The Mirror

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October 7, 2018

(For Works Cited, Go to End of Document)

In Exodus 19:5, God tells Moses to tell the Israelites: “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession of out of all the peoples.” In Exodus 20, God lays out the ten commandments for the Israelites to follow: Have no other gods before me, no idol worship, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, hold the Sabbath as holy, honor your parents, and don’t murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet your neighbor’s belongings.

Seems pretty simple in theory, of course we know in practice it’s not. As the youth said in Sunday School this morning, “We always try our best,” but somehow we always manage to mess it up.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed somewhere in the Caribbean and, thinking that he was in the East Indies, called the people “Indians.” While we know for certain that another European, Leif Erikson, had come to North America long before Columbus, we celebrate Columbus Day because he’s the one who truly opened the Americas for exploration and conquest by the Europeans.

In 1630, John Winthrop, a Puritan lawyer, and future governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, wrote a sermon called “A Model of Christian Charity.” In it, he cautioned the Pilgrims settling in the New World, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city on a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

The Puritans were the first American Historians - the Providential Historians. They saw God’s providence in all things, and believed that all goodness and hardship was God’s will. Their values and beliefs are the foundation of our current American culture.

Winthrop’s sermon draws connections between the Israelites of the Old Testament, wandering the wilderness, and the Puritans taking the harrowing overseas journey to begin a new life the New World. He closes his sermon by quoting and adapting Moses’ farewell, “Beloved there is now set before us life and good, Death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his Ordinance and his laws...But if our hearts shall turn away...it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.”

If Winthrop’s words sound remarkably similar to our scripture today, there’s a reason for that. They share the same theme - you will be my beloved if you listen to my voice and follow my commandments.

As a nation, we struggle a lot with our national memory. It is precious to us, and yet causes us pain. We are taught in school that everything we did is good, but we also have a strong sense of past wrongs. We are taught that history is a book that we can open and peruse at our leisure, and then close and put away if it makes us uncomfortable.

So, I invite you this morning, in light of tomorrow’s being Columbus Day, to open our history book again, and then layer it on top of our Scripture and our Gospel. The history I’m going to relate now covers an enormous time period and is in no way comprehensive. For one thing, it really only touches on the history of some American Indians in the lower 48 states, and not on the experiences of Alaskan Natives or Native Hawaiians, though there are some shared experiences there. So with that in mind, let’s begin.

Long ago, some thousands and thousands of years ago, people arrived in North America. Perhaps they followed animals across the Bering Strait, perhaps they followed the Strait’s exposed coastline by boat. Some American Indian tribes reject the idea of a past emigration and believe that they have always been here.

Between 800 and 1000 of this era, and lasting until the 1500s, the Mississippian culture developed into the most sophisticated in America north of Mexico. At the time of the European invasion in the early sixteenth century, there were at least four hundred different languages spoken in North America.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean. Of course there was no official census of the entire continent at that time, but scholars estimate anywhere between 5 to 8 million people lived in North America.

In 1620, the first Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. In 1623, My Great-Grandfather times nine landed at Plymouth on a ship called the Anne.

In 1637, the Pequot people of Mystic were massacred in retaliation for Pequot attacks and raids on settlements. English settlers and their Indian allies set fire to their fortress and then shot down the Pequots as they tried to flee.

In 1783, the Treaty of Paris formally ended the American Revolution, and recognized the sovereignty of the United States, and gave it a paper claim to a country inhabited by Native nations, without recognizing any of those Nations’ rights.

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which allowed him to negotiate with southern American Indian tribes for their removal to the West. Over the next two decades, tens of thousands, perhaps over 100,000, American Indians were forced from their homes, and tens of thousands died during removal.

In 1837, the steamboat S.S. St. Peter traveled up the Missouri River, carrying people and supplies infected with smallpox. The resulting epidemic killed, among others, an estimated two-thirds of the Blackfoot population, half of the Assiniboines and Arikaras, a third of the Crows, a quarter of the Pawnees, and 90% of the Mandans. There is a great deal of scholarship asking whether or not the spread of smallpox among indigenous groups at this, or other times, was intentional.

In 1851, Nationalist Historian Francis Parkman wrote that Indians were “destined to melt and vanish before the advancing waves of Anglo-American power, which now rolled westward unchecked and unopposed.”

