

NATIVE SPIRITUALITY AUGUST 22 2010
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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There are hundreds of Indian tribes all over the nation and all of them have different legends or traditions about how God or the Great Spirit, as God is sometimes called, is the creator of all the people of the earth.

One of the first affirmations of the Bible in Genesis 1 is that God is the creator of all the people of the earth of all nations, races and traditions. Here is how our faith describes the creation of man and woman in Genesis 1: 26-27:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
GOD CREATED HUMANKIND IN HIS IMAGE, IN THE IMAGE OF GOD HE CREATED THEM; MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM.

One of the traditions of the Dakota tribes is the vision quest where young men and women go into the wilderness to fast and pray for the spirit of God to come and give them a vision for their lives. The vision quest has often been compared to Jesus' time in the wilderness when he went out alone to fast and to pray for God's guidance in his li

Read Mark 1:9-15: *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'* And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

AND THE SPIRIT DROVE HIM OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS FOR FORTY DAYS WHERE HE WAS TEMPTED BY SATAN AND WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS AND THE ANGELS WAITED ON HIM.

Prayer

Father Richard Pates was a Roman Catholic Priest from Wisconsin who came out to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in the 1950's as a Catholic missionary to the Indians.

After serving a Catholic parish on the Reservation for 25 years, Father Pates came to Rapid City as pastor of a Native American Catholic Church and that is where I met him and we became good friends.

Father Pates once told me that he came to the reservation to convert the Indians to Christ and he discovered that they converted him to Christ.

He explained to me that the native tradition of seeing all people as created by the hand of the one God helped him to break out of the narrowness of his own tradition and see all people as Children of God as Christ did.

Father Pates invited me to the dedication of a new Native American Roman Catholic church building in Rapid City and I was amazed at the service.

The Roman Catholic bishop was present to preach and dedicate the altar and church to the glory of God and the service of the Native American people.

But Father Pates had also invited a Native American Holy Man, Frank Fools Crow, to help dedicate the altar to the Glory of God as well.

At one point in the service the Catholic Bishop with full catholic vestments and the Bishops hat walked around the altar and sprinkled holy water on it to dedicate it to the glory of God.

Then the Lakota Holy man, Frank Fools Crow, dressed in deer skins and with eagle feathers in his hair walked around the altar, chanted a song in Lakota, and tied a different colored piece of cloth to each corner of the altar.

On one corner he tied a white cloth; on another corner he tied a black cloth, then a yellow cloth and finally a red cloth.

I thought this was an amazing experience where the church was dedicated by a Western tradition holy man and by a Native American holy man.

Afterwards, I asked Father Pates the meaning of the different colored cloths tied to the altar. He explained that in the Lakota tradition each color of cloth represents the different colored people created by God.

The white cloth represents the white people God created; the black cloth represents the black people God created, the yellow cloth represents the Asian people God created, and the red cloth represents the red and brown people God created. He explained to me that one of the fundamental beliefs of the Native people is that there is one God or Great Spirit who created all of the human beings, animals, fish, birds and plants that are on the earth.

His story reminded me of the children's song we sometimes sing:

JESUS LOVES THE LITTLE CHILDREN. ALL THE CHILDREN OF THE WORLD RED AND YELLOW, BLACK AND WHITE THEY ARE PRECIOUS IN HIS SIGHT, JESUS LOVES THE LITTLE CHILDREN OF THE WORLD.

As followers of Jesus, we also believe that God created and loves all races of people on the earth.

Look at the circle on the screen behind me. It is the symbol of the Native American Comprehensive Plan of our denomination and it has the four colors representing all the people of the world: red, yellow, black and white.

One of the first revelations in our Bible is the story of creation in Genesis one which tells us that there is one God who created the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth and everything that lives on it. The climax, the high point of the creation story is that God created human beings.

Genesis 1 says: GOD CREATED HUMANKIND IN HIS OWN IMAGE, IN THE IMAGE OF GOD HE CREATED THEM, MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM.

We always need to be reminded that God is the creator and father of all humanity; every person, every man, woman and child who lives and breathes on the face of the earth has been created in the image of one God and has a spark of God's spirit within them.

Think about what this means. The people who are like us and the people who are not like us are all created by the one God and have a spark of God within them.

The people we like and the people we don't like are created by God and have a spark of God's spirit within them.

