



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Oppression and Justice by Doug Paysour



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In the wake of damaging wildfires in recent years, some Native Americans have been working to reclaim practices that helped protect the land for thousands of years. Why were these and many other traditions suppressed? What can the experience of Native Americans teach us about injustice and oppression? How can we as Christians help create a more just world?

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This issue of FAITHLINK is the third in a series of four lessons during this Advent season inspired by the book *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, by Miroslav Volf.

Medicinal Fire

In the last few years, wildfires in California and throughout the West have become a regular part of the news cycle. According to a recent article by climate and environment reporter Susie Cagle in *The Guardian*, for the past 100 years or so, government agencies have combatted forest fires using traditional firefighting techniques and other land management strategies. While these strategies look like they're conserving nature, they instead choke the land with vegetation that's more than ready to burn, especially as the climate grows hotter and drier. This undergrowth becomes the fuel that feeds many of these wildfires.

However, a growing strategy to reduce wildfires utilizes the Native American practice of "light-burning," a traditional approach used by the Yurok, Karuk, Hupa, Miwok, and Chumash tribes for more than 13,000 years to manage the land in what's now California. These small, intentional burns create better animal habitats and reduce the fuel for future wildfires while also bringing additional benefits by renewing local food as well as medicinal and cultural resources.

The US government banned light-burning in 1850, considering it primitive and harmful to the forests; but more than 100 years later, the National Park Service discerned that there were no new giant sequoias growing in these unburned forests in California and began to rethink the ban. Eventually the ban was reversed, and many state agencies began to follow suit. Today, the state of California intentionally burns 125,000 acres per year, creating

healthier forests and “a culture where fire is a tool, not a threat,” as quoted in the *Guardian* article. It’s also important to note that none of these controlled burns have led to a fire that required fighting.

These Native practices are deeply ingrained in the cultures from which they arose and connect the people to the land and their Creator. As Cagle describes it in *The Guardian*, one can see the profound connection between the people and an ancient cultural practice. Revitalizing the practice energizes members of the tribes while at the same time providing hope for those suffering from the fear of the debilitating wildfires in California and throughout the West. Though neither the tribes nor skeptics believe that it’s possible to burn our way out of the climate and wildfire crisis, it’s certainly a cause for hope. “Prescribed fire is medicine,” said Frank Lake, an ecologist with a Native heritage. “Traditional burning today has benefits to society as well as supporting what the tribes need.”

REFLECT:

- Why do you think the practice of light-burning was banned?
- What was lost when the cultural Native practice was banned?
- In what ways did two cultures that were in conflict learn from one another?

Oppression

Oppression is a word that’s often used and rarely defined, but at its core oppression is the use of power in a cruel or unjust way. This power may come from the law, or it may come from social and cultural ideas like the widespread use of harmful stereotypes. No matter the definition, the history of the Native people in America is undoubtedly one filled with oppression.

According to *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2016*, two Christian doctrines were intrinsic to the early oppression of Native Americans. The first was the Papal Bull Romanus Pontifex of 1452 by Pope Nicholas V, which declared war against all non-Christians throughout the world and in so doing created a path towards conquest and eventually exploitation. The second was the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, which stems from a Supreme Court ruling in 1823 that Christian European nations

had “assumed dominion over the lands of America, and upon discovery, Native American Indians had lost their rights to complete sovereignty as independent nations and retained a mere right of occupancy in their lands.” In other words, the ruling said that Native Americans lost the right to own and rule the lands that they had occupied for thousands of years.

The problems of Native peoples are well-documented. According to the National Congress of American Indians website, the poverty rate among Native Americans is at a staggeringly high 37 percent, and Native peoples suffer from high rates of unemployment. A 2008 Associated Press article reported that one in ten Native American deaths was related to alcohol abuse. All of this comes in addition to the erosion of their culture.

The silencing of people’s voices is one of the consequences of oppression. When voices aren’t heard, their concerns are ignored. In a video titled “Reclaiming Native Truth Intro,” several speakers put a human face on the costs of this oppression. Kaana Watchman (of the Diné tribe) says that the culture at-large has certain expectations and stereotypes of Native peoples, explaining, “They expect you to fit into this form that they would like, and when you don’t, they silence your voice.” These stereotypes include highly sexualized female imagery, savagery, and magic talk. Steve Judd (of the Kiowa & Choctaw tribes) notes the ways in which Native people are portrayed: “You never see a Native person portrayed as a human, a normal human, and you never meet one. Two percent of the people are Native. Every time I see them, they’re on TV talking magic talk, then you don’t see them as human. It’s easier to perform a crime on someone that you think is not human.”

