

So, it's Indigenous People's Sunday, as you may have figured out by this point in the service.

You might be wondering, what it is exactly and why we are recognizing it.

Indigenous People's Sunday is one Sunday in the year which is set apart to remember the struggles of Native American Peoples, both those of the past and those problems which they continue to struggle with today.

It's also an opportunity for us to remember our conflicted history, and how we as Christians, and especially as Christians living in New England, contributed to the suffering of the people who were on this land before us.

Speaking of New England, that's a phrase that has long upset indigenous people because this is not 'new England,' these lands had names before the English got here.

It's more appropriate to use the name Massachusetts, which comes from the Massachusett tribe who use to inhabit these lands.

You see, we might think of the fights between the Europeans and the indigenous people as something that ended hundreds of years ago, that we don't need to dwell on it anymore.

But we know that the conflict isn't over, as the persecution of native peoples continues today, as I am sure you all learned about when Team Awesome went to Pine Ridge, SD on a mission trip.

And we need to remember that the issues they fought about, identity, land and religion, are still very current to us today.

We also need to continue to remember how this land came to be named, divided and inhabited the way it is today so that we don't repeat the sins of our past,

and so that we can learn how to help with the healing and restoration that is needed between our nation and the native people who still live here, both on and off reservations.

In fact, I sat down with one member of our congregation who wanted to discuss this topic with me when I shared with her that I would be preaching about it.

She expressed to me how angry she is that the Billerica High School mascot is the Indians (a title that many native people find offensive), and that the Tewksbury high school mascot is the Redmen.

She gave me permission to share her story, which is that she doesn't want her son to go to Billerica High School because the mascot is so triggering.

I confess I was shocked to learn that Tewksbury's mascot is the Redmen, which I think is deeply offensive, comparable to the Washington Redskins football team, which has been decried by native peoples.

You see, the conflict isn't over, far from it.

Now it might be more appropriate to recognize this Sunday next week, as it is Columbus Day Weekend, also known as Indigenous People's Day.

However, we are recognizing this today because next Sunday, we, along with Christians from all around the world are celebrating World Communion Sunday.

But my point is that the very fact that we still have a Columbus Day goes to show that we have not made amends.

We have not repented, we, as a nation, have not healed from what took place between the colonial people (just think about that word for a second, colonial, coming from colony, this land being a colony of England, New England)...

We have not reckoned with what happened between the colonial settlers and the indigenous people, who were already settled on this land.

This is such a huge topic that we could focus on any number of things having to do with this land locally, with Native Americans nationwide, and our Christian theology, but this morning I want to spend some time discussing the Doctrine of Discovery.

This piece of legislation is what gave the settlers the power to take the land from people who were already living on it.

The Doctrine of Discovery was created in the 1400's by the church in Europe and Christian monarchs, which allowed explorers to claim lands from indigenous people.

It was promoted by European Monarchs in order to legitimize the colonization of lands outside Europe, which is exactly what happened here in these United States, before we were the United States.

The Doctrine of Discovery was used by the Supreme Court in 1823 in the landmark case, Johnson vs. McIntosh.

In that case, it was decided that the United States, as the successor of Great Britain, had inherited authority over all lands within our claimed boundaries.

This decision meant that the government could invalidate or ignore any native claims to property and resources, and to this date, the courts continue to cite this legal precedent.

It is still being used by courts to decide property rights cases brought by Native Americans against the U.S. and against non-Natives.

In 2013, when the United Church of Christ gathered for its national meeting, called General Synod, they adopted a resolution, "Calling For The United Church Of Christ To Repudiate The Doctrine Of Discovery Which Authorized The Genocide Of Native Peoples And The Theft Of Native Lands."

This resolution was adopted in 2013, just a few years ago.

I think it's embarrassing that it took our denomination so long to get around to naming the injustice of this doctrine.

But better late than never, I suppose.

The resolution calls on the UCC to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery, it confesses that the doctrine has been and continues to be a shameful part of United States and our Church's history.

It calls us to join with our ecumenical partners to explore ways to compensate American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Native Hawaiians for lands and resources that were stolen and are still being stolen and which are now the United States of America.

And among other things, the resolution calls upon the United States government to retract the Doctrine of Discovery.

So, what can we do about all of this?

I think we have a responsibility to interrogate our theology to make sure that our understandings of scripture never embolden us to treat others the way our forbearers treated the Native Americans.

In the 1870's, President Ulysses S. Grant, the heroic army general who led the Union to victory in the Civil War, encouraged Christian Missionaries to set up schools to westernize indigenous populations.

His policy allowed for Native American children to be taken from their families and put into boarding schools, also known as residential schools.

These schools took the children from their families, stripped them of their native languages, culture, music, spirituality and way of life.

These schools were part of the concerted effort to commit physical and cultural genocide of the native peoples.

This was all done in the name of Christianity, carried out by missionaries.

These Christians believed that they had a divine mandate to bring cultural, economic and spiritual liberation to the natives by sharing the blessings of the Christ-inspired civilization of the West with people who they believed were suffering under satanic oppression, ignorance and disease.

And we know that many Native Americans did die from diseases that the colonists brought with them from Europe.

Some puritan theologians interpreted this as God making more space for the English, God's chosen pilgrims.

John Winthrop, one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony said in 1630, upon arriving on these shores: *'the Lord hath cleared our title to what we possess.'*

So by taking children from their families, by translating the Bible into native languages, by giving them communicable diseases, the Christians all thought they were doing God's work.

They even set up special places called "Praying Towns" for the Natives who did convert to Christianity, as they were called Praying Indians.

While it may feel to us, in our core, like all of this happened a long time ago, these beliefs and this understanding of land ownership still lingers with us.

We still fight over land.

Look at modern-day Israel/Palestine, that's a land dispute that is thousands of years old.

This is part of why I chose today's scripture passage, from the Book of Isaiah.

This part of this book was written after the Jewish people had returned to their home of Israel, after their exile to Babylon.

Isaiah is telling the Israelites that restoration will soon follow.

Unfortunately, thousands of years later, we still don't live peaceably with one another.

The fight is still over land, who wants it, who has it, who controls it, who is allowed to own it.

The fight is getting worse as climate change increases as less and less land will be inhabitable by humans, as more land will become arid and more land will be underwater with sea level rise.

When my mom asked a financial advisor what people should be investing in, he said, "They aren't making any more land."

I am afraid the fights over land are only going to get worse.

As Christians, we are called to bear witness to the sacred truth that all the land on this earth has been gifted to us by God, and we need to learn to share this limited space that we have so that all humanity is able to not only survive, but flourish.

We are called to pay attention to who has land, who doesn't, why, and to help those who don't have any.

As Isaiah reminds us that we are invited to bring good news to the captives, bind up the broken-hearted and to comfort those who mourn.

Our Native American siblings have experienced generational trauma because of what our forbearers did to them.

And they are still suffering from extremely high rates of suicide, depression, addiction and poverty.

We still have a chance to advocate for them, make reparations for what was done to them, and to partner with them, so that we all live peacefully on these lands, from sea to shining sea.

Amen.