

Quest for Respect Part II: Indigenous Spirituality and Christianity

Isaiah 25:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14 by Patty Friesen (Oct.15/17)

Isaiah 25:6-9, On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain God will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; God will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; God will remove the disgrace of God's people from all the earth. In that day the people of God will say, Surely this is our God, we trusted in the Creator and were saved. This is the Creator, we trusted. Let us rejoice and be glad in our salvation.

These powerful words of God swallowing up death forever occur before Paul ever echoed them with the idea of the Christian afterlife. There is an ancient Hebrew notion of God's inclusion of all peoples of all nations, including First Nations and the banquet we are all invited to in Matthew 22.

Native American theologian Steven Charleston believes these scriptures soundly reflect aboriginal spirituality. Indigenous peoples believe that the one God, the Creator made them from the clay of the earth as the first caretakers of the earth, not owners and called into covenant of caretaking with the Creator as God's people. God placed them in families and tribes just as God established the families and tribes of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Genesis. Many First Nations names for themselves mean God's people in their languages. They believe God gave them dreams and visions to guide them as God guided Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through their dreams and visions. Charleston says First Nations people are Genesis people with their creation stories and holy men who dreamed

dreams and erected stones as places of worship. First Nations people are Genesis people before there was the written law and temples and tabernacles.

Charleton says First Nations or Native Americans as they describe themselves in the US are also Exodus people – that they have long known migration as nomadic people who first migrated from African and the Middle East over the Bering Strait following the melting glaciers of the Ice Age. First Nations know what it is like to follow leaders like Moses who received his vision on a mountain. They too had leaders who spoke to God on mountains and buttes like Black Elk, Vision Horse, Wandering Spirit and Big Bear. And as the Israelites carried Joseph's bones out of Egypt, so the Choctaw carried their ancestors bones as they journeyed west in the US. But unlike Exodus and unlike Moses' deliverance through the Red Sea to freedom, the Red People were forced through the Trail of Tears in the southern US into subjugation and bondage – a sort of reverse Exodus or more like the Israelite exile to Babylon where separated from their home, they marched to a foreign land where they didn't know the language or the customs and were expected to assimilate.

Steven Charleston is an Episcopal priest from South Dakota whose family was Christian for generations, having accepted Christianity from the first missionaries to South Dakota. Steven had a crisis of faith in the 1970's when the great Native American theologian Vine Deloria called on Native Americans to deconstruct Christianity as the polar opposite of native traditional spirituality. Deloria said Christianity was a religion constructed of rules and native spirituality was about relationship to Creator, creation – birds, animals and plants and other human beings. In fact, aboriginal people call the

birds, animals and plants their relatives – respected members of their tribes and when they take their relatives' lives for food – they offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving in return.

Vine Deloria said Near Eastern religions have a propensity to build massive temples and tombs and this tradition has been emulated by Christian tendencies to construct gigantic cathedrals. Temples, churches and mosques separate the faithful from the secular world and from the natural world as if religion needs to be isolated from the rest of human activities. The native religions on the other hand, insist on holding their ceremonies and rituals in natural surroundings and could not have conceived of establishing a separate building for religious activities. The sweat lodge represents the womb and designed to connect worshippers to the cosmos, not cut them off from it.

Aboriginal people know there are sacred places on earth, holy in and of themselves which ancient peoples throughout the world have been attuned to and have built shrines and altars before there were churches or mosques or synagogues built on those sites. In North American, native people alone know where these sacred sites are and in Saskatchewan, these include the Great Sand Hills, Cypress Hills, Manitou Lake at Watrous and Grandfather Rock at the mouth of the Qu'appelle River Valley (Cree Narrative Memory, Neal McLeod. P.)

The two traditions are polar opposites in almost every respect and come to different conclusions about the meaning of life and the eventual disposition of the soul. The Near Eastern religions seek and guarantee salvation, which is conceived as an exclusive knowledge and escape from this planet where loyal followers can enjoy eternal life. Native peoples see themselves return to nature, their bodies becoming the dust of Mother earth and their souls journeying to another place like the Great Sand Hills or

sometimes being reborn in a new generation of their tribe. (p. 153, God is Red) They would never conceive of being the only ones to know Truth or try to convince anyone else of that truth. They believe Creator reaches out to all people, through the Voice that speaks through the land, birds and animals and through their vision quests that reveal the Creator in their own unique way in their hearts that is not the same for everyone.