REFLECT:

- In what other negative ways do you see Native Americans portrayed? How does this dehumanize them?
- What other groups are oppressed in American society? What are the results of this oppression?

Justice

In his book *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, theologian Miroslav Volf makes a case that

while the overlapping of cultures always brings disagreement, it also provides the possibility of a blessing. As we come into contact with other cultures, we partially inhabit one another's traditions and way of life and can come to share one another's commitments. This "double vision," as he calls it, enables us to "enlarge our thinking by letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from *their* perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives." This may even lead us, as Volf says, to "look afresh at our own traditions and rediscover their neglected or even forgotten resources."

This is essentially what's happening in the reclaiming of the fire-lighting tradition. Even though it took more than a century, the two cultures came into contact with one another, and the dominant culture was able to see the value of the traditional practices. They began to see the error of their previous ways of understanding land management,

and they also began to view the members of these Native cultures as valued partners. This is the beginning of justice.

In his book, Volf goes on to say that we're called to seek and struggle for *the* justice—God's justice—even though we can only comprehend it imperfectly. God's justice is, therefore, not necessarily our justice but rather our understanding of justice that may come into sharper focus when we're willing to embrace and be open to the other. This willingness to practice double vision and to embrace the other brings the possibility of healing. The story of the fire-lighters is obviously a small one, and although a small story doesn't make all things right, it's a beginning and it's a hope.

REFLECT:

- In what ways can Miroslav Volf's example of double vision help us in our culture's relationships with other cultures?
- How can we tell the difference between God's justice and our justice? What tools do we use to do that?

Tribes as Nations

In an attempt to make historical information more widely available, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) published a report titled "The Tribal Nations and the United States: An Introduction," which explores the early relationships between Native tribes and the fledgling United States. Part of this history involves how Native tribes helped to influence the way the Founding Fathers shaped the government of the United States. Long before the United States was founded on the principles of democracy and self-governance, the Iroquois League of Five Nations was constituted in the late 16th century. The league's constitution was referenced in 1751 by none other than Benjamin Franklin, who noted the strength of the union and the seemingly indissoluble ties.

The Iroquois Confederacy (as it was also known) recommended its form of governance to the founders as they were discerning how to govern themselves. Canasatego of the Onondaga Nation shared these words: "Our wise Forefathers established Union and Amity between the Five Nations; this has made us formidable, this has given us great weight and Authority with our Neighboring Nations." He went on to encourage the founders, "Therefore . . . , never fall out with one another."

In the US Constitution, Native tribes were recognized as sovereign nations and maintained the right of self-governance as a key component to maintain tribal identity and culture. Currently, according to the NCAI, there are 573 federally recognized tribes in the United States, nearly half of which are in Alaska. In the long run, the arrival of Europeans disrupted multiple thriving cultures made up of millions of citizens who possessed a history unknown to many of us.

REFLECT:

- How does this history differ from the stereotypes about Native Americans we often see? How does this information change your perception of the Native American experience in history?

Core Bible Passages

Justice is at the core of the Scriptures. God hears the cry for justice of the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt, and the prophets rail against injustice wherever they see it. Now, in the season of Advent, we remember a number of prophecies in which we see God’s justice coming through Jesus.

One of these is found in the beautiful song of Jesus’ mother Mary, called the Magnificat, in **Luke 1:46-55**. In this song, Mary rejoices at what God has done for her and what God is doing in the Baby who is to be born. Mary notes her own lowly status in society as well as of those whom Jesus came to save. God is in the process of putting down the haughty and lifting up the downtrodden. Even more, it seems that God has a preference for the lowly, the poor, and the downtrodden.

Isaiah 11:1-10 is another Advent passage that looks forward to Jesus, who will set the world right for those who are needy and suffering. Jesus is the fulfillment of “the root of Jesse” (**verse 10**), who will bring God’s kingdom into the midst of the people. The beautiful imagery of the calf and the lion eating together (**verse 6**) points to a world in which people will not devour one another. Obviously, that prophecy is not yet completely fulfilled.

REFLECT:

- How do you respond to the idea that God favors the lowly and the downtrodden? What do you think this means?
- In our society, who are the lowly and downtrodden? What do you think would make for a more just world?

