

June 18, 2017 – Doctrine of Discovery

Genesis 17:3-10; 18:1-5, 9-15; 21:1-7

Today is Aboriginal Sunday and so we began our service by acknowledging the fact that we all live and work and play on land that the indigenous peoples of our nation have called home for thousands of years. Nearly all of us are here because our ancestors came to North America in the 19th or 20th centuries searching for a better way of life, many of them looking for the opportunity to own their own piece of land.

When I was in elementary school, I remember studying the history of North America and learning about the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492. We were taught that he was the first European to reach this continent and therefore had “discovered” the New World. (Of course, now we know that the Vikings were here centuries before.) What I don’t remember learning about was the Doctrine of Discovery. You see, when Columbus returned to Europe, the pope issued a proclamation that granted most of North and South America to Spain, the kingdom that had sponsored his voyage. The pope basically said that Christian nations had a God-given right to colonize the lands they discovered as long as they converted the Indigenous populations to Christianity. “A God-given right.”

These orders from the pope “helped shape the political and legal arguments that have come to be referred to as the “Doctrine of Discovery.” This doctrine was used by European nations to justify the colonization of the Americas, Africa,

Australia and parts of Asia. The Doctrine of Discovery argued that, since the Indigenous people simply occupied the land, and didn't farm it, they didn't really own the land so it was "up for grabs." It also included the belief that Europeans were bringing the benefits of civilization (including Christianity) to the 'heathen,' so, in fact, they were being colonized for their own benefit.

http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf

Of course, this was not the first time that God's name was used in the conquering and colonization of civilizations. This has been happening for thousands of years. In today's scripture reading we hear how Abraham, the patriarch, the father, of Judaism, Islam and Christianity was also given the right to take over land already occupied by other nations. According to the book of Genesis, God said, "I will give to you and to your descendants after you, this land in which you are an alien, the land of Canaan; it will be yours, and your descendants."

According the historical records of the Hebrew people, Abraham and his descendants had the "God-given right" to colonize a land that was already home to other peoples, a land in which he was the "alien."

Now you may say, "Well that's ancient history, Abraham lived over three thousand years ago and the colonization of North America happened well before we were born. What does the Doctrine of Discovery have to do with us?" Well as recently as the 1990's this doctrine has been cited in decisions made by the Supreme Court of Canada. <http://www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice->

[initiatives/doctrine-discovery](#) And, of course, there is still much unrest in the middle East where Abraham's descendants continue to fight for their "God-given rights" to the Palestinian land surrounding Israel. The concepts of the Doctrine of Discovery are entrenched in the laws of Canada and other countries around the world. It is far from ancient history.

Thousands of years of human history are entangled with these concepts – this issue is not easy. Consider the story of Abraham. In today's reading we heard that despite her old age Sarah conceived and delivered a baby boy called Isaac. Isaac would, of course, become the father of people of Israel, the ancestor of our own Jesus of Nazareth. Abraham is an incredibly important figure in the history of our religion. I'm not suggesting that he deliberately set out to destroy the lives of the Canaanites. Just as I'm not suggesting that our ancestors came here with the purpose to harm our First Nations people.

But thanks to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we now know that the colonization of North America has been a disaster for its indigenous peoples. We know that many died from disease, violence, starvation and more recently from addiction and suicide. We know that treaties were signed in bad faith and broken by our governments. We know that the Doctrine of Discovery was not a legal, moral or even logical document when it was written and certainly isn't now. It is for this reason that The United Church of Canada repudiated (or rejected) that doctrine in 2012.

What's not clear is what this means for us. What is it that we can do to make a difference? Obviously we can study the calls to action that are part of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to add our voices to those who are calling for the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery by the current pope and the disentangling of this doctrine from our laws.

But I think the most important thing we can do is re-examine our own connections to the land and our own understanding of what it means to own land. I want to end with a story....

A long time ago in a land far away, there was a man who owned a small but beautiful farm. He loved his land, took care of it, and grew fruits, vegetables, and grain. Unfortunately, he had to travel far away to visit his relatives and to take care of them. Since the land needed to be taken care of during his absence, he asked a friend to look after it. After what seemed like a very long time, the man finally returned. He was very happy to be back to his land and resume taking care of the land. But the friend who had taken care of his land did not want to give it back.

He said, "You were away from here for too long. During that time, I took care of it. I weeded it. I sowed and planted and reaped the harvest. I put my heart and soul into it as though I was taking care of my own child. So I don't want to give it back. I consider it mine now."

The owner of the land said, “No, it is mine. I only wanted you to take care of it while I was gone. You need to give it back.”

The friend answered, “It is my land now. Sorry.”

So there was a big argument. Both of the men refused to give in. Before letting the argument turn into a serious fight, they decided to consult with someone living in their village, a very wise person named Hodja. Hodja came to the farm land the two people were arguing about and Hodja listened carefully to both sides of the story. After hearing their stories, Hodja put his ears on the ground. The two men were wondering, “Hodja, what are you doing with your head on the ground?”

Hodja replied, “I am listening to what the land has to say about all this.”

The two men thought that Hodja was a bit crazy and they started to laugh. Still laughing, they asked, “So what is the land saying?”

Hodja replied, “The land says the two of you belong to the land.”

<http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/living-path-respect.pdf>, page 5