

**Galatians 5:1**

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

**“American Indian Spirituality and Ceremonial Traditions”****Dr. Tinker****January 11, 2009**

My relatives, I say Good Morning to you. What a pleasure it is to be here at this church in Fort Collins this weekend. What an alive congregation. I'm having a great morning, enjoying meeting all of you. This is my third worship service. It's been wonderful.

I come before you this morning as a voice from the American Indian world. A single voice. I also come to you as a representative of your school of theology, a very fine United Methodist seminary, one of the best in the country, Iliff School of Theology, something you all should be proud of. Just first-class scholars. Wherever I go in the country, I tell them I have great colleagues. I don't agree with any of them, but we have great conversations with one another, and that's the strength of the school, is that we can disagree on many, many things, and still find life in each other.

My announced topic this morning is to talk to you about Indian cultures and religious traditions, the ceremonial life of Indian people. That changed dramatically with the coming of the missionaries. When our peoples were told, repeatedly, that the ways we had believed, that is the covenant we had with the Creator before white people came across the big waters to teach us the Gospel of Jesus Christ and steal our lands, that those things we had believed for thousands of years were demonic. Somehow God in God's infinite wisdom had failed to send a memo to Indians about Jesus when it happened, and left us, according to this old theology now, left us to stew in our own sin, until those white saviors came over to rescue us. I read this text to Indian congregations who have been taught this way, and I tell them, “You know, you can still reclaim your own ceremonial traditions. You can still remember that God had a covenant with your ancestors long before the Jesus covenant was brought to you. And according to the Gospel, at least the way Paul preaches it, you can still practice your Indian ceremonies. You can still tell those traditional stories. You can still live your culture and its values. Because what Paul says is, we're free to do that. For freedom, Christ has set you free. Stand fast, therefore, and don't submit again to the yoke of slavery.”

That yoke of slavery, in much of Paul you could interpret it as meaning the Jewish law. But the group in Galatia that he's writing to are Gentiles. They're Greek Christians. So he's talking not just about Jewish law, but about all law, all rules, all doctrines that would pen us in and control our thinking, our beliefs and our behavior. Paul says, “For freedom Christ has set you free.” So I tell these Indian congregations, “You're free to pray with the sacred pipe. Free to dance your dances. Free to tell those stories. And free not to do that, if you so choose, because for freedom, Christ has set you free.”

On the other hand, I want to suggest to you all this morning that there are things, ways, values, that Indian people hold to that might be helpful to our larger society today. Might be a corrective to some of the insanity that we're learning to name global warming, environmental devastation. Might be a corrective to a state, a modern state called the United States, that seems inevitably to decide to engage in foreign policy by resorting to the last possible choice, making violence our recourse in national policy. Making power politics and coercing other states' behavior our first order of business when we talk to other states, other nations, around the world. Indian cultures may have a corrective that could help us learn how to create a world that lives more in harmony and balance.

Now, there are any number of cultural differences that we could talk about that put Indian people quite aside from, apart from, the cultures that come out of Europe, American-European culture. Indian people, for instance, don't pay attention to time the way European peoples do. That culture may be shaped by temporality, by notions of progress, ideologies of progress and development. The whole economic system is built upon modalities of time. You can't have a production schedule for a factory, right? without a timeline. You can't measure people's value as workers without a clock for people to punch in at, in order to measure the time that they put in at work. Of course, now it's all done on computer, and we no longer have those old punch cards that we used to have when I was young.

Indian people rather are spatial in their culture, so rather than knowing when the ceremony is, rather than setting aside one particular hour a week on a weekly cycle, we may have key ceremonies at the solstices, at the equinoxes. We may have an annual ceremony that takes twelve days to finish, instead of 59 minutes and 59 seconds on Sunday morning. Unless you're Catholic. Then the priest has to learn to do it in 44 minutes and 59 seconds, because they have masses on the hour, right? Reverend Schuster said something about Indian time before we began this morning, and I want to insist that though is a racist stereotype. All our meetings start on time and finish on time. When everyone gets there, it's time to start. And when we're done talking, it's over.