United Methodist Perspective

Each April, The United Methodist Church sets aside a Sunday to focus on Native American ministries in an effort to seek greater justice for Native peoples. On this Sunday, the offering goes toward developing clergy leadership for Native communities to encourage these communities to fulfill their spiritual development while also honoring their own traditions. The worship services on this day may also help members of the majority culture to understand Native peoples better.

In recent years, the UMC has grown in its understanding and relationship to Native peoples. In 1864, the Sand Creek Massacre led to the deaths of 200 Native Americans, many of them women and children. This assault was led by a Methodist clergyman, Colonel John Chivington. Sand Creek was just one episode that the church repented for during the Act of Repentance with Native Peoples held during the 2012 General Conference. In his book *Exclusion & Embrace*, Miroslav Volf says, “The embrace itself—full reconciliation—cannot take place until the truth has been said and justice done.” Repentance is the beginning of this pathway to reconciliation.

Resolution 3321 in the 2016 *Book of Resolutions* affirms American Indian sovereignty and self-governance. It encourages preserving Native cultures, land, self-expression, and sacred spaces. It also affirms the sacredness of all humankind and rejects stereotypes that depict Native Americans in harmful or exploitative ways. It encourages the UMC to build bridges of respect and understanding with Native persons, to listen to them and to seek to be educated about the relationships between Europeans and Native tribes, and to celebrate the gifts the Native people bring to the body of Christ.

REFLECT:

- In what ways has your church lifted up the concerns of Native peoples? In what ways has it expressed repentance?
- How could your church be more aware of these concerns?

Helpful Links

- “‘Fire Is Medicine’: The Tribes Burning California Forests to Save Them,” an article about Native American traditional land management practice: <http://tiny.cc/6pechz>
- “Reclaiming Native Truth Intro” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjeKlog4QfE&t>
- “Native People and The United Methodist Church,” 2016 *Book of Resolutions*, #3321: <https://www.umcjustice.org/who-we-are/social-principles-and-resolutions/native-people-and-the-united-methodist-church-3321>
- “Tribal Nations & the United States: An Introduction” at NCAI: <http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes>
- Find the book *Exclusion & Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, by Miroslav Volf, at Cokesbury: <https://www.cokesbury.com/p-9781501861079-Exclusion-and-Embrace--Revised-and-Updated-1-1-1>

Doug Paysour is an ordained elder in the Virginia Conference and serves at Windsor Hills United Methodist Church in Roanoke, Virginia.



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Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Exclusion and Embrace

by Jeanne Torrence Finley

Even as we look forward to seeing family and friends at Christmas, many of us also dread some of these encounters. What does it mean to truly embrace someone, and why is it sometimes difficult? As Christians, how do we embrace those whom we would rather exclude?

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Opening Prayer

O God of justice, who has heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, whose prophets have taught us about a more just world, and whose Son Jesus has been sent to scatter the proud and to lift the lowly, we come before you humbly this day. We rejoice with thanksgiving for your promise that the meek shall inherit the earth. We confess that we have sometimes worked not for justice but for our own good and our own desires. Heal us, we pray. Heal our land. Heal our world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- In preparation, read the article “‘Fire Is Medicine’: The Tribes Burning California Forests to Save Them,” published in *The Guardian* and included under “Helpful Links.” This will give you a fuller understanding of the lead story in the essay.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- As an opening exercise, have the group share their own personal experiences. Ask: What were you taught about Native Americans as you were growing up? What experiences have you had with Native American people? What do you understand about Native Americans today?
- Preview the video “Reclaiming Native Truth Intro” (see “Helpful Links”). If you have the equipment to do so, show it as you introduce the topic. If not, use it for your own preparation.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.

Teaching Alternatives

Talk with your pastor and discuss a celebration of Native American Awareness Sunday on or near April 26, 2020. Have your group offer to assist in planning the service for the day, including providing some of the resources in this issue of FAITHLINK. Contact your district or conference office for additional resources, including a Native American person in your area who can speak on that day and share from her or his traditions. If you have the ability to show video in worship, use the “Reclaiming Native Truth Intro” YouTube video indicated in “Helpful Links.”

Closing Prayer

Lord God, help us to recognize the pain we have caused, the pain we have allowed to happen, and the pain we were not aware was occurring. Guide us as we seek forgiveness, and lead us on the path to justice and reconciliation with those we have harmed and those who have harmed us. Amen.