The people of all races, nations, and places are all created and loved by the same God.

Someone put it this way: God must love diversity because God made so much of it.

Think about it. God made so much diversity in this world. God made different colored flowers, fish, birds, and different colored people. God created and loves this amazing and beautiful variety around us and I think God wants us to love it as much as God does.

Another person said: All of us may not believe in God but God believes in all of us because God created, loves and sustains everyone.

It is a great thought that God believes in us whether we believe in God and seek to follow God in our lives or not.

One of the gifts of my experience with Native Americans is to remember that God is the creator of each of us and to always try to see the spark of God in every human being I encounter and discover why God has sent this person into my life and what I am called to learn.

This week I hope that whoever you meet on the street, at work or at school, you might look at them and think, "Here too is a precious child of God."

And when you look in the mirror in the morning; look at the face of the person looking back at you and say: "HERE TOO IS A PRECIOUS CHILD OF GOD."

I think that we would begin to break down some of the divisions among us and live together in greater harmony and peace if we began by seeing every person as a precious child because God created all humankind in his own image.

I think I became a better follower of Jesus when I lived around Native Americans who always reminded me that God created and loves all of us.

A second way that I became a better follower of Jesus was when I heard about the Native American vision quest.

In the Lakota or Dakota traditions of the Dakotas there is a tradition called the vision quest. In the old days, a young man or woman when they were teenagers would go on a time of fasting and prayer alone in the Black Hills waiting for God to give them their vision for life.

The person on a vision quest would climb alone to a mountain top where they would fast usually for four days with only water to drink and they would sit quietly trying to slow down the racing of their minds and become completely peaceful and still and listen to the still small voice of God speaking to them.

Imagine a young person staying alone in one place fasting for four days simply listening to the wind and the singing of birds around them. Sometime during those four days, they would usually experience a vision picture of themselves sometime in the future and what kind of person they would grow to be.

When I first heard about the vision quest, I was reminded of the verse in Psalms 46:10 which says: BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD, and how the Lakota people practiced being still and listening to the still small voice of God.

I once knew a Native American man who was very intelligent and had earned an advanced degree at a University. He told me that after he finished his education he was trying to decide what he should do with his life. He had been offered two different positions. He was offered a good job teaching at a major University and he was also offered a job as an alcoholism counselor on a reservation helping hundreds of native people become free from the addiction to alcohol.

The first job would be a better paying job and he would live in a nice home in a metropolitan area. The second job as an alcoholism counselor would have a much smaller salary, he would live in a very modest place on a Reservation and he would have to work much longer hours in difficult situations.

He told me had been torn about which job to take. Part of him wanted to take the position in a department of Native American studies at a University and part of him wanted to serve his people on the reservation.

To make his decision he went on a vision quest in the Black Hills. He climbed up a mountain, sat under a tree where he fasted and waited for four days. He said after two days he was discouraged because nothing had happened and he was tired and hungry. However, during the last day of his vision quest an eagle began circling overhead and he suddenly began to imagine the faces and smiles of people who were freed from alcohol and were living abundant, productive lives. Then he said a deep peace came over him and he knew what he was to do.

To the surprise of many people he turned down the coveted university position and has worked for many years watching his vision come true. Today there are many native people and their families who are smiling because they are no longer addicted to alcohol and are living joyful, fruitful lives.

His experience reminded me of the experience of Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry.

When Jesus was 33 years old he left his hometown of Nazareth and went to the Jordan River where he was baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. Jesus was probably put under the water by John and when he came up out of the water, the heavens opened and the spirit of God descended on him like a gentle dove. Jesus heard the voice of God saying to him: YOU ARE MY SON, MY BELOVED.

Then we are told that the spirit which had just descended on him led him into the wilderness across the Jordan River in what is now the nation of Jordan. If you have ever travelled there you are aware that it is a barren and deserted place filled with barren hills, rocks, sand and very little vegetation of any kind.

Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, fasting, praying and resisting the temptations to misuse his God given abilities. Mark is the only Gospel which tells us that the wild animals perhaps like deer, lions, wolves, rabbits, and maybe even eagles came to be with him and comfort him in his vision quest. Mark also tells us that angels watched over him in the wilderness.

