

## ***Wisdom from Above***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
October 6, 2024 – HONORING FIRST PEOPLES SUNDAY  
Text: James 3:13-18

Columbus Day celebrations have been struggling in recent years with the fraught history of the earliest beginnings of the colonization of North America by European explorers becoming better understood. Coinciding with pushback against the veneration of Confederate Generals, the venerable Christopher Columbus began to be seen in an equally unfavorable light in many parts of the country. To be honest, Westerly is somewhat of an outlier in that a statue of Christopher Columbus still sits in Wilcox Park, albeit behind its very own wrought iron fence with pointed finials. The local communities also still enjoy the annual Columbus Day Parade, this too becoming a rarity these days. A lot of folks don't understand why celebrating Christopher Columbus along with his Italian, Portuguese and Spanish heritage gets people so upset. Why is this such a big deal, they wonder. He did something pretty impressive, didn't he? He successfully sailed across the Atlantic in ships most of us wouldn't sail to Block Island. So, that's a big deal, right? Besides, all that bad stuff happened such a long time ago. Why does it matter now?

The short answer is this: It matters now because we *know* the celebrations of Christopher Columbus leave out the part about how these lands he discovered were not empty, just waiting for new owners to come along. Entire nations of peoples, with their own cultures and traditions, their own languages and their own powerful sense of the holy and sacred were already living here very happily. They even welcomed these strange new people when they first arrived, with no idea of what danger was awaiting them. This is what I want us to reflect on a bit this Sunday – these “First Peoples” or “First Nations” or “Indigenous Peoples.” We call them Native Americans but truly they are the First Peoples, the first ones who lived on this land we call

home. As we pause to consider what those first peoples endured in the name of advancing civilization and accruing wealth for others across an ocean, it is long past time to acknowledge that Christopher Columbus' hero status came at a great cost to millions of people. He was no saint and to many native peoples he represents evil incarnate. That's why First Nations people see his holiday as a literal slap in the face to them. Today I just want us to understand why that is.

So, let's remind ourselves of how all this came to be. How did Christopher Columbus, and other explorers like Ferdinand Magellan, Hernan Cortes, Jacques Cartier and Juan Ponce de Leon come to be in this hemisphere in the first place. Their expeditions were financed by the monarchies of Europe including Portugal, Spain, France and England. They were undertaken in spite of tremendous danger to the explorers and their crews because everyone involved was convinced beyond doubt that ever more riches and treasures existed on the other side of the dangerous unknown seas. Christopher Columbus was one of the most famous of those early explorers and is the one most celebrated because he is the one deemed responsible for making the monarchies of Europe aware of the *existence* of the continents of Central and South America. Columbus made four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean to what was known as the "New World" between 1451 and 1506, all financed by the Spanish monarchs Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II.

What is not as well known is that Columbus also had the backing of the Papacy in Rome which gave him both temporal and divine authority for what he set in motion with his explorations. This was articulated in the papal Doctrine of Discovery, a series of proclamations or "bulls" as they were called in the 15<sup>th</sup> century issued by the Pope and therefore carrying the weight of God within them. In essence these bulls gave divine blessing to the explorations and violent conquering of the native peoples of these newly discovered lands. This meant that the local peoples could be "subjugated [and] their persons

[reduced] to perpetual servitude.”<sup>1</sup> It was deemed acceptable “to take their belongings, including land [in order to] convert them to the use of”<sup>2</sup> whatever monarch financed the expedition. Doing this was okay to do because all these native peoples they “discovered” in the “new world” were not Christian but rather non-believing heathens. Thus, they had no human rights whatsoever. Further, a priority was to be given to converting them to Christianity, although any resulting conversions did not entitle them to get their land back. They belonged now and forever to their white conquerors.<sup>3</sup>

Dear ones, we think about our grade school history lessons and those dates we had to memorize – like in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue – and we wonder why this is such a big deal today. Well, you might be interested to know that the Vatican did not issue a repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery until March 2023. Dear ones, that was last year. Last year! The truth is that the aftermath of Columbus is not ancient history even though it feels that way. It is our living reality, right now. This church, and all the surrounding communities we think of as our homes, all sit on what were the lands of the First Peoples of this place – the Wampanoags, the Narragansetts and the Pequots. This is their ancestral land, and we need to remember their ancestors did not willingly sell it or give it away to the colonists who appeared on their shores one day. The land was theirs and then it wasn’t. These first peoples almost ceased to exist themselves, driven off their own lands, killed in skirmishes with colonists who regarded them as little better than animals, snuffed out by rampaging diseases for which they had no natural immunity brought by early colonists, decimated by hunger as the animals and crops they relied on for food slowly disappeared. So, perhaps it’s a little easier to see why Columbus is no hero to these First People. And

