

In her book, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, author Annie Dillard writes the following:

“I read about an Eskimo hunter who asked the local missionary priest, ‘If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?’ ‘No,’ said the priest, ‘not if you did not know.’ ‘Then why,’ asked the Eskimo earnestly, ‘did you tell me?’”

Unfortunately, this quote articulates the fraught relationship that Native American people and Christians have had since Europeans first came to this country a few hundred years ago.

This week, I was asked to preach about multiple paths to God, and specifically about how Native American religion and Christianity can co-exist.

This week we will explore whether there can be multiple ‘right’ religions, and multiple truths.

Can we authentically have one set of beliefs, while being able to affirm the religious beliefs of another?

Well, my short answer is that I know there are multiple truths and multiple ways to access the divine because of all the religions humans have created.

If God only wanted us to worship and communicate with God in one way, then there would only be one way of doing that.

People have profound spiritual experiences doing everything from singing to praying to going to a worship service to running to meditating and doing yoga, and so on and so forth.

Some of these activities have become a ritualized part of an organized religion, some of them haven't.

But since there's such a variety of ways of having spiritual experiences, what that tells me is that God is okay with all of the above.

Now, one could argue that a certain person's experience isn't 'real' or 'genuine,' or they're not really communing with God, but that's not my place to judge.

If someone says that a certain activity enabled them to deepen their relationship with our creator, who am I to deny their experience? I wouldn't do that.

Another reason I think that there are multiple paths to the same mountaintop, so to speak, is because most religions have more in common than they do differences.

But since the focus of today's sermon is Native American religions, we'll see what they have in common with Christianity.

And a quick caveat to say that not all Native American religions are the same, and it's not appropriate to amalgamate them into one group, so I will specify different tribes when I am able.

For starters, one very important thing that I think Christians and Native Americans have in common is our reverence for the land and our respect of it.

Although Christian scriptures have been used to exploit creation, I don't believe that's God's will for us and our relationship with the earth.

After all, the book of Genesis says, ²⁸*God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it;*

and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

²⁹*God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.*

³⁰*And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so." (1:28-30)*

I think that in this passage, God doesn't give us permission to destroy and exploit the earth, but to use its resources responsibly, as we need, to live in relationship with the Earth.

And did you know that in one of the creation stories, humans are literally made out of dirt or soil?

In Genesis 2, we are told, ⁷*then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." (2: 7)*

Now hear these words from Chief Luther Standing Bear about the Lakota's relationship with the land,

"The Lakota was a naturalist- a lover of Nature.

He loved the earth and all things of the earth, and the attachment grew with age.

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 tipis were built upon the earth and their altars were made of earth.

The birds that flew in the air came to rest upon the earth, and it was the final abiding place of all things that lived and grew.

The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing and healing..."
(Nerburn, Kent. The Wisdom of the Native Americans, pg. 5.)

And in our scriptures, how many stories are there about land and soil and gardening and vineyards and so on?

Even if we haven't always celebrated or emphasized it, the earth, this space that we all share is central to our faith, as it is with the Native Americans.

Jesuit priest and author Patrick J. Twohy has worked with native peoples in Washington for almost 40 years and he wrote a book, with grant money from the Puyallup Tribe.

The book is entitled Finding A Way Home: Indian and Catholic Spiritual Paths of the Plateau Tribes.

In this book, he writes that Christian and Native spiritual beliefs aren't that different.

What European Americans know as “God,” the First Peoples know, as he says, *“Something that runs like blood in the veins of the People, Something that remembers and carries us all,*

Something that holds the roots of all plants and trees....

Something that shakes the earth with thunder, Something wide as the most distant waters....”

For Twohy, the common thread that weaves us together is,

“The God the ancestors knew as the Maker, the OneUpAbove, has walked with the People and walks with them today.”

Ultimately, I think that if God has priorities, what matters most is how we treat each other and the earth, and all other living beings.

After the ways we treat each other, everything else is secondary, in terms of organized religion, rituals, sacraments, sacred places, and so on.

We share the values with the Native Americans that matter the most, like treating one another and the land with respect and making good on our word, being people of integrity who resolve disputes peacefully and not with violence.

Now I think these are the ideals for us as Christians and for Native Peoples, and neither group has a spotless past.

We have all violated these principles, especially when interacting with each other.

However, in their ideal states, the beliefs and values of Christianity and Native American spirituality are not only reconcilable but compatible.

They both have unalienable truths with deeply-held sacred rituals that help us connect to God or the Maker.

And maybe what's more important is not arguing over which religion is "correct," but recognizing that we worship a God who doesn't split and divide and rank people according to their beliefs.

We profess every Sunday that we worship a God who loves *all* people, and that has to include *all* people, even those of other faiths.

I chose Psalm 139 this morning because the Psalmist is singing to God and recognizing that God is always with us.

We cannot flee from God's spirit or God's presence, God is always there.

This is true with all people, God knows each of us better than we know ourselves, regardless of race, creed or color.

Because of this, I don't think God would privilege the people of any one faith either here on earth or in what happens after this life.

Now, the person who suggested that I preach on this topic also shared a speech with me that was given by Chief Red Jacket, and I think it will be helpful in our understanding of what some Native Americans think about Christianity.

So the context for this speech is that in 1805, a Boston missionary society requested Red Jacket's permission to proselytize among the Iroquois settlements in northern New York State.

Here is an excerpt from Red Jacket's speech, *"You say you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter.*

You say that you are right, and we are lost; how do we know this to be true?

We understand that your religion is written in a book; if it was intended for us as well as you,

why has not the Great Spirit given it to us, and not only to us, but why did he not give to our forefathers the knowledge of that book, with the means of understanding it rightly?

We only know what you tell us about it.

How shall we know when to believe, being so often deceived by the white people?

Brother, you say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit; if there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it?

Why not all agree, as you can all read the book?

Brother, we do not understand these things.

We are told that your religion was given to your forefathers, and has been handed down from father to son.

We also have a religion which was given to our forefathers, and has been handed down to us their children.

We worship that way. It teacheth us to be thankful for all the favors we receive; to love each other, and to be united.

We never quarrel about religion.”

Red Jacket's forceful defense of native religion caused the representative to refuse the Indian's handshake and announce that no fellowship could exist between the religion of God and the works of the Devil.

The reaction of that Boston missionary proved Red Jacket's point, that us Christians do have trouble getting along not only with people of other faiths, but also with other Christians.

Let us take a lesson from Red Jacket, and not waste our time quarreling about religion but celebrate different faiths as different expressions of God at work in our world.

And may we focus on our commonalities so that we can work together to be a stronger world, and as for our differences, may we learn from each other and thus grow in our spiritual understanding of God.

Thanks be to God that there are many paths to the same mountaintop. Amen.