

Series: CoExist!

Sermon: What Christians Can Learn From Native American Spirituality

Deuteronomy 27:1-8 (NIV)

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: “Keep all these commands that I give you today. When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you. And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster. Build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. Do not use any iron tool on them. Build the altar of the Lord your God with fieldstones and offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God. Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God. And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.”

John 8:2-11 (NIV)

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Are you building alters or are you throwing stones?

For this season of Lent, we have examined many religions from across the world. Today, I want to look at a Spirituality closer to home. Pre-Columbian Native spirituality in the Americas spanned the forms of animism, polytheism, the use of plants to enter higher mental or spiritual states, special dances or rituals, and a high regard for the overall well-being of the tribe. Some of these practices continue today in private tribal ceremonies.

From the 1600s European Catholic and Protestant denominations sent missionaries to convert the tribes to Christianity. Some of these conversions occurred through government and Christian church cooperative efforts

that forcibly removed Native American children from their families into a Christian/state government-operated system of American Indian boarding schools where Native children were taught European Christian beliefs, the values of mainstream white culture, and the English language. This forcible conversion and suppression of Indigenous languages and cultures continued through the 1970s.

As part of the US government's suppression of traditional Indigenous religions, most ceremonial ways were banned for over 80 years by a series of US Federal laws that banned traditional sweat lodge and sun dance ceremonies, among others. This government persecution and prosecution continued until 1978 with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

Despite living in Nebraska, that has four Indian Reservations, my interaction with Native culture has been limited. For part of a summer several years ago, I lived on the Winnebago Indian Reservation in Northeast Nebraska. Known as an immersion, it was in conjunction with a class at seminary. I had to immerse myself in a situation and life-style which was foreign to me. I was able to work out a living arrangement with a tribal official in Winnebago. I got to live in his back yard in a tent while I did my study. My tent was pitched right next to his sweat lodge, although they both felt the same temperature in a Nebraskan July! I learned first-hand about Native American culture, about racism, about reservation life. I got to see the effects of 70% unemployment and the tragedy of alcoholism. I learned about cultural pride and the power of strong heritage. One of my favorite memories of the experience was herding Buffalo. The Ponca tribe had 50 buffalo in the Winnabago pasture and wanted them back. The plan was this: We had to get the buffalo thru a certain gate where they could be collected to get on the trailers. Everyone would go by the buffalo and get them to move - sort of like a controlled stampede. My job, however, was to stand at the side of the gate and waive my arms, give them a target in which to run. My host said, Don't worry, they'll miss you and go thru the gate. They got those buffalo moving, and I saw 50 buffalo charging my way. I could see them thinking, "Silly white boy, he believed us." The buffalo went right by me and thru the gate. Before I left, my host, Charles Lonewolf, pulled me aside and said "RESPECT! That is the essence of what we believe. We respect all; we respect ourselves. Our spirituality is expressed in the way we treat each other and in the way we treat our bodies, our minds, our spirit. Our future is in our hands. If we invest in our future, through education, through positive community programs, through respect, we will survive. If we invest in our future through alcohol, through unemployment, through dependancy, we will die. Our future is dependant on our respect." Before I left, his family gave me a gift. It was a T-shirt, which bore the statement "To the 7th Generation". "To the 7th Generation". They explained that in the decisions they make, in broad areas such as government policy or on the personal front of family matters, they intentionally take into account the implications of their actions and beliefs to their 7th generation. What they do today, will affect their generation, the next, the next, all the way to the 7th generation. If we do that, they said, what and who we are called to be becomes increasingly apparent.

Although this belief is held in the Native American culture, it is certainly evident in our own traditions. For Example: According to an interesting research paper, decades ago, Max Jukes lived in New York. He did not believe in Christ, in God, or in any Religious training. He refused to take his children to Church, even when they asked to go. As of a few years ago, he has 1,026 descendants. Of those, 300 have been sent to prison for an average term of 13 years. 190 were public prostitutes. 680 were admitted alcoholics. His family, thus far, has cost the state of New York at least \$500,000. They made no contribution to society.