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery\\_doctrine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

maybe it's time for us to rethink just what it is these First Peoples have to teach us.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in the book's preface an invitation to us, the ancestors of the people who almost drove her people – the Potawatomi Nation – out of existence. This invitation is to dare to engage in a new kind of dialogue only becoming possible now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her beautiful language echoes across the centuries, daring us to set aside our own fears and prejudices to join in the ancient practice of braiding sweetgrass as an important way to learn more about each other. She writes,

“Will you hold the end of a bundle [of sweetgrass] as I braid?  
Hands joined by grass, can we bend our heads together and make  
a braid to honor the earth? I could hand you a braid of sweetgrass,  
as thick and shining as the plait that hung down my grandmother's  
back. But it's not mine to give, nor yours to take. *Wiingaashk* belongs  
to herself. So I offer in its place a braid of stories meant to heal our  
relationship with the world.”<sup>4</sup>

This is an extraordinary invitation to us, and it's not an invitation unique to Dr. Kimmerer. First Nations people across this country and around the world are finding their voices after centuries of exploitation. They are speaking out and speaking up about the gifts they bring to the world. And those gifts are substantial indeed. We are just now learning, for example, thanks to the work of Dr. Kimmerer and others, that indigenous practices for growing bountiful harvests are much better for the environment, and for us. The First Nations peoples have known for millennia that the secret to bountiful harvests is to work with Mother Nature, not against her. To love Mother Earth, not dominate and subjugate her. And now, in spite of all the legitimate reasons they have to treat us as we have treated them – with a complete lack of respect, honor and compassion – they want to work alongside us to make the world a better place for all of us.

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, ©2013 Milkweed Editions, p. ix-x.

So much more could be said, should be said about all the amazing possibilities which exist if only enough of us could accept this invitation to learn from our First Peoples neighbors. I actually would love to continue this conversation and have posted a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board for anyone who would like to join me in visiting the Mashantucket Pequot Museum in North Stonington sometime soon. In preparing for this sermon, I realized how much I don't know about the peoples who lived on this land before us, and I need to know more. I need to know more so that I can acknowledge that the challenges I face are the same as theirs and maybe, just maybe, the knowledge that is uniquely theirs can make a difference for all of us. After this past week of unbelievable weather caused by global warming, it's clear we need to be doing something different from what we've done in the past. We need to better understand how to truly love Mother Nature as our friends in the First Nations do. We need to appreciate how it is that we got here so that we can do what we need to do to move forward into the future God always intended for all of us.

This brings me to why I chose this text from James for this morning. I just love what James' question here: "Who is wise and understanding among you?" He continues, "show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." Gentleness born of wisdom. In other words, the wiser we become, the more kind we become. The more we stop to consider the consequences of our actions, the easier it becomes to see what harm we can cause without intending to. We need to pay attention to those moments when bitter envy and selfish ambition keep us from gentle words and actions. We need to realize that envy and selfish ambition only bring disorder and wickedness. In other words, dear ones, what we do, what we say, what we think, how we act – it all matters, every day. How we respond when we learn new information that makes us uncomfortable matters – like maybe Christopher Columbus wasn't this great guy we were taught to think he was this. Like maybe the

First Nations people – the Native Americans we know right in our own community – are still hurting on some level because of all the trauma their people have been enduring since those first ships were sighted off the coastlines of this country we so love. They love it too and they loved it first.

So, where do we go from here? I'd like to suggest we all engage in a renewed quest for wisdom in our minds and in our hearts. Not the wisdom we get from books or even from a really great teacher. No, the wisdom I'm talking about is the wisdom described as the text we read earlier comes to an end. I'd like to share it with you now but I am reading from the Native American Version of the New Testament which our own Dav Cranmer gave to me as a gift one year:

“the wisdom that comes from the One Above Us All is first of all pure, then peace-loving, gentle, full of mercy, and open to another's way of seeing and thinking. People with this kind of wisdom are like trees filled with good fruit. They have open hearts with nothing to hide. This wisdom will bring about a harvest of doing what is right, because they are peace-makers planting seeds of peace.”

A harvest of doing right, from seeds of peace planted by peace-makers. May we embrace our role as peace-makers and may we plant our seeds of peace with joy and hope. Then, with the blessings of the One Above Us All, may our harvest indeed be bountiful beyond measure. Amen.