovereignty. I purposefully used the term "inherent sovereignty." Inherent sovereignty means no entity outside the Wabanaki Nations confers sovereignty upon them. Wabanaki Nations possess sovereignty as part of their original existence.

Their political struggle involves achieving State of Maine legal and political recognition of that inherent sovereignty.

Much of the political struggle concerning Wabanaki sovereignty centers on the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act (MICSA), the 1980 law that includes a state law, the Maine Implementing Act, that was only made effective upon President Carter signing MICSA on October 10, 1980. The MICSA settled the lawsuit brought by the Dept. of Justice on behalf of the Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Nation in 1972 concerning illegal acquisition of land by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the State of Maine in violation of the 1790 Nonintercourse Act, a Federal law that specifies any land agreements entered into by states must be approved by Congress. In other words, Congress, or the Federal Government, has primacy in governmental relations with tribes, not state governments. Congress had not ratified a number of Massachusetts and Maine land deals with the Wabanaki, thus putting legal title to two thirds of the State of Maine in question.

While MICSA effectively ended the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot lawsuit, it did not end the struggle over the tribes' inherent sovereignty. For the last three legislatures, the Wabanaki Alliance, a nonprofit organization created by the Wabanaki Nations in Maine in 2020, has been leading the effort to pass 22 recommended changes to the Maine Implementing Act that resulted from a Task Force (<https://legislature.maine.gov/maine-indian-claims-tf>) of state legislators, Wabanaki Chiefs, representative of the Governor's Office and Office of the Attorney General, and the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission. During the 129th Legislature (2019-2020), the bill died without a floor vote due to the interruption of the legislative session by the pandemic. A similar bill was introduced during the 130th Legislature, LD 1626. It fully passed the House and required one final vote in the Maine Senate but it died on the Appropriations Table when legislative Democrats acquiesced to Gov. Mills' demand that they not send the bill to her as she did not want to deal with the political consequences of her expected veto. This year a bill embodying the Task Force recommendations has been introduced a third time, LD 2007 An Act to Advance Self-determination for Wabanaki Nations. It will be considered when the Legislature reconvenes in January.

People of St. Andrews', I appeal to you to have a bias towards action on the side of justice. There are dozens of constructive things you can do both collectively as a congregation and individually to support LD 2007, other Wabanaki-backed legislative initiatives, and to stand with Wabanaki Nations. Given this is not the 18th or 19th century when two-hour sermons were common, I won't describe all those potential actions now. You have a great resource among you in Steve Ward who is active with the Episcopal Committee on Indian Relations. Please confer with him. I am also available to talk to you, either to your vestry or any other group of St. Andrews' parishioners, who want to learn how you can be meaningfully involved to make a difference. With Zoom, that is much easier compared to when we were limited to in-person gatherings.

We know every one of us will die and shed this mortal coil. When God asks what kind of life have we lived, be prepared should God ask did you stand with colonialism, racism, and white supremacy, or did you stand with the Wabanaki? Amen.