

Reading for Sunday March 10, 2019

Our reading this morning is an excerpt from the Spanish Requerimiento of 1513. Requerimiento means requirement. When Spaniards arrived on coasts or inland areas in the Americas, ready to take over those lands and the peoples who had inhabited them since time immemorial, they read this document aloud.

I've shortened it a bit, but it's still longer than most of our readings. The language is archaic, but if you kind of let it flow over you, I think you'll get the gist of it. If not, well, imagine being one of the original hearers of this document. It was read to them, by the Spaniards, in Latin or Castilian, with no interpretation into native languages. Which is by turns ridiculous and horrifying.

Also: some parts of the reading and sermon today may be upsetting to hear. If you need to step out, that's okay. Do what you need to do to take care.

Here is the Requerimiento:

"On behalf of the King, Don Fernando, and of Doña Juana I, his daughter, Queen of Castille and León, subduers of the barbarous nations, we their servants notify and make known to you ... that the Lord our God, Living and Eternal, created the Heaven and the Earth, and one man and one woman, of whom you and we, all the men of the world at the time, were and are descendants, and all those who came after and before us.

But, on account of the multitude which has sprung from this man and woman in *the five thousand years* since the world was created, it was necessary that some men should go one way and some another, and that they should be divided into many kingdoms and provinces, for in one alone they could not be sustained.

Of all these nations God our Lord gave charge to one man, called St. Peter, that he should be Lord and Superior of all the men in the world, that all should obey him, and that he should be the head of the whole Human Race ... and he gave him the world for his kingdom and jurisdiction.

And he commanded him to place his seat in Rome, as the spot most fitting to rule the world from; but also he permitted him to have his seat in any other part of the world, and to judge and govern all Christians, Moors, Jews, Gentiles, and all other Sects. This man was called Pope.... The men who lived in that time obeyed that St. Peter, and took him for Lord, King, and Superior of the universe; so also they have regarded the others who after him have been elected to the pontificate, and so has it been continued even till now, and will continue till the end of the world.

One of these Pontiffs, who succeeded that St. Peter as Lord of the world ... made donation of these isles and Tierra-firme to the aforesaid King and Queen and to their successors, our lords, with all that there are in these territories, as is contained in certain writings which passed upon the subject as aforesaid, which you can see if you wish.

So their Highnesses are kings and lords of these islands and land of Tierra-firme ... and some islands, and indeed almost all those to whom this has been notified, have received and served their Highnesses, as lords and kings, in the way that subjects ought to do, with good will, without any resistance, immediately, without delay, when they were informed of the aforesaid facts.

And also they received and obeyed the priests whom their Highnesses sent to preach to them and to teach them our Holy Faith; and all these, of their own free will, without any reward or condition, have become Christians... and their Highnesses have joyfully and benignantly received them... and you too are held and obliged to do the same.

Wherefore, as best we can, we ask and require you that you consider what we have said to you, and that you take the time that shall be necessary to understand and deliberate upon it, and that you acknowledge the Church as the Ruler and Superior of the whole world, and the high priest called Pope, and in his name the King and Queen Doña Juana our lords, in his place, as superiors and lords and kings of these islands and this Tierra-firme ...

If you do so, you will do well ...and we in their name shall receive you in all love and charity, and shall leave you, your wives, and your children, and your lands, free without servitude, that you may do with them and with yourselves freely that which you like and think best, and they shall not compel you to turn Christians, unless you yourselves, when informed of the truth, should wish to be converted to our Holy Catholic Faith, as almost all the inhabitants of the rest of the islands have done...

But, if you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us.

And that we have said this to you and made this Requisition, we request the notary here present to give us his testimony in writing, and we ask the rest who are present that they should be witnesses of this Requisition."

There ends the reading.

The Doctrine of Discovery

A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera

First Unitarian Church

March 10, 2019

This is one of those sermons where I'm going to tell you something that directly impacts your life. It has to do with where and how we live. It's a huge thing, that is invisible to most of us. But in order to make it visible today, right here, we have to first travel back in time.

First stop: the first century. Christianity was new, and it had a grassroots quality. In the first decades after Jesus's death, people gathered in house churches. Extended-family size groups. Meeting for prayer and ritual and discussion.

There was a lot of theological diversity from one group to the next. It seems Jesus's disciples had each interpreted his teachings slightly differently, with different aspects standing out, and filling in the gaps according to their own best guess or context. They went out and taught others, and those others did the same, so that they did not all agree on how to best apply his teachings.

But the spirit of the faith was one of solidarity with the underdog. Jesus had touched people who were considered untouchable. He healed. He blessed the poor. He fed people. He hung out with bad influences. He was not impressed with power and wealth. In fact, while some people believed wealth was a sign of God's favor, Jesus said the opposite. He said it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven.

This subversive religion started to spread rapidly through the Roman empire, which alarmed wealthy and powerful leaders. Many of those early Christians faced persecution--- often extremely violent persecution.

