

1 Sermon, August 19, 2012

Texts: Psalm 8, 1 Corinthians 1:20-31

Title: "Christianity Compared: Stewardship of Nature in Christianity and Native American traditions"

Today I'm contrasting Christianity and Native American traditions in how they view the stewardship of nature.

And it's not exactly fair.

First of all, it's not fair to treat Native American traditions as though they were all one. There is a great deal of variety: some with a God figure, some without, some with the circle as the central symbol, some with other shapes, and so on.

It's also not fair because the two religious streams think very differently.

When I was in my 20s, I worked at a detox center in Minneapolis, and when doing an intake interview, I put a coat on the floor. But that act caused a big objection from the person I was interviewing, because the coat had a feather on. That feather was sacred, and so I did something that the other person regarded as harmful to the earth by not honoring that feather, and through it the earth. I also did not honor that person in front of me.

My reaction must have been something like a deer in the headlights. I just didn't know how to respond.

This is not just a gap between Christianity and Native American spirituality. It is a gap between the whole western or European worldview and native worldviews.

Another example:

Barre Toelken writes that in the 1950s, he was a uranium prospector in southern Utah, and he lived with a Navajo family. He lived with them for two years, and got to appreciate their ways.

In this family Barre stayed with, the father (or grandfather) in the family was a man in his 80s or 90s who had never seen a paved road or a train. He had seen airplanes flying overhead, and was afraid of them.

Barre took on himself the task of educating the old man. (How unknowingly arrogant we can be when we're young.)

Barre showed the old man a picture from *Life* magazine of the Empire State Building. The man looked at the picture and said, "How many sheep does it hold?"

Barry was flummoxed, and tried to explain the size of the building, but the old man wasn't interested.

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The old man was asking Barre to explain to him what the building was useful for. What would the building do that would sustain life or help people. When Barre told him what the building was for, the old man was shocked. He felt that so many people so close together could not live a very rich life, and expected they must be spiritually impoverished.

I think, when it comes to Christian thinking about the environment, the old man may be right; we are spiritually impoverished in this regard. Our appreciation of nature is impoverished because we do not live close to nature and depend upon it.

Why is it that we modern people from the Columbus area don't have as close a relationship to nature as most Native Americans do?

To describe this, I want to introduce to you the idea of Christianity as a portable religion. To be a Christian, you don't have to live in any one place. Even our ancestor, Temple-based Judaism, had a tie to a specific place. You were supposed to come to the Temple to perform certain rituals at least three times per year.

But Christianity never had that limitation. God was everywhere. Jesus himself was a traveling preacher. Saul had his vision on the road to Damascus, in the book of Acts, Saul (or Paul) even sails on a ship and goes to Malta.

Contrast that with Native Religions, where certain mountains or rivers are considered sacred, where the plants that grow in a certain area are sacred, or the animals or birds that live in a certain habitat.

For many Indian groups, there are one or more places that have powerful spiritual meaning: the Black Hills for the Sioux Nation; Blue Lake for Taos Pueblo; or Mount Graham for the San Carlos Apaches.

Many Navajos carry around with them in their pockets a certain kind of beads. They are really the inside part of juniper berries. How they are acquired is a lesson in itself. The juniper berries aren't picked from the plant. Instead, a child will search for a burrow where small ground animals have hidden a stash of juniper berries, and unearth them. They will take only the juniper berries that the animal has already broken open and extracted the food value. The rest of the berries are left in the burrow for the animals. The child keeps only the ones with a hole in one end. Then she takes them home, cleans them, punches a hole in the other end with a needle and strings them together.

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This elaborate way of doing this is for a reason. It illustrates human partnership with nature. There is a partnership between the tree that gives the berries, the animals which gather them, and the humans who pick them up.

Take the Navajo out of the desert where the junipers grow, and you have impoverished him and his religious faith. Navajo religion is not portable.

In fact, you can say that native religions tend to honor place in the same way that Christianity honors time. Think about it. We celebrate Christmas and Easter and Pentecost and Mother's Day and Sunday School kickoff day, and some Christians celebrate saints days and a whole host of other special days. Most of these have no real relationship to the seasons of nature.

Native American religion pays attention to the seasons as they are related to what happens to the earth and its creatures. Christians have, by and large, forgotten the harvest festivals and other celebrations attached to the land.

Christianity has focused on time. We measure years by the time before or after the birth of Christ. We think of the end of the world as something happening in time, but rarely think about where it will occur. And when we think of time, we tend to think of it moving in one direction, of making progress, of finishing things.

Native American cultures, on the other hand, tend to see time as more cyclical or rhythmic, in repeating patterns. Time is about relationship between sun and rain and frost and harvest.

Native American traditions tend to focus on place, rather than time, and that means they really pay attention to the place. The rocks, the trees, the grass, the animals – it is all sacred.

But since Christianity is a portable religion, and doesn't pay as much attention to place, it is easier for Christians to overlook the holiness of ordinary things.

Native Americans remember what Christians often forget: everything is sacred.

Another difference is that Christianity – or at least the culture that Christianity is a part of – tends to emphasize the individual, rather than

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the community. Christians are more likely to think of individual success than traditional native peoples.

For traditional American Indians, success is the survival and prosperity of the community or tribe.

American Indian religious traditions are mostly community based and have no real meaning outside of the specific community in which the acts are regularly performed, stories told, songs sung, and ceremonies conducted. Vine Deloria, Jr., described the communitarian foundations of American Indian existence in his 1973 book *God Is Red*, his point being that ceremonies are engaged in not primarily for personal benefit but rather for the benefit of an entire community or nation. The most common saying one hears during the Lakota Sun Dance is "That the people might live!" This sentiment becomes the overriding reason for and purpose of this ceremony.

It's not to say that Christianity doesn't have its own environmental ethic. Indeed it does.

In the book of Genesis, God creates humanity to be caretakers of the other creatures. We are not to have ownership of nature, but to take care of it on behalf of God.

The Psalms praise God for the wonder of creation.

Jesus spoke of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, and constantly referred to the natural world.

In the book of Revelation, God doesn't just do away with earth, but God restores it to something perfect, like the Garden of Eden. So the earth is precious. We have to leave something Good for God to restore.

But perhaps the most convincing thing in the Bible about care for the earth is the God's repeated urging of the people of God to take care of the weak.

Right now, with nature under attack from the expansion of human population, from the increasing demands on the soil for food and the earth for minerals for the things we want, you could say that nature is in the weaker position. At least we have the power to damage nature, often unintentionally.

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When we build homes in fire-prone areas of the West, we interfere with a natural cycle, and over time make the fires much worse than they would be if fire took its more normal and natural course.

Over time we have drained the wetlands that helped form a natural sponge to lessen the impact of severe flooding.

Mountainous Tropical areas that used to be thickly forested and now have homes have become much more susceptible to mudslides.

Humanity has weakened nature's ability to withstand calamity.

Our Christian faith tells us to care for the weak. In the Bible it talks a lot about caring for orphans and widows. But today our compassion needs to extend to the earth itself.

It may be time to make Christianity a little less portable, a little more concerned with the nature that is around us.

Amen.

"Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" 1 Corinthians 1:20-31, NRSV.

"O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Psalms 8:1-9, NRSV.