

“By hiring the reservation wild man to dress in his most hideous costume of feathers, paint, moccasins, blanket, leggings, and scalp lock, and to display his savagery, by hair lifting war-whoops, make those who pay to see him think he is a blood-thirsty creature ready to devour people alive. It is this nature in our red brother that is better dead than alive, and when we agree with the oft-repeated sentiment that the only good Indian is a dead one, we mean this characteristic of the Indian. Carlisle School's mission is to KILL this Indian, as we build up the better man. We give the rising Indian something nobler and higher to think about and do, and he comes out a young man with the ambitions and aspirations of his more favored white brother. We do not like to keep alive the stories of the past, hence deal more with his present and his future.”

Those are the words of Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, which opened its doors in 1879, taking in Native children from all over the country. As offensive as these words are, and as difficult as they were for me to just repeat, they capture quite well the approach the United States Government took at the turn of the century with all Native people in this country. The goal was to force indigenous people to forget who they were and strip away from them every last shred of their cultural heritage. By taking away their language, their culture and their past, the idea was that Navajos and Lakota, Ute and Hopi would actually become Western Europeans, only with a different skin color. In fact, speaking to a group of Baptist ministers in 1883, Pratt said this in stridently clear language. “In Indian civilization I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indians in OUR

civilization, and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.” Pratt is most often quoted using the motto, “Kill the Indian and save the man.”

Carlisle was the first and perhaps most hideous of all the boarding schools, where male Indian children were forced to wear military style uniforms and females Victorian style dresses. Boarding schools were just one phase in this process. In 1883 the Indian Religious Crime Code was enacted, which said that indigenous people could be imprisoned for taking part in Native religious ceremonies. Then, of course, the system of reservations was established, taking away any possibility that indigenous people could continue their ancient traditions. The final straw came by 1888, when the millions of buffalo roaming the plains of this country were almost totally extinguished, leaving many tribes with no possible way to maintain their way of life.

It is a very old story. For centuries, dominant civilizations have attempted to conquer minority groups, and then proceed to tell them that they need to give up their old ways and begin acting just like them. A common methodology for doing this is to take away the others history and tradition. Most often, this method of domination is successful. History is written, as they say, by the victors, and hundreds of cultures have totally disappeared from the face of the earth because they were swallowed up by a much larger group. Without maintaining our cultural identity, we lose a major part of who we are and often disappear all together. That is why it is so important here at St. David’s for us to create liturgies that lift up Navajo culture as well as every other culture that is represented by each of us. To not do so is to participate in taking away someone’s soul.

Perhaps the most successful group in all of history in protecting their culture from obliteration has been the Jewish people. It is one of the most amazing stories in human history that the very tiny tribe of Hebrews surrounded by cultures 100 times their size, and often taken over by those cultures, not only survived as a group, but also became one of the most important influences in world history and religion. That is why in my opinion, the Hebrew Bible is so important to indigenous cultures everywhere today. It offers a “how to” methodology in preserving culture in a meaningful way. If you are Navajo, these are not just stories for you, they are YOUR story.

The great question that the Hebrews had to face, just as Navajos do today, is this; “How do we maintain our sense of identity when we are so greatly outnumbered?” One Jewish answer to this is found in today’s Gospel. In Judaism, it is called the purity law, which refers to all those regulations in Deuteronomy 14 and Leviticus 11 that we now refer to as kosher practices. “Kosher” means “appropriate” and those laws center around cleanliness and avoiding ritual defilement. Forgetting for a second the practical reasons why these laws existed, what they effectively did was culturally distinguish a Jew from the rest of society. Just as the fry bread Alice brought to the food pantry on Thursday distinguishes Navajo culture, keeping kosher made (and continues to make) distinctive, Jewish culture from the rest of society.

What this meant was that even after the Jewish people had been absorbed into the culture of the Babylonians and the Persians and the Romans and nearly everyone else around them, they remained linked by a common practice. Even after the diaspora, when Jews were strewn all over the world and had no way to stay in community with

each other, their culture still survived. People knew they were Jews because they wouldn't eat pigs or shellfish.

I have heard many a sermon on today's Gospel attacking the purity code as a harmful system. But the truth of the matter is that without it, Judaism, in all likelihood, would have ceased to exist. Those laws did nothing less than save Jewish culture and provide Jews with the self-esteem they needed to persevere as a people. Jesus, of course, is well versed in Jewish history and the Torah. He knows darn well how important the purity code was in saving his culture. But still, Jesus chooses today to purposefully and deliberately break the code. Why? Why does he decide to disregard what his bible says and in so doing reject a code that saved his people? This morning I would like to suggest that Jesus does so not because he is adverse to preserving his cultural heritage, but because that is exactly what he wants to do.

There was a time and a place when keeping kosher was what saved Judaism. But by Jesus's time, something has changed. The section of the purity code that he attacks had actually begun segregating people, rather than bringing them together. That's because for a Pharisee or a scribe living in towns, washing hands in a ritual manner was not a difficult task. But for a peasant farmer in rural areas, it was all but impossible. Washing hands out in the fields, where farmers spent the majority of their time, could not be done. Taking ritual baths when water was so scarce was beyond impractical. Both farmers and fisherman also had to handle dead animals all the time, another purity law they could not follow if they were going to survive.