In 1864, a group of soldiers led by U.S. Army Colonel John Chivington attacked and destroyed a village of Cheyenne and Arapaho people at Big Sandy Creek in southeastern Colorado. Men, women, and children were killed and mutilated in horrifying ways, and their scalps and other body parts, were used to decorate the soldiers’ weapons and clothing, and displayed in Denver at saloons and in the Apollo Theater.

In 1860, the Indian Boarding School System was begun by reformers who wanted to assimilate Indian tribes into mainstream American life. But by the 1880s, the US Government was waging an attack of full cultural genocide on American Indian children in off-reservation boarding schools - by separating them from their parents and communities, by cutting their hair, giving them new “white” names, and banning traditional American Indian foods, dress, and language. At the schools, children were subject to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as malnutrition and rampant disease. In order to meet quotas for school attendance, some Indian agents on reservations would withhold rations from families until they surrendered their children, or forcibly seize children from their parents.

In 1890, Census records estimate an American Indian population of about 250,000.

If history is a book, this is one I think we’d prefer not to read.

The events I have touched on here just barely brush the surface of this story. There is so much more, much that is horrifying, enraging, haunting, and heartbreaking.

But it is, after all, history. None of us were there. None of us did those things, or suffered those things.

But History is not a book. History is not something we can put away when it makes us uncomfortable.

History is a mirror, and we look at it every day of our lives, because history impacts all of us, and we are all here.

There is a thing in the world called a true mirror. It can be either two mirrors set at a ninety-degree angle to each other, or one solid piece that is shaped like wings. Unlike a flat mirror, which shows you a reverse image when you look into it, when you look at the center of a true mirror, it shows you as you appear to the rest of the world. You see yourself as you really are.

So on one side of the mirror, we might see Christopher Columbus, Puritans, and other Europeans looking West, to the New World. On the other side, American Indians looking East, from the land they have inhabited from time immemorial, watching as Europeans flood into their communities.

On one side, Eurocentric history that either ignores American Indians, or sees them as passive historical objects, who sit and have things done to them. On the other, inclusive history that tells a compelling story about about the actions and activism of Native Peoples who have been adapting in order to survive and thrive in spite of what they have faced. I have said little about the resilience, innovation, courage, and determination shown by American Indians throughout this onslaught and in the past 130 years.

The history we are taught in school surrounding these topics is incredibly over-simplified, and not just for the sake of age-appropriateness. It is harmful to leave no room for nuance, and harmful to treat history students of any age as too fragile to know the truth.

Self-examination is hard. We still believe in our American ideals - liberty, freedom, and justice for all. We have never doubted that the good outweighed the bad, and that even though we may have come from a past of pain and conflict, we believe we have always managed to move forward towards goodness and righteousness, and peace. So to look at the past and admit that there has been a degradation of our national values, to admit that those degradations are impacting the lives of people currently living, inspires guilt and shame.

I think a quote from Willard Gaylin, a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia, is appropriate here. He writes that guilt, “signals us when we have transgressed from codes of behavior that we personally want to sustain. Feeling guilty informs us that we have failed our own ideals.”

But again, none of us were there. This is history.

Here is the problem with that argument. We want to claim connections to John Winthrop, or maybe Christopher Columbus. I want to claim a connection to Edward Bangs, my Great Grandfather. But I don’t get to claim and discard historical connections at my own choosing. I have to accept that Edward Bangs arrived, claimed land, and built a home and a life in a place that he called the New World but *there were already people here.* I don’t get to claim a connection to a Pilgrim and all of the historical and cultural legitimacy that gives me and also get to discard the Mystic Massacre.

If we use the “I wasn’t there” argument to justify ignoring history, then that argument applies to our celebration of it. So no more Thanksgiving or Fourth of July any more, because none of us were there.

We don’t get to choose to only look at one side of the mirror, the side that celebrates but does not examine, that uplifts one voice and deliberately silences another.

We get stuck here because our Scripture seems to offer us only one half of the story. Here is what you need to do, to be my beloved people. Fairly straightforward, but we don’t always adhere to the rules, as individuals, as communities, or as nations. We break our rules, and then scramble for a way to justify it so that we can tell ourselves it’s okay.