Jesus came out of that experience with a vision of what God was calling him to do. He immediately went back to his home area of Galilee and told people the Good News that the Kingdom of God was here now; that God was present in this very moment and they should turn from their egotistical ways and surrender themselves into the hands of God. That is what it means to repent and trust this Good News of God.

Jesus' time in the wilderness was very much like the vision quest of the Dakota people.

One of the problems of our lives today is that we live without a vision quest. Our lives revolve around what we want to do and achieve and acquire and accomplish. Rarely do we slow down, fast, and focus our attention on what kind of person God is calling us to be.

This is why worship is so important to our spiritual lives. At least for one hour each week, we come to a place where we can exhale, relax, pray, sing and listen for the still small voice of God which may come to us through the music or the message.

It would be even better if we would go on a spiritual retreat for an extended time to allow all the worries and concerns of our daily lives to be surrendered to God and to make space in our lives for the living presence of God. Whenever we have an important decision to make it would be good for us to go on a vision quest and allow God to give us his vision for our lives.

I once went on a four day spiritual retreat by myself in the Black Hills. I fasted from food and only drank grape juice for four days. I stayed in a small trailer in an isolated part of the Hills. I read scripture and journaled about what each verse might mean in my life. I prayed for people I knew who were facing challenges in their lives and I went for long walks in the mountains.

For me to go four days without seeing or talking to anyone was a challenge at first. By nature I am an extrovert and like to be around people but in this time of solitude and quietness I felt the rich living presence of God.

One of the experiences which has stayed with me is this. One day I was walking in the woods when suddenly a deer stood up in the grass just a few feet away from me. The deer was startled and I was startled so we both just froze. I realized that it was a doe and her fawn was at her feet and she was concerned that I might hurt her baby.

I decided that I would try to make peace with her and assure her that I would not hurt her fawn. So I just stood there looking gently at her and trying to be peaceful in my heart and communicating peace to her. We stood there looking at each other for about 15 minutes and then she nodded her head as if to say follow me and she started walking away from her fawn and I followed her as she led me away and then she circled back to her fawn. She took me away so I wouldn't endanger her fawn.

That experience left me with a deep feeling of peace. It made me realize that whenever I come upon a person or a situation of tension, that I should go into that peaceful place in my heart and bring peace to those who may be anxious.

I realize how often I don't do that and contribute to the anxiety of the situation, but I still remember the vision of the peace God wants me to bring to every situation in life.

I would like to invite you to have some vision quest times in your life where you can slow down and listen to the still small voice of God and bring peace to every situation you encounter.

I would like to call your attention to this painting by a Lakota painter named EDDIE TWO BULLS. When I told our worship planning team his name they asked me to repeat it because they couldn't believe someone would be named TWO BULLS. I explained that Lakota names were often started from something that happened when that person was born years ago.

If you think Two Bulls is an unusual name think about the family with the name AFRAID OF HIS OWN HORSES. I knew many people whose last name was "Afraid of his Own Horses", because in the distant past, a boy was born on a day when something happened and his father became afraid of his own horses.

This is part of the cultural understanding we need to develop with other people.

Eddie Two Bulls is a famous artist now around the nation. When we were at the Crazy Horse Monument two weeks ago, we saw several huge and elaborate paintings of Native Americans on horses with beautiful scenery.

However, I knew him before he became famous and stopped by his house one day on the reservation and he was painting this picture. I watched him while we talked about a program of providing hope and help for people of the reservation.

When he finished I asked him if I could buy this painting and he gave it to me for a very low price and signed it in 1974.

It hangs over my desk and it is a constant reminder to surrender to God. Whenever I face a problem which I can't figure out, I do what he does: I stand up and open my arms and lift my face to God and surrender my concern into the hands of God.

It is an act of surrender much like what Jesus did on the cross; he surrendered himself and his life into the hands of God and God brought the resurrection.

Perhaps one of the reasons that we don't experience the resurrection and new life in the midst of the challenges of our lives is that we don't surrender them to God. We hang on to our problems tightly and perhaps it is not until we can open our arms and surrender them to God that God can bring a resurrection and new life to us.

I seek to learn to surrender from the painting of my friend Eddie Two Bulls and from my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today as we think about the Native Spirituality, remember the circle with the red and yellow, black and white quadrants and how God is the source of all colors of people; remember the vision quest and remember to surrender ourselves and our lives in to the loving hands of God.