Vine Deloria challenged the European Christian notion of exclusive chosen-ness and Doctrine of Discovery whereby they were called by God to occupy and convert the peoples of the Americas as a tool of colonization, not a true calling of Creator God who desired all nations to share God's good land and God's banquet table. Deloria said Native Americans had to choose between the religion of the colonizers or their own religions – they couldn't have it both ways. This caused a crisis for Steve Charleton who fasted and prayed and went on a vision quest to find whether there was anything of the Hebrew Christian scriptures that fit with native spirituality and understanding of the world. Charleton humbly claims to have received such a prophetic vision of integration of Christianity and Native spirituality which he has written about in *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* and can enrich our own understanding of Jesus.

Jesus knew what it was like to grow up in the Roman occupied territory of Judea. The difference between the Roman occupation of Jewish lands and the white settler occupation of North American lands is that the Romans let the Jews stay on their land and actually improved their land with excellent roads and aqueducts for water and active trade and commerce. The Romans let the Jews continue worshipping their Hebrew God and didn't herd them into concentration camps and didn't take their children away to teach them Latin and make them into little Romans!

Charleton understands Jesus as a Native American Messiah who went on vision quests like a Native American. Jesus first appeared in scripture in Mark's Gospel, at the Jordan River, where hearing the voice of God with the presence of the dove and the community of other believers, he received his name as the Son of God at his baptism and purification for mission at the Jordan River. Native Americans purify themselves in the same way in a sweat lodge. In this holy womb-like communal worship experience with water and stone, they open themselves to hear the voice of God, which may occasionally be mediated through a bird or animal.

Then Jesus went alone into the wilderness where he fasted and prayed for 40 days and nights and was taken up to a high mountain where he had a view of the nations. First Nations peoples go on vision quests alone where they fast and pray for 4 days on mountains or buttes with a view. Jesus was tempted by the devil but was kept safe by God and was attended by angels and wild animals. In Native American vision quests, they experience temptations or threats by wild animals or spirits but are kept safe within the ring of stones by God. Jesus came out of his vision quest empowered by the Holy Spirit for his ministry of healing and feeding and proclaiming the good news to his people. Native American people believe that vision quests are not for personal spiritual gain or comfort but are to empower the quester for healing and service to their communities.

Charleton understands Jesus' alone time on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden and on the Cross, as three more vision quests which confirm him as the Messiah of the Indigenous people as well as the Jewish and Gentile people. It's a fascinating, liberating understanding of Jesus who transcends all time and all culture to be

the Saviour of all as declared in Isaiah and Matthew's gospel today. Charleton said it's the role of all disciples of Jesus to go on vision quests themselves to seek God, to purify ourselves in baptism and to spend time alone fasting and pray for how God wants to use us to help our communities like Jesus did. It's a community thing – not an individualistic salvation thing. Not unlike our Anabaptist notion of discipleship – following Christ's way in our lives as a community. We will tease this out more during the adult Sunday School hour in the blue room – unless it is too full – we'll come back to the sanctuary.

Let us pray: Creator God, you have made us and called us to be your people through scripture and through how other cultures have come to know you as well. Help us on this quest for understanding and renewal of our own relationship with you and with our indigenous neighbours. Amen.

Sermon reflection questions:

1. How does the Indigenous community's struggle between traditional spirituality and Christianity reflect our own modern day Mennonite struggle with our faith?
2. Does Steven Charleston's Native American view of Genesis, Exodus, the Prophets and the Exile make sense? How might it refresh our own understanding of the Old Testament?
3. Does Steven Charleston's Native American view of Jesus as Messiah and his four vision quests make sense? How might it refresh our own understanding of Jesus?
4. How might vision quests of solitude, fasting and prayer help us as Mennonites?
Are there ways we already do that?