

LESSONS IN LIVING

Around the World in 40 Days: Part V What a Christian Can Learn From Native American Religion

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Any scripture, or any words that awaken us to the sacred in life or in living, certainly comes from something bigger than can be held in any one book.

There is a road in the hearts of all of us, hidden and seldom traveled, which leads to an unknown secret place.

The old people came literally to love the soil, and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power.

Their teepees were built upon the earth and their altars were made of earth.

The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing. That is why the old Indian still sits on the earth instead of propping himself up and away from its life giving forces.

For us, to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly. We can see more clearly in the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about us.

This ends our reading of scripture for the morning.

Well I have to admit from the very start that I had second thoughts after I had chosen a Sunday of studying each of these different religions. It seems to me, with the history of how people on this continent treated the Native Americans, that there's a humility that is required when we lift up the teachings. We all know people who say that they love this [Native American] culture and they lift up symbols of the culture and superimpose these symbols onto our life style, using them as jewelry or maybe they put like a Native American symbol on their Hummer, or something like that. (laughter). It is hard to realize this way of life for Native Americans - that their religion led them into their own roots and into nature, and to the life in their own bodies. So when we take up these ideas and symbols, and I think we should, I think we should do it with great humility, and not

leave out of the story the American **Holocaust** that took place. We all have friends that say we should never bring this up - that we have moved beyond the mistakes we made early, things like slavery, things like how we stole the land. "Uh let's move beyond that." And I suspect those friends are the same people who say "Remember 9/11!" "Remember Pearl Harbor." "Remember the Alamo." In other words, remember everything that's been done to us, but let's not remember anything that we've done to anyone else. "After all, we found the crummiest, most inhospitable tract of land we could find on the North America continent and we gave it to those people -let's just move on—at this point". Well hopefully we will feel haunted to re-explore some of that as we lift up the words of wisdom. And this isn't just true of people from this continent; the indigenous peoples around the world have something to teach us. People who stay close to the earth have something to teach us that we've lost, and that we will need to find if we're to survive as a species. So I want to read a couple of things that may be a little bit chastening, but I think that's sort of the entrée' to this wisdom. Here's one. This is from Chief Joseph:

**We do not want your schools... they will teach us to have churches.
We do not want churches...they will teach us to quarrel about God.
We do not want to learn that. We may quarrel with (human beings)
sometimes about things on this earth, but we never quarrel about God.
We do not want to learn that.**

Here's another one:

Before our white brothers and sisters arrived to make us civilized human beings, we didn't have any kind of prison. Because of this we had no delinquents. Without a prison, there could be no delinquents. We had no locks or keys; therefore among us there were no thieves. When someone was so poor that they couldn't afford a horse, a tent or blanket, they would in that case receive it all as a gift. We were too uncivilized to see the great importance of private property. We didn't know any kind of money and consequently the value of a human being wasn't determined by one's wealth. We had no written laws laid down, no lawyers, no politicians, therefore we were not able to swindle one another. We were in really bad shape before the white people arrived. And I don't know how to explain how we were able to manage without those fundamental things that so that tell us are so necessary for civilized society.

--John (Fire) Lame Deer

May be there's a little sarcasm there. (laughter). Well, now we're ready to turn our attention, to explore deeply - more a changing of one's life direction, than simply picking up little trinkets here and there. The first and easiest thing, and I think that everybody would agree, is that we learn a lot about nature and our relationship with nature from indigenous people. That's kind of the easy one.

Perhaps you've seen that a lot of the older Native Americans won't have anything covering their rear end. It's because when they sit on the earth they want to feel it, with their skin. They feel a power that comes from earth. One of the things that I've discovered over the years is if you ask anybody where they felt closest to God – anybody - they would say what? (Congregation responds "Nature.") Now, isn't it interesting that we don't put more weight on that when time and time again, when things were off balance, it's where you went to find balance? How many times...how many times it was running water, it was the soil, it was trees, being surrounded by the animals and there was a moment when you forgot who you were in society and maybe didn't want to leave the forest to come back again? Or if somebody asked your name, you wouldn't remember it and probably not even your social security number. If you can, think how that felt and realize that religion should be taking you *there*. A religion that takes you *away from there* to an invisible place may not be the way you want to go.

One of the disturbing things I did in studying for this Sunday was to look up in Christian passages the word, "nature". When you type into a data base, a Christina data base, it's not quite as friendly. What comes up is *fallen* nature, *sinful* nature. Do you think that might have some disorienting effect to think that nature is bad, that *your* nature is bad? Do you think that could disorient people a little bit from the earth and from each other? I think it probably does and has. And that's the reason why I think we trust technology rather than trusting nature. We seem to trust technology, and we don't realize that we are forming a death spiral. If we do not get our population lower, everyone could look down and see the end of that road. If we do not curb our population, we will not survive as a species. And yet, how much energy is being directed toward curbing our population as opposed to chasing down some old guy in a cave in who knows where—Afghanistan maybe? But we can begin today to change - not everything - I am not saying leave your cars here in the parking lot; we'd have to tow them all. But to begin to re-orient life not just as an individual, but as a community, as a culture.

