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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Isaiah 11: 1; Matthew 5: 1-12 (Indigenous People's Version)
September 21, 2025

Green Grass - 40 Years of Partnership

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...

Isaiah 11: 1

A little more than a year ago, six travelers from FCCOL visited our Lakota friends in South Dakota after a five year absence. We went in order to see what remained of our partnership with the community at Green Grass, and in the town of Eagle Butte. Covid had interrupted our annual visits, and the passage of time meant that many of those most passionate about our partnership - both here and in South Dakota - were no longer with us. That, combined with the fact that there is no longer a worshipping community at the Green Grass church, made us wonder what the future held for our partnership. Indeed, it made us wonder if there was a future.

What we discovered was that the bonds of affection between our respective communities remained strong. It was like a fire that had once roared, where a bed of hot coals still remained. Visiting one year ago, we sensed the heat still rising from those coals. And with a little tending, we concluded, the fire could be rekindled. And so this past June, eighteen people traveled to South Dakota, a visit that marked the 40th anniversary of our partnership with the Lakota people of Green Grass, Eagle Butte, and the wider Cheyenne River Reservation. A year ago, we could only see the glowing embers of this relationship. This year we saw the flames of this sacred fire of partnership burning once again.

Each of our travelers have their own impressions, but I wish to offer just one, as a means of suggesting why this relationship continues to be of great importance for our congregation. After our arrival, the first thing we did was to visit the site of Wounded Knee, where, in 1890, U.S. soldiers had slaughtered some 300 men, women, and children, as a part of what was then called "Manifest Destiny." It's a sobering way to begin, and I apologized then just as I do now to all of you. But Wounded Knee allows us to enter into the layers of trauma and violence that the Lakota community, and indeed, all Indigenous peoples in North America, have suffered. But it also allows us to consider how the treatment of Native Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries provided a template for the treatment of Africans by the colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Later, it provided a template for Germany's own version of Manifest Destiny, called Lebensraum, in the 1930's and 40's, as Germany annexed first Poland, and then tried to annex much of the land held by Russia. We spoke of how it prefigured the atrocities we're seeing in Gaza, and we spoke of how our own government is, even now, openly trying to revive some

notion of Manifest Destiny. All of that is somehow contained in the terrible site called Wounded Knee. Finally, though, we spoke about the need to pause and to reflect, to mourn and to lament, that we might begin to imagine a different future for the human family.

A little later I came across a passage from Black Elk, the Lakota medicine man and wisdom keeper who survived Wounded Knee. Looking back on that event nearly sixty years later, after two world wars had been fought, he spoke these words:

“I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream...the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.”

Standing as we do 135 years after Wounded Knee, the words of Black Elk sound prophetic. Who can doubt the truth of those words, on the Reservations, or really anywhere right now? And yet, since that time, there have been those who have worked, against all the odds, to plant the sacred tree once again, and to restore the hoop that binds the world, and the human family, back together. We see it when our Indigenous friends work to restore their traditions, going so far as to share them with us. We see it in the sacred tree planted at the center of a sun dance ring, where all the prayers of the people are gathered. We see it in the grandparents that are raising and educating their grandchildren at Green Grass. We see it in the struggle to remain sober among those who have felt the ravages of addiction. And we see it in the open hand of friendship extended to all of us here in Old Lyme, across 40 years of partnership. Yes, the sacred tree was destroyed. But there are those who have replanted and carefully nurtured it - a tender shoot springing from a stump - not unlike Isaiah imagining a future for his people.

This year, our friends insisted on cooking meals for us. They made a cake in our honor. The tribe issued a proclamation, establishing June 22nd as a day set aside in honor of The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme. And then, as if that wasn’t enough, the people of Green Grass had us all line up, and they each took turns shaking our hands one by one, thanking us for being there. I have to tell you, that moment nearly gutted me. That they should thank us, after all that they have lost, after all they have suffered, after all that they have given over the years, after everything, was nearly overwhelming. It was a gesture of love, extended not only to those of us who were there, but extended to our whole community. It helped us to see that, indeed, the sacred tree is not dead.

Across 40 years of friendship, many of you have traveled to Green Grass. You have cooked meals. You have listened to stories. You have prayed in sweat lodges, and sometimes at sun dances. You have driven people around the reservation. You have fixed broken pipes and have installed new appliances. You have led art projects for children. You have taken young people out for ice cream. You have bought beadwork and quilts, and sometimes you have sent money. You have hosted people in your homes. And you have mourned when another of our friends has crossed over to be with the ancestors.

In all of those ways, so many of you have kept this partnership alive. Amidst so much tragedy, I believe your friendship - our partnership - has helped in some small way to nurture the sacred tree, that tender shoot growing from the stump of Wounded Knee. I believe that in some small way, this partnership has helped to mend the broken hoop of the world.

Each of those who visited Green Grass this year added just a bit of themselves to this work of restoration, tending the sacred tree. It was a delight to travel with each of them, just as it has been a delight to travel with many of you over the years, as we nurture the sacred tree, as we guard this ancient flame.