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Sermon: “Mitakuye Oyasis”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

In 1996 and in 2006 I led mission trips to the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota. I've been in third world cultures. This was a third world town within our country. Now the Rosebud reservation is the home of the Brule' Lakota people. Lakota or Sioux nation is divided into seven tribes, the largest of which is the Oglala which resides on the Pine Ridge reservation. The Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservation are separated by 50 miles. Each of the seven tribes have a reservation. Hawkwing, who we support, is on the Cheyenne River Reservation and another Lakota tribe. Standing Rock was the reservation that opposed the Pipeline recently. When we think of Native Americans we think of the Lakota people. In many ways, they're archetypal when we think of Indians. Pre-Columbian, the Lakota followed the buffalo throughout the center of our country. In this part of America, they were the dominant tribe. Native Americans have been in the forefront in bringing our awareness of Earth Day.

The Lakota people end every ritual and ceremony with the phrase Mitakuye oyasin. At the end of each prayer during a purification ceremony or sweat lodge the prayer closes with Mitakuye oyasin. When they connect with the trees or the horses or run into or over a rattle snake, they think or say Mitakuye oyasin. This translates to 'all of my relatives' or 'we are all related.' It is the underlying nature of much of Native American religion that humankind is not distinct from the web of the earth that I alluded to in my meditation. We heard this also in the opening words by John Fire Lame Deer, a medicine man from the area that we visited.

John Fire Lame Deer wrote a book called *Seeker of Visions* and was a grandfather of a man named John Cook who led us through a sweat lodge on my last trip. Lame Deer explained their spirituality of the web in the following quote:

“Nature wants things to be round. The bodies of human beings and animals have no corners. With us the circle stands for togetherness of people who sit with one another around the campfire, relatives and friends united in peace while the pipe passes from hand to hand. The camp in which every tipi had its place was also a ring. The tipi was a ring which people sat in a circle and

all families in the village were in turn circles within a larger circle, part of the larger hoop which was seven campfires of the Sioux, representing one nation. The nation was only part of the universe, in itself circular and made of the earth, which is round, of the sun, which is round, of the stars, which are round. The moon, the horizon, the rainbow--circles within circles, with no beginning and no end.”

Our Lakota hosts made us feel part of this circle and as one of their relatives. They invited us into their homes in this small village of fifty tribal houses. Our host Russell Eagle Bear was the tribal counsel representative for town of Norris or the Black Pipe Community. The name Norris was the name of the first post master of the community, non-native of course.

While the hospitality was great so was seeing the problem of the community. Since we were in Norris on August first we saw the results of the 80 percent unemployment. This unemployment sucked the hope from many of the Lakota people who had to choose leaving their culture to live in cities or keep their culture on their land and have few opportunities for meaningful employment. Of those employed most worked for the tribe. For the unemployed, the welfare checks would arrive at the beginning of the month. A package store was located just off tribal property and out of tribal authority, and the package store management would cash their checks and many would drink until they ran out of money. Sitting on the steps of the store drinking malt liquor until they passed out, they would wake and drink until their money ran out. Russell apologized for us seeing this, but this was an important part of our trip for our understanding.

One interesting dynamic among native American communities is their patriotism towards the military. Russell was a Vietnam era veteran who returned with post traumatic stress disorder and an addiction to alcohol. His son Russell Junior just returned from a second tour with the Marines during the second Gulf War when we were there. He too had PTSD. They had different ideas about the way we white people should react with their culture. Russell believed we should work together, his son felt the answer to their problems had to be Lakota.

When I was there before in 1996. I experienced a non-European culture in the heartland of North America. Both times we lived in tents in view of the a village near the Rosebud Reservation and worked repairing a house that was being converted into a youth center and the community building we used as our dining hall. We also offered crafts for the young children who

lived there and helped Russell prepare for his Sundance ceremony the next week. The area we visited was a remote part of South Dakota on the edge of the badlands national park and was very flat with few trees. The daytime temperature went above 90's and into the low 100's but the humidity is so low that you didn't notice. You had to drink water constantly. No one seemed to have to tell you this, your body just demanded it. The area was so remote the only radio we sometimes had was in the Lakota language and our cell phones were outside the area of usage.

The Lakota people were originally part of the seven council fires with other related tribes. One of these tribes was the Chippewa who were called the - "Nadowe-is-iw" - meaning little or treacherous snakes. It was natural for tribes to have less-than-complimentary terms for their other tribes. The French later corrupted the term to "Nadowessioux", which the English, still later, shortened to "Sioux". When there we visited powwow at Pine Ridge. The powwow is the equivalent of a county fair and individuals would compete performing dances and with their fancy regalia.