Jonathan Edwards lived in the same state, at the same time as Jukes. He loved the Lord and saw that his children were in church every Sunday. He served the Lord to the best of his ability. As of a few years ago, he has had 929 descendants, and of these 430 were ministers. 86 became university professors. 13 became university presidents. 75 authored good books. 7 were elected to the United States Congress. One was vice president of his nation. His family never cost the state one cent but has contributed immeasurably to the lives of many.

Two people, same place and time. Two people whose decisions and life choices molded and shaped the path that they and their descendants would take. Their attitude, their character, their motivation played a vital role in the future of their families. Granted, these are extreme situations, but the principle holds true. The behavior, and the beliefs of a single individual, any individual, can impact the world and the future in wonderful or catastrophic ways. And so I ask you: Are you building alters or are you throwing stones? Are you building alters or are you throwing stones?

Our first bible text this morning is from Deuteronomy. It seems kind of strange by itself. God tells the people how to build alters, a Bob Villa sort of Passage. "Set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Build there an alter to the Lord your God, an alter of stones". And upon this alter, write on it all of the words of this law". If you were roaming around in the wilderness, through the desert like these people were...stones are your only resource. Wood is very scarce, metals are hard to come by...but you can find a rock any old place. And it is out of stones that God has ordered these people to make an alter. To come and worship. To find God, to find what is sacred and to seek the divine. Stones are their only building material, their main possession and they choose to use those stones in a fashion that gave respect to God, respect to each other, and respect to themselves.

On the contrary, the Gospel lesson this morning from John shows us another use of stones. Instead of using the stones to worship and to give respect, the religious leaders have another idea, a means of execution. I think the way we execute our condemned today is pretty grizzly. Here in the U.S., there are 5 remaining legal ways that a state can put someone to death; Electric chair, gas chamber, lethal injection, hanging, and believe it or not, a firing squad is still legal in some states. These are all horrible ways to die. But I cannot imagine being put to death by having people throw stones at me. There were two ways of stoning a person, one being to put the person into a pit or tie them up against a wall and have the public take turns hurling rocks, or by taking the prisoner on top of a cliff and hurl them off to a pile of rubble below. In one case, you throw rocks at the person, and in the other case, you throw the person at the rocks. It has the same ugly result.

The teachers of the law brought a woman to Jesus. "Teacher," they said "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" For Jesus, it was a trick question. At that time, Jerusalem had been conquered by the Roman empire, and the Romans were the only ones allowed to execute people. So if Jesus said "stone her", he would have been arrested by the Romans. And if he said "Don't stone her", then all of Jesus' followers would have said that he did not support the Jewish law. It was a no-win situation. Here they are, with stones in their hands, ready to throw...and Jesus bends down to write in the sand. Now, we don't know why this important, nor do we know what he wrote. Maybe he saw all of these stones ready to be hurled in his general direction and he just wanted to get out of the way. Maybe Jesus is wondering where the gentleman is...it takes two to tango. She is not the only guilty party. You cannot commit adultery by yourself. And the teachers of the law said that the law required them to stone her...which was a half-truth. The law only said that the adulterers must be punished, the law never stipulated how. All of these things were probably going through his mind...while they kept pestering him for an answer. Finally, he does answer. "Anyone who is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." And you know how the story ends...one by one, the older ones first, drop their rocks and walk away. Finally, Jesus and the woman are left alone. And Jesus asks "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" And the woman replied "no one, sir". Jesus said "Then neither do I condemn you, Go now and leave your life of sin." "Go now and leave your life of sin." The woman knew she had sin in her life. The teachers of the law knew that they had sin in their lives, otherwise they would have stuck around. Jesus gives the woman two commands in one sentence. If I were to translate this into common language, it would be "Stop It!" "Go and lead a better life!" Two commands "Stop what you are doing" and "Go and lead a better life!" This is Jesus's big soap box moment. His chance to tell us to knock off the sin in our lives. Are you committing adultery? Stop it! Are you not being honest with friends or family? Stop it! Are you treating your body in terrible ways, destroying it physically or