Our next stop in time is the year 325. Three hundred years after Jesus lived. A titanic shift occurred. The emperor Constantine aligned himself with the most organized, visible strand of Christianity, giving it official sanction and protection.

Constantine was a practical military leader who recognized the advantage of marshalling such a rapidly growing movement. Even though he is said to have had an authentic Christian conversion experience, he also appears to have continued worshipping Apollo, the son of Zeus.

A Christian emperor meant a Christian empire or state. Now that the state was Christian, the two began to get smooshed together. State and church. Church and state. What was good for the state was good for Christianity, which was, in the minds of Christians, what God would want. God would want what is good for Christianity, therefore God would want what is good for the state. Growth. Wealth. Power.

The impact of this conflation, this marriage between Christianity and empire, is hard to overstate. Really, it changed everything.

Jesus was nonviolent. If someone slaps you, he said, turn to the other cheek. But that is not how an empire grows. An empire grows through force of conquest. And now the empire was conflated with Christianity. The growth of the empire was also the growth of the faith. This mindset spread across Europe. It led to the crusades—holy war against Muslims in the middle ages, sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church.

And then.... in 1492, a Spaniard named Cristóbal Colon, known here as Christopher Columbus, sailed across the ocean and learned of the existence of something that caught everyone in Europe by complete surprise: the Americas. We often say he discovered America, but how do you discover something that has been inhabited for thousands of years by a great variety of peoples with their own rich histories, cultures, and societies? He did not discover it any more than I could “discover” your home and move into it with all my stuff. It is already there. You already know about it.

But the land was a surprise to Europe, and not just a geographical surprise, but also a theological surprise. There was so much more to God’s 5000-year-old creation than the church had realized. How should they make sense of this and their role in relation to it?

In 1493, Pope Alexander VI answered that question with the Inter Caetera papal bull. Inter Caetera is the title. A papal bull is a public decree made by a pope. “Bull” comes from the seal, or bulla, they are stamped with to prove their authenticity.

Pope Alexander’s papal bull presented the church’s viewpoint regarding Spain’s role in these lands they had just learned of. It read:

“Among other works well pleasing to the Divine Majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and everywhere increased and spread, that souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.”ⁱ

In other words, if you do it in the name of religion, you are free to take over other people’s lands. Addressing the king and queen of Spain, a Catholic country, the pope

went on to “give, grant, and assign forever to you and your heirs... all the aforesaid countries and islands” discovered and undiscovered, “together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places and villages...”

He gave, granted and assigned? A pope, in Rome, gave away countries and islands halfway around the world, that were already inhabited?

How on earth did the pope come to see himself as the possessor of those lands, able to give and assign them as he wished?

Well, popes believed they, the popes, were God’s proxies on earth. An earth that all belonged to God. Therefore, it followed in the minds of popes, the earth belonged to the Catholic church.

This is how Spain conceived of and created the Requerimiento that you heard earlier. In the 1500s, as Spanish invaders barged into and across the Americas, the Requerimiento was read in Latin or Castilian. Sometimes it was delivered from the deck of a ship to an empty beach—I guess if people couldn’t understand it, anyway, they did not need to be present for the reading to count. All of which belies the real reason for it: it was self-justification for the Christian invaders, and of course it was never intended to prevent violence. Quite the opposite.

Whatever those invaders “discovered,” was in their eyes, actually already theirs for the taking. That teaching is called the Doctrine of Discovery.

It matters what you believe. This [mural, with its interfaith symbols] matters. And this is why I am so emphatic about our principle of honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person. When religious people (and other people) think they know who has worth and who does not, who is fully human and who is not, this is what happens.

This Catholic doctrine was adopted by France and England as well. And when colonists in what we now call the United States declared their independence from England, the doctrine carried over in a secularized version.

Native American scholar Steven Newcomb recalls when he was in college, he took a law class in which they studied the case *Johnson v McIntosh*. In that case, which took place in 1823, the US supreme court explicitly said that the US, when it declared independence, inherited the land claims made by European countries on this land. The decision states, "discovery gave an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or by conquest." The court spoke of native people as infidels and heathens.

Newcomb was struck by that religious language being invoked right there in the law, in a country that is supposed to separate church and state. He spent the next ten years doing research, tracking down the roots of those land claims. And it turned out to come straight from the Doctrine of Discovery. The *Johnson v. McIntosh* decision has never been overturned.

The Doctrine of Discovery is still invoked in our courts today.

One of the ways it plays out is that US law recognizes Native American tribes as sovereign peoples, but the federal government controls their land. And when it suits the government's interests, including commercial interests, to take over that land, they do so.

Ruth Bader Ginsberg cited the Doctrine of Discovery in a case in 2005. The doctrine was implied in a decision against a native man in another case just last August. It comes up pretty regularly.

And, it is subtly invoked outside of the courts, too. Streets and towns named Canaan are a reference to the bible, and Christian settlers' belief that this land was given to them by god. When the US is described as "a city on a hill," it's the same kind of code.

