**November 13, 2022**

**Thanksgiving**

**Rev. Kelley L. Becker**

**Prayer of a Native American #698 CH**

This prayer is in our Chalice Hymnal. It is the Prayer of a Native American, the author is unknown.

Please pray with me:

O Great Spirit, whose voice we hear in the winds,

and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear us.

We are small and weak.

We need your strength and wisdom.

Let us walk in beauty

and make our eyes ever behold

the red and purple sunset.

Make our hands respect the things you have made.

Make our ears sharp to hear your voice.

Make us wise so that we may understand

the things you have taught your people.

Let us learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.

We seek strength,

not to be greater than another,

but to fight our greatest enemy---ourselves.

Make us always ready to come to you

with clean hands and straight eyes.

So when life fades, as the fading sunset,

our spirits may come to you without shame. Amen.

**Sermon**

What did you learn about Thanksgiving when you were a child in school?

What most of us learned was a myth. We learned that friendly Native people, unidentified by tribe, welcomed, with wide open arms, the Pilgrims to this land. We learned the Native people taught the pilgrims what they needed to know about living on this land, including how to grow things. Eventually, in celebration of these new relationships and way of being, they all sat down to dinner together and then, it seems, the Native people sort of just happily moved out of the way so the white people could have their home on which they could build a great nation dedicated to liberty, opportunity, and of course Christianity. That’s the story—it’s about Native people knowing their place and acquiescing to colonialism.

We know better now. We know there was bloodshed, disease, and complicated tribal politics that impacted the relationships of Native people with one another and with the Pilgrims. Until recently, most Americans have acted like the history of this land and its people began with the arrival of the Europeans, though people have been living on this land, and by “this land” I mean North America, for at least 12,000 years. And then, the Europeans came and took what didn’t belong to them and went about trying to assimilate and subjugate the people who were already here.

There is a lot more to the story than any of us were taught as children and a lot more than we can possibly cover today. What I would like for us to reflect on, as we prepare for the Thanksgiving holiday which is all about the abundance the land has provided, is the lasting impact of the violence inflicted on Native people by taking away the land their people had lived on for thousands of years. To the Europeans who colonized this land, it was a commodity, to the Native people it was and is more.

Unlike a lot of us who buy and sell land and houses throughout our lives, land is more than just property, more than the ground under the feet of Native people. It is not a commodity to be bought and sold, not that there isn’t the acknowledgement that with land comes wealth and power. But land is also part of preserving Native tribal culture. Tribes look to their land and natural resources to provide and support essential elements of life and culture—from subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering, to sources of economic development and tribal sacred places.

The natural world permeates all aspects of their lives—religion, daily rituals, mythology, writings, food, medicine, art, literally everything. Life is lived hand in hand with the land and environment. Spirituality rests on the belief that all objects and elements of the earth—both living and nonliving—have an individual spirit that is part of the greater soul of the universe. This would include humans, plants, and animals, as well as elements and geographic features like a river, mountain, or thunderstorm. Native tribal culture is fiercely devoted to respecting and honoring the spirit of the land and everything it provides.

If we were to look to scripture to understand how our ancestors thought about land, we would find that we have strayed a bit. We seem to have forgotten what they knew. The land does not belong to us. Psalm 24 declares,

The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,  
    the world, and those who live in it,  
2for he has founded it on the seas  
    and established it on the rivers.

In the Hebrew Bible land is considered a blessing, a blessing that can only be given by God. In Psalm 37, there is a series of reflections on how to keep land and how to lose it. Here are a few of the verses:

For the wicked shall be cut off,  
    but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

**10**Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;  
    though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.  
**11**But the meek shall inherit the land  
    and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

21The wicked borrow and do not pay back,  
    but the righteous are generous and keep giving;  
**22**surely those blessed by the Lord shall inherit the land,  
    but those cursed by the Lord shall be cut off.

29The righteous shall inherit the land  
    and live in it forever.

34Wait for the Lord and keep to the Lord’s way,  
    and he will exalt you to inherit the land…

Each statement makes the exact same point. Land possession is at the pleasure of God. According to theologian and author Dr. Walter Brueggemann, the wisdom teaching in the Hebrew Bible, “generally reflects on the moral conditions whereby blessing is to be received and maintained, and land is the fundamental blessing.” He continues, “This kind of reflection is linked to creation, for land is the specific experience of God’s well-ordered creation…”

The ancient Israelite’s connection to the land paralleled their connection with the Divine in much the same way the Native people understood their connection to the land and their own spirituality. When their land was taken from Native people, a lot more then land was taken…their identity, their sacred places, their connection to the spirits that dwelled there. Where do you go to connect with the Holy? Imagine it being taken from you…over and over again.

The connection the Native people have with the land is good for the people and good for the land. When I think about Genesis and the Holy appointing the first human beings as caretakers of the Earth and representatives of God here on Earth, I can’t help but feel ashamed at the way human beings have cared for the Earth. We have not tended it. We have abused it. We have robbed it of natural resources with no way to pay it back. And yet, the Earth continues to support life. It continues to supply our food and water. It continues to give us glimpses of the Holy every single day.

For all of this, we must be grateful. And we must commit to doing better. To be clear, two things can be true at the same time. We can be grateful for all we have, and we can be aware that the road that brought us here is littered with violence, injustice, greed, and selfishness. We know the story we were taught about Thanksgiving was made up to make white people the heroes, but that does not mean that Thanksgiving cannot and does not have value. There is nothing stopping us from using the day to express our gratitude for the land that produces our food, our bread, our wine, even our turkeys, and for the people we share our tables and lives with. But also, now that we know better, we must do better.

I invite you to be the person at your Thanksgiving table or your Zoom call with family, to tell the children the age-appropriate truth and to remind adults of the same. I invite you to feel uncomfortable as you learn more about our shared history, but to know that knowing that truth and feeling uncomfortable does not make the actions of the Pilgrims or any of our ancestors your responsibility. But our responsibility is to be truth tellers. Learn the truth. Tell the truth. I will end this morning with a Thanksgiving affirmation. At the end, there is a response for all of us.

This land belongs to no one  
but God. The Earth was here  
before us and will endure  
after we are gone.  
Let us walk gently  
upon this precious earth,  
taking only what we need,  
leaving little waste,  
nurturing the soil,  
revitalizing the land  
to sustain future generations.

We acknowledge this land we worship on today  
is the ancestral land of the Cherokee, Kickapoo, Quapaw, and Sioux tribes.

We acknowledge their historical roots  
in this place and the many generations  
who were stewards of this land.

We hear the echoes of their prayers  
to the Great Mother Earth  
and seek to learn from their wisdom.

We acknowledge the history of pain,  
disease, and bloodshed  
the Native people endured  
when they were colonized.

Though we can’t reverse the course of history,  
let us not ignore it.  
Let us look history in the eye  
and accept its painful truth.  
Let us honor the memory of the ones who died on this land,  
and the ones who lost their sovereignty.

Let us honor and respect the Native people who,   
keep their sacred traditions and culture alive  
and seek to reclaim, reassert, and revive their sovereignty.

Let us seek to learn about cultures different from our own

so that we can grow closer to our neighbors and the Holy.

We are grateful for the abundance we share.  
We acknowledge and thank the farmers and workers,

many of whom are immigrants, who plant  
and harvest our food and the workers

who manufacture what we drive, wear, and use.

We commit to sustaining this earth  
so it will continue to sustain us,  
our children and grandchildren.  
We commit to give more and take less in all ways.

**\*Response Slide**

Recite together:  
Thank you, God, for the land that sustains us, for this community of family and friends, and these sacred moments we share together. Amen