Another cultural difference is that we tend to be strongly communitarian, rather than the kind of radical individualism that comes out of the European development of culture over the past thousand years. So that when we dance in that dance called the Sun Dance, new agers want to come out and dance in this dance, because they see it as the most powerful way to enhance their individual spiritual strength. It's a self-enhancement, self-help program. It's, in fact, your western culture run amok, because when Indians dance that same dance, they have one thing on their mind: the phrase, "That the people might live." See, it's done not for me, but if I dance that dance, I do it for the people, that the people might live.

Perhaps one of the biggest shifts in culture between white and Indian people, is related to this communitarian stuff, and you find it rooted in that phrase that Lakotas use that has become common in larger society too – maybe you've heard it. "Mitakuye Owasin, "For all my relatives." The Osage equivalent would be ( ). For all my relatives. Now, this phrase is a powerful prayer. It's a prayer that someone can pray at the end of a longer

prayer, or it can be the only prayer they speak in a ceremony, when they pray for all their relatives.

When I was a young man, I was told by a Lakota elder that your relatives in that prayer are not just your nephews and nieces, your cousins, your aunts and uncles, your grandparents or grandchildren. Your relatives are the whole people, your whole nation, that is, all Osages, all Lakotas. More than that, all the Indian people. But more than that, you're praying around that medicine wheel for black people, red people, yellow people, and white people, all the human beings of the earth. That makes it a powerful prayer. But the elder wasn't done yet. He went on to say, it also includes, besides, the two-leggeds, all the flying things, and all the living, moving, people of the earth. So that when you pray that prayer, "for all my relations," you're praying for all human beings, all the buffalo and all the squirrels, all the eagles and all the sparrows, all the mountains and all the trees and lakes and rivers. Those, he said, are your relatives. That's the culture Indian people live. Praying for all those relatives makes it very difficult to kill any one of them, and yet, it's necessary that we do, to eat.

I spent a good deal of time in the Eighties as a consultant for the World Council of Churches, in something they called the Conciliar Process of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. Maybe you remember the language, from nearly twenty years ago. But I spent my time, and they brought me in as a consultant dealing with indigenous issues, an indigenous consultant. Trying to convince the World Council of Churches they got it backwards. Justice and peace, the World Council had learned that much for the third world, back in the mid-Seventies, that justice must precede peace. You can't use peace and justice as your slogan, it's got to be justice and peace, because you can have no peace without justice. And so all American denominations went for that "justice and peace" language instead of the other way around. But then in this program, they attached the integrity of creation to the end of that sequence, and I thought it was kind of like playing "pin the tail on the donkey." In order to take care, they took care of the south, of third world countries, by going "justice and peace," and they didn't want to give that up, but now they wanted to take care of northern churches' concern for environmental justice. So they created this language, I don't even know what it means, "the integrity of creation," and put it at the end of the sequence.

I told them, "I think you missed the boat, because you could have made this a powerful trinitarian formula that would have reflected the historic teaching of the Christian church, if you'd put creation first, where it belongs, forget integrity, and if it had been "creation, justice and peace." Creation is what the parenthood of God reflects, is God's action in creating all that is. Justice then becomes a reflection of the Christ event and salvation that comes to the world through Jesus's sacrificial death. And peace, then, is the sanctification work of the Holy Spirit. It would have been, I thought, a very fine formula, even though American Indians are not trinitarian. We are actually as Alfonso Ortiz used to tell us again and again, relentlessly tetradic. That is, the sacred number for American Indians is four and not three. If we had done that, it would have made for a very powerful creation theology, something the modern church has had trouble with, as the modern church, especially in the United States, has focused almost exclusively on the second article of

the creed, on Jesus. We run by the first article of the creed, *credo in unum deum*, I believe in one God, etc. to get to the Jesus part, and then we recite the third article of the creed about the Holy Spirit and forget we said it, because we don't pay any attention to the Holy Spirit in American Christianity, whether it's mainline Christianity or evangelical Christianity, seems to focus on Jesus. Maybe it's time to start recovering creation theology and spirit theology, and make our theology more holistic and balanced.

