

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

All Faithful Departed/November 6, 2016
The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

I arrived in the town of Cannon Ball on the Standing Rock Reservation four days ago. I was no stranger to that place. We have been going there with our young people for nearly ten years. We have friends among the Sioux tribe and among the clergy both native and non-native.

Morton County law enforcement has been using military force against unarmed, prayerful protestors who call themselves water protectors. The path of the Dakota Access Pipeline designed to carry millions of gallons of oil was originally to cross the Missouri river above the city of Bismarck. City officials rejected the plan. The builders of the pipeline then rerouted the path southward within a mile of the Standing Rock Reservation. This step was one more in a long line of attacks on the Sioux people. Two camps arose to stop the project. The first was the Sacred Stone Camp. A second camp of water protectors was established on federal land outside the reservation. It is called Oceti Sakowin. The name means the seven council fires. It is the first time in 150 years that all seven Sioux tribes have gathered together in one place. On Wednesday before I arrived, law enforcement shot “non-lethal” bullets at point blank range and maced demonstrators who were attempting to prevent destruction of a gravesite of two women, Alma Pekin and Matilda Gain. The pipeline company had unearthed another sacred site two weeks before and did not inform the North Dakota Public Service Commission for ten days.

This was just some of the lead-up to our arrival on Wednesday evening. The call went out for a clergy gathering on October 22nd. The Standing Rock Sioux tribe asked for clergy to come to their support and calm the tensions. Our friend John Floberg, who has been here to Saint Paul's, hoped for 100

clergy to respond. That night as we gathered in the Cannon Ball gymnasium we numbered 500.

One of the speakers was Jennifer Martel of Sitting Bull College. She began by asking simply “Who are you?” Then she repeated, “Who are you?” As a western non-native person I would likely answer with my name. Who are you? Then I might tell her what I do. That didn’t tell her much. She wanted to know of my family. Who are the people that I come from? What is my history?

Today at this celebration of All Faithful Departed she would want to know of those people who lived and are now with God. Who is it that taught you your faith stories? What values did they pass along that have guided you? They are all God’s beloved, says the Wisdom of Solomon. Those who have died will live. They hear the voice of the beloved, God’s Son, who embodies compassion and life eternally.

Now I am aware that my forbears had faults just like I do. I know of one who fostered the country’s western expansion which intentionally or not happened at the expense of native people. This is who I am, sitting in a gym on the Standing Rock Reservation. I’m a bit conflicted. Then Jennifer Martel says, “Be proud of where you come from.” Native or non-native, they are your people. They have made you who you are.

Another speaker was a Navajo by the name of Lyla June. She looked over the crowd. She said, “It really heals me as an indigenous woman to see you all here. Unbelievable so many generations back, to see us in unity as we were always meant to be. She went on, “I often say to my contemporaries that we each have a job to do. The descendants of so-called colonists have a job to acknowledge the atrocity. And indigenous peoples we have a job to do too and that job is to forgive.” Clearly, the next day would be one of healing and reconciliation.

I think of all this now. Our descendants are with God where unhealed hatred is no more. All the faithful departed love with such compassion, says the Wisdom of Solomon “because (God’s) grace and mercy are upon his holy ones.” Because of this we ourselves in this life can do the work of healing and resolve the things that need to be resolved.

The next day over 500 of us went to the Oceti Sakowin camp. A police helicopter circled overhead. Our first act was to burn copies of the Doctrine of Discovery, a 15th century papal document that legalized the taking of land from indigenous peoples. This had a very healing affect on one observer. “Very powerful,” he said. “We’re witnessing in the history of the United States that the church did recognize the atrocities down there that happened to indigenous people.” The church admitted that it was wrong. “They are in solidarity,” this native observer went on. “It is part of the healing. This is part of the healing for both native and non-native people, as we start to move forward in Indian country in a new, good way...”

After this burning we went as a group to the Backwater Bridge where the police guarded a barricade. We formed a circle that went up a hill and across the road. The same observer commented: “Today is one of the largest healing circles you are going to be witnessing across the country, the healing of both native and non-native relatives here.”

So our celebration of All Faithful Departed is an act of reconciliation and healing. There is a sad postscript to this witness that came to me today. Parents wrote, “Tragically, our beautiful daughter Erin was killed in a car accident early this morning. She was driving through Montana on her way back to Seattle Pacific University after helping support the protesters at Standing Rock. Erin died doing what she loved – helping others. We are thankful that our daughter is dancing in the arms of Jesus right now. We are resting in God’s sovereignty and faithfulness. Erin changed many, many lives while she lived. We are confident God is going to use her death to do even greater work.”

So who are you? Who am I? Who are those dancing in the arms of Jesus that have changed us, taught us values, told us stories? Be proud of them. Be reconciled. We are one in a great, compassionate community of God. Join the largest healing circle there is. And engage in the work of reconciliation across police barricades, in the face of ongoing attack. The faithful departed tell us there is work to do – acknowledge and forgive.

Amen.