

**No Other Choice**  
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**Readings**

Mark 2:15-17

<sup>15</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

<sup>16</sup> When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>17</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Iroquois Prayer (adapted) – from *Earth Prayers from Around the World*,  
ed. Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon

We return thanks to our mother, the earth  
which sustains us.

We return thanks to the rivers and streams,  
which supply us with water.

We return thanks to all herbs,  
which furnish medicines for the cure of our diseases.

We return thanks to the corn, and to her sisters,  
the beans and squashes,  
which give us life.

We return thanks to the wind,  
which, moving the air  
has banished diseases.

We return thanks to the moon and stars,  
which have given to us their light when the sun was gone.

We return thanks to the sun,  
that has looked upon the earth with a beneficent eye.

Lastly, we return thanks to the Great Spirit,  
in whom is embodied all goodness,  
and who directs all things for the good of his children.

**Sermon**

As we heard in the reading from Mark's Gospel, Jesus sat down to eat with those considered in polite society to be sinners. Indeed, throughout the various Gospel accounts, we see Jesus moving among all sorts of crowds, being with all kinds of people. His disciples were ordinary working folks, and of course he himself was the son of a carpenter. In the spirit of "all sorts of people" Jesus was even in frequent conversation with those who opposed him, the political and religious authorities of his day.

So... we might do well to ask who would Jesus be sitting at the table with these days, whether at Thanksgiving or any time? To begin with, it would likely include those who many consider to be bad people – sinners – in one way or another: refugees and asylum seekers, immigrants at the border who some believe are seeking to game the system to get into our country and then get public assistance they don't deserve; or poor people who are clearly, some affirm, just lazy, preferring welfare to work; and so on.

Jesus... would of course see the humanity in every last one of them, would see that of God in every last one of them, would sit at the welcome table with every last one of them. Grateful for their presence.

He would also see the humanity and that of God in those who called the others “sinners” and worse. Even as he would at the same time call them to account.

The welcome table for Jesus was every table for everyone. A beautiful thing. In fact one of my favorite things about Jesus is exactly this, that he hung out with every sort of person.

As for us? Well, we have a long history in our nation of lifting up and sometimes living up to values of equality and justice, everyone welcome... at the same time as our history includes dramatically failing to live up to our stated values and ideals.

When it comes to the people who lived here long before European explorers and settlers arrived, the history is particularly tragic and blood-stained. It is in fact a history of attempted genocide of peoples who many of the Europeans considered to be less than fully human, savages who had no religion, and who either needed to be eliminated, moved, or converted to Christianity, or made into Americans – in short, their Indian identities if not their very selves erased.

These people too of course – from Wampanoag to Iroquois to Cheyenne to Sioux to Navaho to the over three hundred other nations of this land – would Jesus have sat with at table or in a circle in a tepee or around a fire.

In the same spirit, in the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that Jesus said that when you give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, welcome the stranger, or visit the prisoner, it is as if you are doing these things for him: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Now listen to the Cayuga Iroquois warrior Logan (1723–1780):

I appeal to any white man to say, if ever he entered Logan's cabin hungry, and he gave him not meat; if ever he came cold and naked, and he clothed him not.

Who, then, was living in the spirit of Jesus? And who was not?

The history of European colonialism on this continent has indeed been a bloody one, and still not often enough told or understood. I expect most Americans largely still think of ours as a history of Manifest Destiny: Europeans, and in particular the English,

arriving to a an untamed wilderness, the only human presence the presence of savages, a continent just waiting to be taken, sea to shining sea.

Of course this was *not* a near-empty continent. Tens of millions of quite civilized people lived here prior to European settlement and conquest, with networks of villages, nations, trade routes crisscrossing the land as they had done for millennia – many of them with traditions of ritual daily thanksgiving long before our national holiday.

So... the true history of these United States?

As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes in the introduction to her book, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*:

The history of the United States is a history of settler colonialism – the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft.

All of which remains abstract language to describe centuries of brutal enslavement, warfare, massacres, displacement, broken treaties, and on and on.

In New England beginning with the 1620 pillaging of native food supplies by the arriving Pilgrims. Then, not too many years later came Puritan settlers, among them some of my ancestors, including Governor William Bradford, who wrote in triumphantly vivid language of the “war” against the Pequots – essentially a massacre of hundreds of men, women, and children, burning of villages.

Just the opening acts of the centuries to come: further wars and massacres, forced removals, including the Trail of Tears, the Indian wars in the west, the Wounded Knee massacre, too much to recount in only a few minutes.

