

Hidden Heritage

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 15, 2023

A samurai sought out his master to pose a basic yet truly elusive question. “Master, tell me, is there really such a thing as heaven and hell?” The master paused in contemplation. “Who are you?” he eventually asked. “I am a samurai swordsman, one of the emperor’s personal guards.” “A samurai!” the master scoffed. “Who would want you for a guard? You seem in complete disarray!” “What?” stammered the samurai in disbelief and anger, reaching for his sword. “Oho!” mocked the master. “You have a sword, do you! I bet it’s too dull to do me any harm.” Steaming with anger the samurai could no longer contain himself. He drew his sword, ready to attack his master. Quickly, the master responded, “This is hell!” The Samurai understood the truth of these words, sheathed the sword, and bowed. “Now,” replied the master gently, “that is heaven.”¹

Last week we talked about welcoming all of who we are – the good and the bad, the blessings and the curses – our heritage. This week, we focus on the heritage of our nation – specifically the ills from centuries ago which shape, mold, and craft who we are to this very day – the genocide of the indigenous peoples, and the slavery of Black bodies stolen from Africa. Hell on earth – swords at the ready grasped in the hands of the leaders, the perpetrators, and the complicit throughout the centuries. A complex topic – for these are ills that many of the privileged can and do ignore, and yet that the marginalized hold in their being each and every day. We spent centuries in hell, anger and violence attempting to overcome the peace and love inherent in this planet we call home; intrinsic in this faith we hold dear.

Origin stories shape and mold a people – allowing groups to share a common genesis that dictates how we engage with the world today and why we do so. Each faith tradition has at least one – detailing a relationship with sin or the natural world or suffering or love. Each nation has at least one – a story that dictates the start of society, affecting morals, politics, faith, and

¹ *Doorways to the Soul* Edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain Pg. 27

determining those who are seen as less than and inferior. Our own country is no different – although we carry with us false portrayals and often hidden truths.

The history books tell a tale of Europeans encountering a new world where they were met with, and ultimately fought against, quote, “savages and barbarians” – those who were not white. We were taught that the Europeans were able to take control and triumph because they were the Chosen People and part of a superior race.² Lies that must be countered with the truth of genocide, murder, and the displacement of millions of innocent peoples – we must share this truth, louder than any lie. Truth dictates that African peoples were stolen from their ancestral lands and forced into labor and unspeakable horrors – seen not as people but as dispensable property. As part of these falsified and disastrous tales and their repercussions whites are still seen as unique and superior. And while at times we as a faith have remained complicit, these narrations are so fundamentally different from the theology of inherent dignity and worthiness that we espouse. We, as a people of faith and adherents to the divine, are called to counter these lies and their detrimental repercussions as we work for a fair and equitable society. Many are stuck in hell, swords are still drawn, far from the sheath. Today, just as we proclaim love and justice and dignity and truth, Indigenous peoples face overwhelming addiction, homelessness, forced to live in squalor. Today, as we proclaim worth and meaning and faith, Black peoples occupy the bottom rung of society; news outlets feed lies and exaggerations of crime and poverty serving to distort society’s perceptions of this marginalized group.³ We are called as a nation and a faith to put these ideals and sentimental proclamations into action for these wounded peoples. I wonder of the repercussions if this origin story were to be told truthfully, and what would ripple out to society instead of hate and superiority. Perhaps a deeper love as we work to reconcile with these stolen, destitute people. Perhaps we could craft our nation as a safe and committed space for healing. Perhaps we could focus on reparations. On reconciliation. A society truly built on justice and equity. And this begins with the story and chronicles of truth.

² *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz pg. 104

³ *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson pg. 234

As we grapple with these origin stories and their detrimental consequences, we are posed questions so large and looming that no response seems satisfying or adequate. What can we do? What can we possibly do to override such hate, lies, and violence? It is those small actions that reverberate out well beyond our individual selves. We are called to invite others into a liberal faith founded on love, to create relationships with those who appear different than us, to counter lies with truth, to interrupt the discrimination in our midst, and those of us who are white are called to relinquish our privilege and power, stepping back from the domination that feels so comfortable and natural. We are called to act with courage and conviction, abiding, not by the approval of others, but by empathy and compassion for those on the bottom rung.⁴ This is how we counter the white supremacy culture that prevails in our country, its origin found in slavery and genocide. We are called, most importantly, as a catalyst to all of these acts, to love people, not to tolerate them. To love those who were destroyed by our origin stories, to love the marginalized, to love the outcast, to love anyone held in the throes of stigma or dehumanization or violence. To love, not to tolerate. How does this fit in with the convictions of our faith tradition?