See, if one has a creation theology, and understands this Indian vision, this Indian value of finding ourselves in relationship with all of creation, it becomes much more difficult to cut down a tree without thinking very hard about it. Very difficult to even hunt and shoot an animal, without understanding that that deer is my relative, my brother, my sister. Of course, we've got to eat, right? That's where this begins to fall apart. You have to eat. In other words, you have to perpetrate violence in order to eat. But for Indians, that was always done with a ceremony. You always give something back before you take. So I may kill that deer in order to eat, and feed my family, but I'm also doing ceremony for that deer, making sure that its spirit gets into the spirit world, and can be regenerated into a young deer.

The ceremony Osages perform before going on a buffalo hunt was ultimately exactly the same ceremony that they performed before sending a military contingent out to defend the people against an enemy. What white people call the "war ceremony," but for us it was also the buffalo hunting ceremony. A thirteen-day ceremony, before we could go kill a buffalo, because those buffalo were our relatives, our brothers, our sisters, our siblings, and we can't take their lives, even though we may need to kill 60 of them to feed a village, at a time. That's trying to restore harmony and balance even when you must engage in an act of violence, to bring the world back into balance, when my act of killing a buffalo puts the world out of balance. That's a cultural value that would have changed, I think, the way America does business. And I might have more respect than I have had for the past five, almost six years now, for this American war and invasion of Iraq, if I had seen George Bush and the U.S. Congress, let's throw Dick Cheney in there too, perform a thirteen-day religious ceremony before they decided to attack Iraq. That would change things, if our focus was not on teaching Iraqis democracy, imagine this, we're teaching a three-thousand-year-old country how to grow up and be adults, how to govern themselves. If our goal had been bringing the world into harmony and balance, we might have done that in a whole different way. Creation, justice, peace.

I'm reminded of a story, and I can't tell you the story in its wholeness because it takes – it's an Indian story, you know, it takes four days. The Indian time, we have time for those things. But modern Christian church time, I have to give you the Cliff Notes version of this story. It's about First Woman and First Man, the first two human beings created, at a time when they had made so many babies, and their babies had made babies, and their babies had made babies, and their babies had made babies, and death was unknown to them. And yet they'd become so large that the children began to starve. Corn Mother, with tears coming down her face for her children who are starving, finally convinces her husband and her sons that she has a plan to save her children, but they have to kill her. It's a sacrificial death. They have to kill her, and by her instruction, now the tears are

coming down their cheeks, carry her body out to the clearing and drag it around this clearing seven times, until all the blood soaks into the ground and all her flesh comes off the bones, and then bury her bones in the middle of the clearing. And they go back to their village, weeping, don't sleep because they weep all night because this is the first death they've ever known as human beings. The next morning they go out to pay their respects to her, and discover, to their amazement, that the clearing has been filled with vegetables that are growing. Corn. Squash. Beans. All kinds of vegetables, and a little tobacco in the very center, that they can use for their prayers. And a voice that comes to them is their mother's voice, now called Corn Mother, who says to them, "All this is my flesh. Eat it to give yourselves life."

And so, Indian people know that even when we eat a package of hamburger bought at Safeway, that we are consuming Corn Mother, and all our ancestors, because you see, everything that we eat grows out of the earth, or it eats that which grows out of the earth, and it's fertilized by our ancestors who are buried in the earth. I don't know about our recent ancestors, who are soaked in formaldehyde, their veins filled, you know the routine. But in the old days, the body would disintegrate and would give new life to the earth, so that when we kill a deer and eat a deer, we know that that deer has been eating grass that has grown where our ancestors have been buried, so we continue that cycle, so that eating anything is a sacramental act for American Indians, not unlike what Christians think of in terms of Holy Communion being the real presence, however you interpret real presence, of the body and blood of Jesus.

That gives us a different attitude towards each other, gives us a different attitude towards enemies, gives us a different attitude towards the earth. And Indian people want to offer you this insight as a gift and a possible corrective to a world that is badly out of balance, with environmental destruction imminent, with wars destroying human lives, wreaking destruction in various quarters of the earth. Now it's Israel and Palestine again, in Gaza. Indian people want to offer you this new insight and invite you to participate with us and other indigenous peoples around the world in bringing this world back into balance. And may we can walk hand in hand, work side by side, not just for human dignity, but for the dignity of all our relatives on this earth.