But as Martin Luther King, Jr., once wrote:

Our nation was born in genocide.... We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or feel remorse for this shameful episode.

And yet... and yet, all this said, and much, much unsaid, the genocide did not entirely succeed. As Dunbar-Ortiz writes:

Today's Indigenous nations and communities are societies formed by their resistance to colonialism, through which they have carried their practices and histories. It is breathtaking, but no miracle, that they have survived as peoples.

Look, the indigenous peoples of this land were not and are not perfect. No one is. They were not always peaceful. Pretty much no peoples are. Yet when it comes to what is sometimes too-gently called the “encounter” between European settlers and the indigenous peoples of these lands, we know who was the aggressor, we know who waged total war.

We know, too, that the wrongs have yet to be made right. This, in spite of often well-meaning though not always well thought out initiatives since the end of the Indian wars in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Even a congressional “apology” to the native nations several years ago was buried in a larger bill and never publicly read or proclaimed.

So change must be much deeper and more sustained than anything yet attempted. At the very end of her *Indigenous History*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz acknowledges (paraphrasing Native historian Jack Forbes) that though of course “living persons are not responsible for what their ancestors did, they are responsible for the society they live in, which is a product of their past.”

That’s us, right? She goes on:

Indigenous peoples offer possibilities for life after empire, possibilities that neither erase the crimes of colonialism nor require the disappearance of the original peoples colonized....

In this spirit, she affirms the need to honor broken treaties, to restore sacred lands, to make reparations payments to Native nations, and much more, including everyone in these efforts: from “descendants of settlers, enslaved Africans, and colonized Mexicans, as well as immigrant populations.”

She concludes with words from the Acoma poet Simon Ortiz:

*The future will not be mad with loss and waste though the memory will  
Be there: eyes will become kind and deep, and the bones of this nation  
Will mend after the revolution.*

Now, as I’ve mentioned, I am a descendant from some of the English who colonized New England. Indeed, as you know, I descend from our first minister Peter Hobart – so this feels personal to me, and I’ve found myself increasingly reflecting on this part of my ancestry the more I’ve deepened my knowledge of the full story of our history.

In one of Peter Hobart’s first sermons after he and his community arrived here, he named in what we can only assume was good faith, the importance of friendly relations with those he called “the red people” and acknowledged their invaluable “tutelage” when it came to farming, fishing, and hunting.

Yet, as we well know, the friendly relations did not last. My people, maybe some of yours – including for me Hobarts, Ripleys, Bradfords and others – were justifying for themselves the righteousness of taking more and more land from those who had been here for thousands of years. It would not and did not end well, to put it very mildly indeed.

But as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz wrote, though we are not responsible for the deeds of our ancestors, we are responsible for naming the truths of the past, including the sins

of our ancestors, and we are most assuredly responsible for how we choose to live and vote and contribute today.

We have no other choice.

So... on Thanksgiving, yes, we ought in the tradition of many cultures and peoples, give thanks for the blessings that have come to us, blessings for example in the spirit of the Iroquois we heard earlier, blessings of food and drink, blessings of moon and stars and sun, blessings of the earth. (Such recitations of gratitude are, not incidentally, good for both our spiritual and our physical health.)

Then, taking no blessing for granted and realizing that many of these blessings are entirely unearned... then we can resolve to live in such ways that extend these blessings, along with blessings of equality, freedom, and justice, to all peoples of this land and everywhere, and to resolve to live more gently on the earth that gives us life, resolve to live so that the generations to come, our children and grandchildren to the seventh generation and beyond, might live in greater peace and harmony with all life always.

After all, a truth easy enough to forget yet for which we can also be grateful, is that each small thing we do to redress past wrongs and create a better future – whether our single vote, our dollar in the Guest at Your Table box, our email to an elected representative, our conversations with those who are different from us or who have different political opinions or affiliations, our choices to use less and more sustainable energy... each seemingly small thing multiplies to become the one big thing of a kinder, better, more peaceful world – everyone welcome at the table.

And after all, if we would seek to be true to our ideals and values, we do indeed have no other choice.

My last words this morning are the words of the 19<sup>th</sup> century leader, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce nation of the Pacific northwest:

When the white man treats an Indian as they treat each other, then we will have no more wars. We shall all be alike – brothers of one father and one mother, with one sky above us and one government for all. Then the Great Spirit Chief who rules above will smile upon this land, and send rain to wash out the bloody spots made by brothers' hands from the face of the earth. For this time the Indian race is waiting and praying.

To which I would add:

May we live in such ways that the wait will not be long.

So may it be.