mentally? Stop it! Do you take advantage of others? Stop it! Do you like to gossip? Stop it! I wanted to call this sermon, “Stop it” but it neglected the positive aspect of this passage...Go and lead a better life. Make the right decisions, make the right judgements. Don’t compromise yourself or what you know to be true. You need to respect God, your family and your friends, and yourself. If you don’t, the results are grim. Like I said, your behavior, your actions, the beliefs you hold can impact the world and the future in wonderful or catastrophic ways. And so I ask you again: Are you building alters or are you throwing stones? Are you building alters or are you throwing stones? Do you take what you have and make something positive out of it or do you take what you have and turn it into something less than what it can be?

Years ago in Germany there was a young Jewish boy who had a profound sense of admiration for his father. The life of the family centered around the acts of piety and devotion prescribed by their religion. The father was zealous in attending worship and instruction and demanded the same from his children. While the boy was a teenager the family was forced to move to another town in Germany. In the new location there was no synagogue, and the pillars of the community all belonged to the Lutheran church. Suddenly, the father announced to the family that they were all going to abandon their Jewish traditions and join the Lutheran church. When the stunned family asked why, the father explained that it was necessary to help his business. The youngster was bewildered and confused. His deep disappointment soon gave way to anger and intense bitterness that plagued him throughout his life. He left Germany and went to England to study. Each day, he sat daily at the British Museum formulating his ideas and composing a book. His book introduced a new world view and conceived a movement that was designed to change the world. In his book he described religion as an “opiate for the masses” which could be reduced to explanations of economics. He believed that our choice of religion was undergirded by our economic desires. We believe in that which is good for us and our life-style. Today there are billions of people in the world who live under the system invented by this embittered man. His name, of course, is Karl Marx and his book: The Communist Manifesto. The influence of this father’s hypocrisy is still being keenly felt around the world.

Are you building alters or throwing stones? The eighth wonder of the world, according to Benjamin Franklin, is Compound Interest. Compounding interest can be good or it can be bad. If I put \$100 in the bank at 10% interest, at the end of one year, I would have \$110. But at the end of the next year, I would have \$121, because the interest compounded on itself, I got paid interest on last year’s interest. The money grows exponentially. If I had a credit card with a \$100 balance at 10% interest, my debt would accumulate the same way it grew, exponentially. That’s why it takes forever to pay off those credit cards if you pay only the minimum balance due. This mathematical concept of compounding also works in our lives in the simplest of ways. Are you building alters or are you throwing stones? Smiling at someone or greeting them kindly are small gestures, yet chances are that your small action will be repeated by that person and that person will do the same to another, to another, to another. If you are a kind and generous person, your attitude will have an affect on those you encounter. Hopefully your actions will compound farther than you could imagine. On the other hand, if you are cranky, negative, selfish, have a bad attitude, your actions will have a negative effect on those you encounter and will also be spread farther than you can imagine.

I wondered why Respect was the one word used to describe Native Spirituality. Respecting each other, Respecting Mother Earth. Respecting yourself. I wonder if it had to do with the fact that European culture didn’t respect them. Broken treaty after broken treaty. Forced relocations. One of the last groups of Americans to get the right to vote wasn’t women, but Native Americans, many of whom didn’t get the right until the mid 1940’s. Despite the Freedom of religion, they weren’t allowed to practice theirs. Over time, the theme of respect has been elevated to a high value.

So this morning, I ask you: What do you respect? To what end are you working? What kind of attitude do you have? Is your character positive? Are you building a strong foundation for your future and your family? Or are

you destroying yourself and those about you with careless words, destructive habits, personal grudges? Are you building alters or throwing stones? Whatever you choose will be compounded. And I guarantee, to the 7th generation.