The way that we think of time is in a straight line. You think of your life in terms of where you are going, and if you don't get there then you are sad about it. Indigenous culture time is a circle. The houses are circular very often, the dances are circular; the stories are circles. Because what they are trying to do is not get somewhere in life, but to actually live it, which is really more like a dance. It's not getting somewhere. Bad news: you die, that's the bad news. You're going to die and there is nothing at all that will keep that from happening. In Indigenous cultures, dying is lifted up. Children are taught their death song very early on. As a way of expressing your life, that life is a gift that doesn't last forever, so you enjoy it—you live it and you give it to other people. You don't hold it back because you're afraid of losing it--if that makes any sense. And heaven is never a place somewhere else; it's always that spark within nature and life. It's like the glimmer of a diamond or the sparkle of a pearl. It's imbedded in the core of your life in the most simple things. That's why the sacraments - originally, water, fire, earth, bread, wine – in those simple things of life the sacraments called us to experience the sacred. So the one thing I think everybody realizes about Indigenous cultures is that you learn what it means to live in nature.

But let's go beyond that, it also teaches us what it means to live in community - real community where we help each other. If somebody runs into trouble there is a community around them. Now you have to simplify your life to do that.

Some years ago, a message was sent out to the oil companies and they were asked to cut some slack for the poor. Only one oil company gave people a break. The "evil" Hugo Chavez from Venezuela decided that people were more important than the price of oil, and our Administration wanted to turn it down because they saw it as a political ploy- just like when Cuba sends doctors into places where we're letting people die of preventable diseases, we see that as some kind of plot. Indigenous people and those who remember their Indigenous roots have a sense of what it means to be human beings in community as well.

In the law of the Iroquois, the great laws, for any decision that is made, you must think of what it means seven generations from now. Do you think they are doing that in Washington at this moment? No, it's a very short frame of time that will get me elected next time. So you don't pull out a part of this problem we need to change—it's a spiritual problem solved by a kind of repentance and reorientation to something that is living and sustainable. There are some great quotes about this. One is about levels of peace and the second is about a hoop ceremony.

It says the first peace (it's talking about levels of peace) which is most important is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers and they realize that at the center of the universe dwells the great spirit, and that this center is really everywhere, is within each of us. This is the real peace and the others are but reflections of this.

That's one very helpful reading. Here's another one.

They have a hoop ceremony when one sits in the hoop of the people one must be responsible because all creation is related and the hurt of one is the hurt of all. (*Does that sound familiar?*) And the honor of one is the honor of all. And whatever we do affects everything else in the universe.

So when we look at indigenous cultures, we shouldn't romanticize them. They have war, too; they have greed, too, but they remember something more basic about nature, about community and finding what it means to be human beings. Did anybody here see "Dances with Wolves"? It wasn't a great movie, but that idea of the naming where you're named by your spirit and not because you came along as the third Joe in a row. That when you see these names, you realize that they were individuals in communities that cared about each other and uniqueness was celebrated in each of the people.

The death song is, I think one of the most powerful aspects, and I want to begin to close with that. This is a benediction that is given.

So live your life that the fear of death can never enter your heart. Trouble no one about their religion. When you arise in the morning, give thanks for the food and for the joy of living. If you've seen no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies only in yourself. Abuse no one and no thing. For abuse turns the wise ones into fools and robs the spirit of its vision. When it comes your time to die, do not be like those who are filled with the fear of death. So that when their time comes they weep and pray for little more time to live their lives over again and in a different way. Sing your death song and die like a hero going home.

Does that sound like something maybe we've forgotten? Feels good. I think we should take up these teachings with humility; I do think we need to take them up; we need to learn them; we need to live them, and I hope they will give us hope. Because if we change direction, we will change the future. But if we don't, we won't change the future.

So however bleak things look, that is not written in stone. It will depend on what we do and which part of our character we feed. I want to close with a prophecy from the Cree Nation that may have already come true. I think this prophecy is for us.

When all the animals have been hunted, and all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover you cannot eat money.

The path we're on is a dead end, but remember the line we began with, the scripture we began with:

“Written in you is a memory of the earth and is a basic goodness.” It can be precisely what we need to be deliberate.

There is a road in the hearts of us all hidden and seldom traveled which leads to an unknown and secret place.

Transcribed and revised by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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