Similar issues existed for itinerant travelers like Jesus and his disciples. So while

the purity laws may have effectively preserved Jewish culture in the past and kept folk connected to one another as a community, what Jesus sees are laws that are now segregating Jews from one another. Small minority groups of Pharisees and scribes began to see themselves as better than and aloof from regular workers, because they were ritually clean and others were not. The law was effectively keeping peasants, farmers and fisherman out of the community, and as such, it was having the opposite effect as what was originally intended. Instead of preserving culture and keeping people together, it was driving a wedge between them and forcing people out.

Here lies the central component of all those battles we hear about in the Gospels between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees are rightfully angered by a man who disregards laws in the Torah. They are also incensed that Jesus would break a purity law, of all things, the very law that they too realize preserved their culture and saved them as a people. It is not difficult to imagine the words that they must have used in their argument, because they are the same words we often hear today. “How can you abandon our most precious tradition? How can you disregard what the Bible says?”

This of course, is not the first time Jesus does this. The argument ensues throughout the Gospels. Jesus breaks another biblical law and the Pharisees have a another cow. He touches a woman who is hemorrhaging. He handles a corpse. Immediately after this story in Mark’s Gospel, he touches Gentiles (unclean people). He touches lepers. He routinely ignores the sabbath laws.

In every case, Jesus’s reasoning for breaking the law in the Torah is the same. Continuing to follow the law will mean that someone will be left out of the community.

Instead of creating community, the law is strangling it, segregating people and leaving them out. Jesus breaks the purity code over and over again, because he believes it has outlived its usefulness. It was created to protect the people. But what it was doing was separating some of the people from their own culture, from their own religion. It, like all those dominant societies before, was now taking away their culture rather than protecting it. It was excluding people who, because of their life circumstances, could not follow the code.

Our reading from the letter of James reminds us that the argument does not end with Jesus. After Jesus's death, his brother James is remembered as the one who successfully argues that Gentiles be allowed to enter the fledgling Jewish/Christian community, even though they have not followed the purity code. "Therefore I have reached the decision," James says in Acts 15, "that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God..." Just as with Jesus, today's letter of James suggests that faith is centered on bringing neighbor and alien into the community. Biblical laws and codes are fine, but we must always remember that their purpose is to preserve culture and bring us together as a community. If they are no longer accomplishing this, then it no longer makes sense to continue following them. The sin for both Jesus and James is not breaking a biblical law, but forgetting the reason the law existed in the first place. The sin for them is not breaking tradition, but anything that contributes to the segregation of another from the beloved community of God.

It seems patently obvious where Jesus's priorities lie. Then how is it, we must ask, that we continue to have this same argument today? The Pharisees are nice

enough people and their hearts are in the right place. Their desire to follow the biblical code and preserve tradition is laudable. But when doing so means that we are disenfranchising another, or not allowing someone to fully participate in our religious culture, there is no question, at least from Jesus's and James's point of view, what we need to do.

How then, can we possibly begin with a theology that suggests that Biblical law is eternal? And how could we ever refuse to stray from biblical tradition when it separates others from the love of God? Following any code by rote, even a Biblical code, is exactly what Jesus taught us not to do. Instead, he teaches us over and over, that the sin we commit is segregating others from the reign of God. Beloved, if Jesus and James regularly broke biblical codes in favor of respecting the dignity of every human being, how can we possibly justify a theology of Biblical tradition over and above everything?

As Christians then, this is how we decide how to interpret the Bible, how to set up our churches, how to order our governments, how to live our lives. Like Jesus, we must always avoid segregation and create a church and a world of inclusion.

That is why I believe the Episcopal church finally got it right in the 1960's when we made Civil Rights the central concern of this church, even while people in the south left our pews in droves, citing Biblical verses as their justification for continued segregation. That is why I believe we got it right when we finally began ordaining female priests and deacons in 1976, over and against the objections of those who said

the bible offered no tradition to justify this. And that is why I believe we got it right weeks ago at General Convention when we passed D025, clearly expressing our theology that ALL of the baptized in this church have had and will always have full and equal access to all of our sacraments, over and against the objections of some who said we were not being faithful to our biblical tradition.

Yes, we should and we must always honor the tradition of our cultural and religious ancestors. We should and we must always honor all of the writings in our sacred text. We need to honor the purity code of the Hebrew Bible, admiring how it brought a sense of identity and cultural strength to a community that would have otherwise disappeared into nothingness. We also must learn from it how to fortify Navajo culture and other cultures today who have suffered from attempts to take it all away from them. But there is a big difference between honoring our Biblical tradition and indiscriminately adopting it wholly and completely into our own time and culture.

Of course, it is much easier to do the latter. It is much easier to just follow the rules, no matter what they say. It's much easier to say the Bible is always right. It's also much easier having purity codes or dogmatic rules to decide who is in and who is out. It is neat and orderly. But it is clearly not the life that Jesus calls us to live. No matter how it is presented, exclusivity is a sin, the sin that Jesus spends his entire ministry trying to erase.

So let us instead have the courage to change our tradition, whenever such tradition isolates a single person from the reign of God. Let us have the courage to always bring everyone in, even if we must break the law to do so. Let us continue the

struggle to create a community, a church, a nation, and a world where there are no outcasts, where everyone is always inside the circle. It may not be easy. It will definitely be messy, but with all of us together, we will discover the power of the living God, blooming in our very midst.

Amen.