When reflecting on this heritage of carnage and our faith, I am reminded of the innate human goodness professed by our Unitarian forbearers. How can we make sense of this in response to all this violence, hate, and murder? I spent time reflecting on this theological quandary. We are each born with this innate goodness, that I hold true. But our lives, experiences, the hatred we are taught and the lies we are fed serve to overshadow it until it becomes so hidden it is inaccessible. Some become overpowered with greed, power, and money – just as the European settlers did centuries ago. It becomes so powerful that their still, small voice within is silenced, as animosity, violence, and hate overpower it.

I invite us to step beyond the actions and origin stories that proceeded these inequities and perpetuated white supremacy culture and turn to the live-giving gifts that were created as a

⁴ *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson pg. 384

result – art and theology. Art can be the most expressive way to narrate, illuminate, and heal from systemic harm. I turn to Maya Angelou’s poetry, what I interpret as stanzas dictating the attempts of white supremacy culture to rule and overpower countered by stanzas of the perseverance, bravery, and strength of the marginalized. I offer one stanza to be countered by the next:

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

How does the marginalized woman respond?

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.⁵

These words strike me every time I engage with them. Let us follow with the sentiments of an indigenous poet, Janice Gould, who shares in a provocative and heartbreaking way how the tortured indigenous peoples are contemporarily held dismissively and painfully in the jokes and games of the white and the privileged. She offers haunting words, "Red Indians hung or burned—it's only in jest." She continues, "Their kids perform mock war dances, whooping, re-enacting scenes of a debacle white folks let loose."⁶ Images of mockery, ignorance, disregard, and hate flowing from her pen to be shared with the world – can her art serve to change us? To

⁵ "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou

⁶ "Indian Mascot, 1959" by Janice Gould

change the world? To give her release? She concludes, “we're still here, lungs full of indigenous air.”

I now turn to theology. How can any group of people faced with such atrocities make peace with a God or a deity or deities of any kind? I know that simply in reflecting upon such evils I am in conversation with my own God. I turn in this moment to liberation theology, primarily a theology of Latin Americans and formerly enslaved Black Americans. I note this is a Christian theology and hold this alongside the truth that Christianity was forced upon both Black slaves and indigenous peoples. Slaves, in many ways, made it life-giving. And while many indigenous peoples have since converted to Christianity, not all have, and to some Christianity is still seen as harmful. So, while lifesaving to many slaves, I begin my reflection with that caveat. It is the sentiments of the divine’s unique and special connection with the hated, condemned, and marginalized that I want to lift up – that is my purpose in this reflection. This theology is what philosopher Paul Tillich called “The courage to be.”⁷

Those who espouse the beliefs of liberation theology hold a personal, intimate connection with God and with Jesus. Through the narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus, these marginalized groups experienced shared suffering and solidarity – they shared similar physical and emotional anguish. This understanding that Jesus agonized just as they did led to an overwhelming conviction that just as God was with Jesus on the cross, so, too, was God with them.⁸ And this is a faith, not for the privileged, not for the wealthy or the elite or the powerful, but crafted carefully to save the downtrodden, the outcast, the abused. Those who suffered just as Jesus suffered. Those who thus felt God’s love just as Jesus felt it.⁹ This tie to Jesus was held so intimately that it was professed, and I quote, that “every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus.”¹⁰ I wonder what happened, theologically, with the death of George Floyd? To the indigenous children stolen from their families and forced into boarding

⁷ *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James H. Cone pg. 160

⁸ *Ibid* pgs. 21-22

⁹ *Ibid* pg. 160

¹⁰ *Ibid* pg. 158

schools? Jesus' resurrection gave the downtrodden hope that they, too, could have a life beyond violence, slavery, and lynching.¹¹ I want to end this theological reflection with one last quote. James Cone writes, "humanity's salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity's salvation is available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst."¹² We, those of us who are privileged, can only be saved when we act through solidarity with the marginalized among us. Unless we accept this truth and make reparations in response to our nation's origin stories, we are stuck brandishing our swords in hell.

Let us conclude our journey with a quote from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "Hate and white supremacy culture lead to violence and alienation, while love and the cross lead to nonviolence and reconciliation"¹³ How can we even begin reconcile with the descendants of the indigenous peoples subjected to genocide? To the descendants of Black peoples stolen from their homeland and sold into slavery? Love and faith, writes King. Love and faith that calls us towards truth telling, towards relationships, towards reparations, towards shared justice and equity, towards returning what was stolen, towards relinquishment of white privilege and power. Slavery and genocide are the heritage of our nation. Let us begin to build a shared future together.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

May it be so, and Amen

¹¹ Ibid pg. 26

¹² Ibid pg. 160

¹³ Ibid pg. 71

