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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Exodus 3: 1-5; Pablo Neruda, Keeping Quiet
April 30, 2023

Standing on Sacred Ground: Considering the Land and its People

You might say that what we're doing this morning began this past autumn, during an Indigenous People's Celebration at McCook Park in East Lyme. That's when I first met David Brule and Chief Ray Tatten, who both spoke about the significance of that space for the Nehantic community. It was there that I asked David about Land Acknowledgments, and whether he would help us here at FCCOL to craft a meaningful statement concerning our own responsibilities both to the land, and to the people who stewarded that land - this land - prior to the arrival of Europeans. That conversation led to a conversation among the deacons a few months later, and then ultimately to this day, when we'll read together the Land Acknowledgement that the Board of Deacons has adopted for our church.

But you might also say that what we're doing today began in the fall of 2020. After the murder of George Floyd, the entire country engaged in a kind of audit of its history and its institutions. We sought to clarify where we have been less than forthcoming about the ways we tell history, and the ways power has been wielded in our institutions. That led us here at the church to begin our Stories from the Deep North series, examining the legacy of slavery and colonialism throughout Connecticut and Southern New England. It also led to the Witness Stones that, thanks to Carolyn Wakeman and her team of volunteers, now exist throughout Old Lyme. They tell the stories of those who were enslaved in our town for a span of more than 150 years. Some of those individuals were Indigenous. Many were of mixed ancestry. They lived and worked upon this land.

Then again, you might also say that what we're doing today began some 35 years ago, when this congregation formed a long term partnership with the Lakota People of the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. That partnership has led many of you to open yourselves to Indigenous spiritualities and practices. As a community, we have been invited into a way of life that, while different from that of New England Congregationalists, shares more in common with our tradition than we might suspect. We have been blessed by friendships with many in the Lakota community, and so it feels especially significant to begin a new set of friendships with those who are a little closer to us.

More deeply still, you might also say that what we're doing today can be traced back to the very beginning of the Old Lyme community, back to the beginning of the experiment called The United States. To get at that dimension of our activity this morning, I'd like to reference a problematic "classic" of American literature, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*.[1] If that seems a little far afield, in both geography and theme, from our work today, bear with me. The book is set in the 1750's, during the French and Indian War. It's the story of Hawkeye, a frontiersman in upstate New York who is adopted by local Mohicans - you might remember that he was played by Daniel Day-Lewis in the 1992 film. The Mohicans raise Hawkeye, and they share an intimate knowledge of the land with him. The plot details of the novel are unimportant for our purposes, save for one overarching moment. At the culmination of

[1] What follows is drawn from Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), pgs, 103-104.

the novel, Cooper depicts the last of the pure and noble Mohicans dying a natural death. And as that Mohican elder dies, he hands responsibility for the land, and symbolically for the entire continent, over to Hawkeye, his adopted son.

Cooper published his novel in 1826, and he was, in many respects, local to us. He attended Yale, and he lived much of his life in Cooperstown, which of course bears his family name. He was writing during Andrew Jackson's presidency, a man who had personally supervised the destruction and removal of Native Peoples from their land for the previous quarter century, a process that continued well into and beyond Jackson's presidency. Cooper's Leatherstocking novels, and especially *The Last of the Mohicans*, can all be understood to represent a nation struggling to come to terms with what it had done, with what it was continuing to do, to the Indigenous People who were here when they arrived. It was a nation swept into a collective amnesia, for no one wanted to confront the truth of genocide and forced displacement. And so a new and different story was invented, a myth really, that is still with us today.

It goes like this: a new nation was born from the merger of the old and the new. The new keepers of the land are the rightful inheritors of it, having received it through the gift of adoption, like Hawkeye receiving it from the Mohican elders. A kind of spiritual baton is passed from one group to the next, with the full consent of the Indigenous elders. Once the spiritual transfer of stewardship is complete, it then becomes possible for the new inheritors of the land to sing something akin to what Woody Guthrie sang: "this land is your land, this land is my land, from California to the New York highlands, from the redwood forests, to the Gulf Stream waters, this land was made for you and me."

There are no Indigenous People in Guthrie's song. And of course, the wider story that it supports just wasn't true. The original residents of the land didn't simply die off, and they didn't disappear into history. Their descendants are still very much among us, and the aftershocks, the tremors, of that original American trauma continue to surface. Which means that all of us, collectively, have the responsibility to tell a different kind of story. This one must be more honest and forthcoming about the origins of our country, and the origins of our own community. But it must also be rooted in relationship, as we seek to build a different kind of world, one rooted in shared resources, friendship, and a recognition of the sacred and shared land upon which we all live.

What we're doing today is not about undoing the past, or fixing a wound that no one person or community is capable of fixing. There is a hubris to believing that, through our actions, we can fundamentally alter a 400 year pattern of history. We can, however, play a small part in a greater whole, as we all seek a new and more sustainable way of life for our children, and for the planet entrusted to our care. In the same way, what we're doing today should not be understood as an occasion for guilt, which is, usually, an unproductive emotion. You don't need to feel bad, in other words, for something you weren't here to do. Instead, my hope is that this meeting upon sacred ground, between FCCOL and our new Nehantic friends might lead toward a greater responsibility - to tell a more honest story about the past, and to live into a future of healing and embrace. My hope is that we might be led to consider our shared responsibilities to the planet entrusted to our care, and to the land that we all now inhabit. Most important of all, my hope is that what we do today leads toward friendship, between us and the greater Nehantic community.

To David, to Marc, to Chief Ray, and to Ned, I wish to say that you honor us with your presence today. Thank you for being among us, and for sharing your wisdom and traditions with us. I'll now invite David Brule to say a few words, after which Carolyn Wakeman, Ned Pfeiffer,

and Marc Strickland will offer further perspectives. When they're finished, John Higgins, one of our Deacons, will share a little about the process that the Deacons have gone through to adopt the Land Acknowledgement, and then we'll have an opportunity to read that statement together, as a sign of our communal affirmation.

(After the Land Acknowledgement is read):

Like Moses before the burning bush, we too stand upon sacred ground. And we have been given a sacred charge, contained in the words of the Land Acknowledgment itself. With that in mind, before we sing our final hymn, I'd like us to return to the words of Pablo Neruda:

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still

for once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for a second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

And so now let us count to twelve. Let us keep still. And then let us join our voices in song.