Our government's relationship with the tribes has been very inconsistent and troublesome. Both the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Agencies (later Reservations) were created in 1878 from the 1868 Treaty area called the "Great Sioux Reservation" and the non-ceded Indian Territory where the Lakota could hunt. It took the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 to grant full citizenship to Native Americans, but not full protection under the Bill of Rights for Indians living under tribal governments. Later the Eisenhower administration of the 1950s terminated this policy and started to move many Indian tribes off the reservation and relocate the individual members in cities. Reservations had been closed, affecting about 60 tribes. The purpose was to force assimilation of Indians into the American culture. This was our government's idea of the cultural superiority of our material-based system. But, support programs for some reservations, including health and education services, were also terminated. This policy ended in the Nixon administration in 1970, when it was realized that Indians had a right to maintain their tribal culture. It took the 1968 Civil Rights Act -- Title II, to give full civil rights to individual Native Americans living under tribal law. This in effect reversed a 1896 Supreme Court decision in which the Court had held that the Bill of Rights did not apply to individual Indians subject to tribal governments. The activism and takeovers by the American Indian Movement in the early 1970s, may have led to more thorough consideration of the condition of American Indians. But this was the civil rights era, and

many laws were passed in the period 1964-1980 for civil rights and environmental protection. Yet it was not until that the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 that our government finally stopped its policy of outlawing their religion and suppressing certain ceremonies the government called shamanic rituals. The Sundance ceremony that we saw the second week was one such banned religious worship. The right to use peyote for ceremonies by Indians was protected in 1965 by federal regulation; the right of non-Indian members of the Native American Church to use peyote for religious purposes was upheld in 1991. Still today fundamental incompatibilities remain between the western concept of individual freedoms (free speech, property ownership, etc.) and the tribal view of religious, private land ownership and political expression. There are also conflicts within some Indian Nations on policy, for example, between Traditionalists and those Native Americans who are interacting with and doing business with American companies.

For the last visit, our host, Russell Eagle Bear, had us camp at his sister's trailer a few minutes' walk from Norris. The houses of the village were built about 50 years ago as temporary shelters by the government when they tore down the preceding log structures. Far from luxurious they were not insulated and had a central heat source that was a kerosene heater and were still in use.

The Lakota people are a matrilineal culture. The Lakota women keep the fabric of their society operating. They establish the faith that the children learn. Historically the men of the culture left to follow the buffalo and the women maintained the home front. Since 1970's there has been an attempt to revive Lakota language and religious practice. In the Indian schools like the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania (where the athlete Jim Thorpe attended) the policy was to Americanize the Indians, their hair was cut from the traditional long straight ponytail to parted western styles. The Indian children were punished for use of their native tongue.

A significant part of Lakota Spirituality is that they live with nature as an internal part of their environment. Russell for example never carried a watch. Most of his time determinations were made by his feel for the sun and the time of day. He called it living on Indian time. When things happened, they happened. Here was a cultural conflict. If he was having materials delivered on Monday of the first week, they arrived on Thursday.

Events like this did not disturb Russell, but it drove me batty.

In an attempt to enlighten us outsiders, Native Americans describe their spirituality in many ways. One Lakota put it this way. "I would like to share with others some of the Wisdom of the Elders which seems to be rooted deep in their souls. It is a quiet thing, a dignity that seems to be born in them. Not needed is the materialistic attitude that the "white" people seem to need to survive... I am trying to keep in my soul the old traditional ways of the Lakota. I am still learning and I make many mistakes in this world that I am newly a part of, even though I have known all my life I was a breed. My grandfather grew up on a Rez and when he was old enough he left because he was ashamed. He was born in 1902 and died about 30 years ago. He had told us he was Sioux but never what tribe it was. I was with my father when he was dying and he told me it was ok now to seek my relations. His father had exacted a promise from his children not to "be" Indian" and my father was an honorable man. He taught me things he could - about tracking, wild plants that are edible, trees, roots, the seasons, things like that. He taught me about horses although it seems like I had already known horses all my life..". Another said. "Every part of this country is sacred to my people...The very dust responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors..." Yet another put it this way, "All living creatures and all plants derive their life from the sun. If it were not for the sun, there would be darkness and nothing could grow - the earth would be without life. Yet the sun must have the help of the earth. If the sun alone were to act upon animals and plants, the heat would be so great that they would die, but there are clouds that bring rain, and the action of the sun and the earth together supply the moisture that is needed for life."

