

Stirring the Waters¹—Matthew 4: 1 & 8-10 and 28: 16-20
June 19, 2022—Indigenous Sunday

You know that old joke about fish in water? There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?”² I thought of that this week reflecting on the relationship between settler (non-indigenous) and Indigenous peoples. Settler people are hardly ever aware of the water. By this I mean, the political, social, and economic environment that caused settlers to be on this land and that continues to benefit those of us who are settlers. Of course, why would settlers be aware of the water? You don’t need to be if it doesn’t harm you.

For Indigenous people it’s different—the water is polluted. The political, economic, and social environment has made and is making those of us who are Indigenous sick to the point of death. It started right at contact, millions decimated by disease. It continues today—unclean water, addictions, residential schools, child apprehension, over-incarceration. The list goes on. Indigenous peoples have been pointing out the water to settlers for a long time. Pointing to our political, economic, and social environment that is polluted by the Doctrine of Discovery.

The Doctrine of Discovery emanates from a series of papal bulls, technically just a formal statement from a Pope. And beginning in 1493, right after Columbus landed on what he called Hispaniola (modern day Dominican Republic and Haiti) the Popes of that age got heavily invested in helping Europeans claim this so-called “new world.” These papal endorsements were used as legal and moral justification for the dispossession of sovereign Indigenous Nations, including First Nations in what is now Canada. During the so-called European “Age of Discovery”, so-called Christian explorers “claimed” lands for their monarchs who felt they could exploit the land, regardless of the original inhabitants. Basically, the Pope back in 1493 declared that any land not already populated by Christians was uninhabited (*terra nullis*), and ripe for exploitation. European explorers were given explicit permission as follows: to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [by which they meant Muslims, if they found any] and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to...convert them to his and their use and profit.” So much for the meek inheriting the earth. This was the very foundation of genocide.

¹ This reflection is about the Doctrine of Discovery, the damage it has caused and continues to cause and the need to repudiate it as people of faith. For a quick summary and background check out this site, <https://dofdmanno.org/fact-sheet/>. For an extremely well done film on the topic click here, <https://www.anglican.ca/primate/tfc/drj/doctrineofdiscovery/>.

² <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-is-water>

Basically, a licence to kill. And that utterly odious ideology led to practices that continue through modern-day laws and policies.³ It is the water, the environment in which we swim.

While not explicitly mentioned in the papal bulls, the first scripture reading this morning, known more commonly as “the great commission” is recognized by theologians and scholars as the biblical foundation of the Doctrine of Discovery. It is a classic example of the hazards of scripture taken out of context and a cautionary tale of the dangers that are set loose when the bible is in the hands of the powerful. The thing is the great commission, “go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” comes at the end of Matthew’s gospel. What the disciples are to teach is informed by what has come before, including the second scripture we heard which explicitly rejects the temptations of domination and exploitation as obstacles to knowing and living the will of God.⁴ Never mind all the teachings about not judging others, the golden rule and taking care of the poor. That is the good news that is worth living and sharing.

In other words, the Doctrine of Discovery has no basis in sound Christian theology. In fact, it is an abomination, it is heresy. It is antithetical to everything Jesus lived and taught and must be repudiated. Unfortunately, it is the polluted, stagnant water in which we swim as Canadians. It is embedded in our psyche; it defines the relationship between settlers and Indigenous people. The dispossession of lands and the reservation system is based on concept of *terra nullis* or empty land central to the Doctrine of Discovery, that failed and fails to understand the Indigenous relationship to the land that abhors private property. The spiritual arrogance that led to residential schools and the downstream effect of trauma, addictions and cultural annihilation that are being felt to this day. The prejudice and cultural superiority that failed to recognize sophisticated Indigenous systems of governance that led to the Indian Act and created division between traditional forms of governance and those who operate within the settler system as we’re seeing in B.C. these days.

Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery is about starting over and unlearning what we’ve been taught. Nothing was discovered, there were people here, the land was occupied. Indigenous people have always had a profound and deep spirituality that could teach us a thing or two about living in harmony with the planet. Indigenous people governed themselves well and had systems of trade and commerce. Repudiation, unlearning, and re-learning is so important for settlers because it creates the ground on which we can build a just way of co-existing on this land.

³ Rev. Deana Dudley, *Cowboys, Indians and Canaanites*, the text of this reflection was emailed to me by a friend which I could not find online but the video is here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzktlYjtqeE&list=PLFLhqMTEDADUpaugELxxRPqJDvnkPYK92&index=3> from the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto.

⁴ William Loader, <https://billloader.com/MtTrinity.htm>

Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery is important for the healing of the relationship and the liberation of indigenous people from oppression. But, as the man on tv trying to sell us knives says, there's more. It's also important for the liberation of those of us who are settlers. Lilla Watson, of the Gangulu people in Australia once said, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."⁵ Those of us who are settlers also need liberation from the Doctrine of Discovery, whose oppression is hidden from settlers by the seductive idols of wealth (for some), power (for some) and cultural and religious superiority. We to need liberation from these doctrines that separate us from others and the earth, that cause us to consume recklessly exploiting the planet to the point of disaster. We to need liberation from an economics that sees some people as expendable. We to need liberation from political and personal relationships based on might and coercion.

The grace? We need only go back to our faith story of Jesus in the wilderness who repudiated all that the Doctrine of Discovery stands for and lived into the fullness of who he was meant to be—healer, teacher, child of God. The grace is to not be distracted by all that is not God and to be who God intends us to be as individuals, as a society. It is to know the joy of living into the fullness of who we are meant to be in community with others who are also living into the fullness of who they are. It is quite simply to know God. That is both the call and the promise. Let us pray.

Creator, May your presence among us
provoke such longing for your realm,
that we will never be satisfied
until the whole earth knows
your justice, your peace, and your love.
Amen.⁶

Rev. Joe Gaspar

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson

⁶ *Celebrate God's Presence: A Book of Services for the United Church of Canada*, p. 303.