Steven Newcomb compares the Doctrine of Discovery to binary code—a pattern that is repeated over and over again to create a larger system—in this case a society. He calls it a domination code.ⁱⁱ

Domination of people. And... think of how, even the earth and her resources, is now used to the point of irreversible harm, to grow the wealth and power of the state and its richest, most powerful members.

We don't grow up hearing this history, most of us, because it threatens this country's very identity as a land of liberty, founded by people seeking religious freedom.

Instead of that, there was this doctrine, and trails of tears, and there was the enslavement of African peoples, which stemmed from the same theology. The papal bull called *Dum Diversas* laid that out in 1452.

This stuff that sounds historical is still active. It's not gone.

Do you know the thirteenth amendment, which is said to have abolished slavery, left a loophole? It says slavery shall not exist in the US "except as punishment for a crime." Right now, more black men are behind bars or under the watch of the criminal justice system than there were enslaved in 1850.ⁱⁱⁱ

Let's breathe. This is hard stuff.

We need a national conversation about race and genocide that is on the level of the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa.

Because only when we begin to widely acknowledge these stories, only when we allow their implications to register... only then can wellness come. And that national conversation starts with local conversations. With speaking about it in schools, and in neighborhoods, and especially in churches.

The Catholic Church has never renounced the Doctrine of Discovery. But as you've just heard, the doctrine's power extends far beyond the Catholic church. I mentioned the Johnson v McIntosh decision. Well, the associate justice of the Supreme Court at the time was a man named Joseph Story. Joseph Story was also president of the American Unitarian Association.

Unitarians, like other denominations, have been complicit and have at times actively participated in religious malpractice and in state violence.

These can be scary truths to confront, especially if we are in a win/lose, good/evil, all or nothing, mindset. But I'm not in that kind of mindset. I'm in a mindset of mutual flourishing. Of responsibility and deep spiritual grounding and faith that love will lead the way if we are brave and humble. I invite you into that with me.

So, let us speak honestly about these things. I want wholeness, well being, and peace for our children, and for our children's children. All of them. We want that.

This is a time for courage and honesty. Some good things are happening.

Several large Christian denominations—including the Episcopal Church, Mennonites, United Church of Christ, and others— have now publicly renounced the Doctrine of Discovery. Our denomination did so in 2012 with a resolution passed at our General Assembly that repudiates the doctrine

“as a relic of colonialism, feudalism, and religious, cultural, and racial biases having no place in the modern day treatment of indigenous peoples...”

It calls upon the denomination to “review the historical theologies, policies, and programs of Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism to expose the historical reality and impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and eliminate” any and all traces of “its presence in the contemporary policies, programs, theologies, and structures” of the church.

The resolution also publicly calls other religious bodies to reject the doctrine, and calls upon the US to implement the standards of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. law and policy without qualifications.

In *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, author Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz lifts up the UUA's resolution as “particularly powerful and an excellent model.”^{iv} Which means we got off to a good start. Now we roll up our sleeves.

Hundreds of clergy including UUs have also shown up at Standing Rock to publicly repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery there, and to side with the Standing Rock Sioux tribe in having a say over their sacred lands and water.

And there is lots more happening. I'll post links in the text of this sermon, which will be available on the church website.^v Sermons are usually posted by Monday afternoon. I

also always include citations in my sermon texts online, so you can see where my information comes from.

I want to close with two opportunities for those who are ready to take a next step for dismantling racism, speaking truth, and being in right relationship.

First, a training called Promise to Protect is coming to Albuquerque on March 23rd and 24th. Promise to Protect is an indigenous led movement. Its goal is to “provide skills and resources to activists who are resisting proposed fossil fuel projects in their communities and, if called upon, are committed to taking peaceful action” alongside indigenous people on the route of Keystone XL pipeline.

You can get more info about how to sign up at the Connections Table.

Also at the connections table: sign-ups for a new round of book groups studying Robin DiAngelo’s book, “White Fragility.” We mentioned it in the announcements this morning.

While anyone is welcome to sign up, it’s important to know that these groups are geared toward white people learning together about the things that white people specifically need to understand in order to dismantle racism. That is the focus of DiAngelo’s text.

Over sixty people took part in the first round of groups last fall. What they reported back is that Robin DiAngelo’s book is a really excellent foundation for other work around race.

ⁱ Deloria, Vine. God is Red: a native view of religion. Fulcrum Publishing: Golden, Colorado, 2003. (258)

ⁱⁱ Steven Newcomb is the author of Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and co-recreator of the documentary The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code. Interviewed on the Wiki Politiki podcast, 14 August 2018: <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/966-wiki-politiki-28865870/episode/revealing-and-revoking-the-doctrine-of-29714533/>

ⁱⁱⁱ This statement has been made by various public figures in recent years. Here’s a link to politifact checking the data: <https://www.politifact.com/rhode-island/statements/2014/dec/07/diego-arene-morley/brown-u-student-leader-more-african-american-men-p/>

^{iv} Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxane. An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States. Beacon Press: Boston, 2014.

^v Lots of info here: <https://www.uua.org/racial-justice/dod>