The most sacred of the Lakota religious services is the Sundance. This is a four-day event in August but a form of the Sundance is common to many western tribes. It was represented in a movie named "A Man called Horse." Until the Indian Religious Act was law, the practice of the Sundance was outlawed. Russell Eagle Bear told us that the government used to fly Huey helicopters what was called Jolly Greens in Vietnam over these areas looking for possible sites of Sun Dances so they could raid them. The Sundance involves the entire culture. First the site must be constructed. The land is cleared and they have to cut down and bring in a 20-foot cottonwood tree from some distance. It is an honor to help carry the tree. While transporting the tree they will drink the juice of the chock-cherry tree. This bitter drink was something that was found in most areas in the black

hills. These black hills are a sacred place for the Lakota. With exception of the temple wall in Jerusalem and the Mosque in Mecca, western religion does not have an equivalent to the sacredness of the Black Hills to the Lakota. We can practice our religion even on the moon but for a Lakota to go on a vision quest they must go 'home.' The site of a Sundance is made into a sacred place. The cottonwood tree is placed centrally and a circle is formed around it. The four cardinal directions are marked out. There are four colors for the directions, black, yellow, red and white and corresponds to the colors of humanity. There is also the sacred colors of green for the earth and blue for the sky. The other sacred direction is the direction inside us. There is a color associated with the internal direction too. They make a shaded viewing areas around and outside the circle. These areas are for those people watching the event and many times these include people who are sick or in need of something and would like Wakan'tanka or grandfather to grant them. The Sundance is an event in which the participants suffer, so prayers will be answered or would be heard by the Grandfather. I cannot imagine a concept so detached from modern concepts of the divine. This is medieval Catholic penance. At a Sundance, the dancers suffer in the Sun so that the village may have their prayers answered. The community idea is that young people will suffer for the advantage of the community. Each year members are chosen to participate in the Sundance for the succeeding year and use the coming year to prepare for the Sundance. Each participant make a pledge not to touch alcohol for the coming year or go on a vision quest or do another feat that will aid their society. The dancers are suffering for all of their relatives

After the site is cleared and set up with ropes strung from the central cottonwood, the dancers retire into seclusion. The night before the dance starts they will go through a purification ceremony or sweat lodge. Two low tent structures with a hole in the ground in the center for super-heated rocks to be placed are erected. Rocks are heated in fires outside and rolled into the central pits. The number of rocks used determine the temperature of the sweat. While we were there we were invited to a sweat. The sweat is during the evening and the honored elder offers the first prayer. For two hours, we each offer prayers for changes that we would like to see in the world. Some are personal changes, others are for community changes. One couple who sweated with us really prayed for very personal problems. Now this is more than just hot. For the first hour, the sweat just ran out of me. I could not see for the salt flowing into my eyes, after my salt ran out I just sweated. At the end of the sweat the evening temperature was in the 60's so we cooled and

dried very quickly. One sweat ended with a thunder storm. On one night I did a sweat, the August Perseid meteor shower appeared as we laid in the grass with the heat coming off our bodies with no ambient light we watched the shooting stars. It was an almost magic time.

After the sweat, the dancers would then retire into teepees for the night prior to the Sundance. The next day some dancers would be pierced through their skin and attached to a rope hooked to the central cottonwood tree. Men were attached at the chest and women on their upper arms. They would then dance facing the Sun as the village spurred them on with drum-beats, chanting and prayers. Many people who came to watch were in wheel chairs or with obvious physical problems. Fires were kept going around the circle and wild sage was burnt to keep the smell in the air. During the daylight hours the dancers could take no water, and did not eat for the entire four days. At the conclusion, as the sun sets on the fourth day, the dancers fall back and allow the rope to support them until their skin breaks. Many dancers showed scars of past piercing from previous Sundances. At the conclusion, there is a feast of buffalo and lavish presents are given to everyone especially someone being honored and dancers.

The Lakota are not personally very materially motivated. They only have what is necessary. When someone dies, their possessions are taken by anyone who needs them. Little is passed on to children as legacy. When I was at the first Sundance in 1996 Russell's son who was about 13, participated in his first Sundance. Watching the gentle way Russell pierced him and watched over him throughout the four days revealed a rite of adulthood that our western religions and culture don't parallel or appreciate. The last visit, Russell, the elder, was dancing because his son had lived through two tours in Iraq as a marine and was now out of the service. Though I find the Sundance, very alien to many UU values, as statements of faith that suffering for a greater community will bring about physical changes for the hurting in their society. I do find the commitment to community by personal example and dedication as a concept we could embrace as well as their faith in the interdependence of all creation.

Lakota peoples end all of their religious events with the words Mitakuye oyasin!!! We are all related!!!

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