The problem is that in our Scripture there is no contingency plan for rule breaking.

By the grace of God, we have two sides the the mirror, commandment and gospel, and between the two we can find a true reflection of who we are and our purpose.

On one side of the mirror, the ten commandments. On the other side, the greatest commandment - “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

On one side of the mirror, all the violent choices we’ve ever made. On the other side, fully aware of our love of violence, a savior who submits to it and says, “Here is my body, broken for you.”

On one side of the mirror, broken covenants. On the other side, fully aware of all the times we have broken faith, a savior who knows the inevitable and still says, “This is the new covenant, in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.”

Columbus Day is tomorrow, and it is worth noting that Columbus Day was created to celebrate Italian-Americans and all that they have contributed to this country. Like most things, Columbus Day and everything it represents in our country is shaded with nuance.

This might be really hard to believe at this point but I’m not trying to depress everyone here. The point of this is not to dishearten, but to encourage. God has covenanted with us through our Savior and to keep that covenant - to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly - we must be able to honestly and openly examine who we are and where we have come from.

God has called us, by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our Lord, to do some hard work. To face our history squarely and think and examine and act on what we see. And if your ancestors were on the receiving end of violence, then this story may be intimately familiar to you already. And if your ancestors didn’t have any part in this, or were some of the many people who actively opposed the horrible treatment of American Indians, or if they weren’t even here yet, that’s okay. We are all still here, and it is still important that we, now, together, face these issues in our shared national past.

If we don’t face our history and think about what it means that we are here because of what our ancestors did, then we are not doing the work the God has called us to do. If we don’t talk about ugly history, then we are doing ourselves and our neighbors, who we are commanded to love, a great disservice.

If we do not choose to examine that past, and think about how that past affects people even to this very day, then we are not just ignoring our oppressive past - we are maintaining it. We are maintaining the wall of silence that oppresses both historical and contemporary voices and says to them, “Your stories matter less to us than our need to be comfortable.” And not only do we maintain this past by refusing to talk about it, we celebrate it.

God has called us to do hard work - and by God’s grace, it is work that we are strong enough to do.

We are strong enough to withstand self-examination. We are strong enough to withstand self-doubt. We are strong enough, not to open old wounds, but to admit that the wounds are there, and that we have ignored them for centuries because we’d rather live with a dim but persistent discomfort than begin any kind of healing process that might bring our national guilt and shame to the forefront.

The 12th-century philosopher Maimonides described the act of teshuvah, or repentance, as complete “when a person has the opportunity to commit the same sin as he had in the past, but does not - he makes a different choice the second time around.”

And here we have a God who loves a people so much that they are granted an opportunity to commit the same sins again and again in the hopes that they will choose differently.

As Christians who proclaim that God, it is our responsibility to do the hard work of choosing differently.

What might choosing differently actually look like? It might look like learning American Indian history. It might look like getting involved with our Mission Partner, One Nation Walking Together. It might look like spending this Columbus day seeking out American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian writers, artists, musicians, and filmmakers. It might look like just seeking out their voices, and listening to what they have to say, and taking them at their word that their experience is what they say it is.

If we feel guilty, we should be spurred to action, because being paralyzed by guilt does nothing to help anyone and really just keeps the attention on the people feeling guilty. Being active is a way to keep the covenant with our God, the one that tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

If history is a mirror that shows us a true reflection of what we have been, then the Gospel is a mirror that shows us everything we have the potential to be. A mirror that doesn’t hide the parts we don’t like, a mirror that holds us accountable, but also says, “now - do justly, love mercy, walk humbly, love your neighbor.”

In Psalm 85, we find a prayer for the restoration of God’s favor. “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.” Two sides, coming together, and meeting in the middle.

God has yet to give up on us, in spite of our apparent inability to keep covenants. Through Jesus, God is constantly reaching out to us, and giving us a chance to choose differently this time around.

Works Cited and Referenced in This Sermon

(Books marked with \* are a good place to start if you want to start learning more American Indian History)

Books

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Indians in Unexpected Places by Philip J. Deloria

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The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War After the Conquest of Canada by Francis Parkman

The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado by Elliott West

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