Like many in this congregation, I serve as a volunteer at First Parish Bedford in their sanctuary ministry, providing protection and companionship to an undocumented immigrant around the clock.

I often take the overnight shift. For a long time, overnight volunteers parked across the street. Thus, my shifts began by crossing Great Road and walking alongside the Bedford Town Common. First Parish's Puritan-style church stands at the back of the Common; the front is marked by two monuments, plaques attached to large stones. One stone honors military veterans while a smaller stone, names that this land is the site of a number of "firsts:" "Within these limits stood the first meetinghouse, built in 1729, the first town pound in 1733, the first school established in 1741, the bell tower erected in 1753..."

This stone, naming the many "firsts" established on the Common, is connected to another stone, sixty miles to the south.

Visit the Plymouth seashore and you will find a large stone. You cannot touch it as it rests at the bottom of a trench, surrounded by iron fencing. There is no plaque but it is inscribed with a year – "1620" – the year English pilgrims landed on this shore, a year of encounter between these settlers and the Wampanoag people who called this land their home. The protection around this rock suggests it is a holy relic, an object representing a secular scripture, the story of "the Pilgrims and the Indians" and the beginning of the nation we call "the United States."

Like many, I learned this story as a child. Right around now, in my elementary school we would divide into "Indians" and "Pilgrims." Your role defined whether you wore a severe black hat or feathered headband, all made from construction paper. So many trees gave their lives for the telling and retelling of this Thanksgiving origin story – an autumn feast of gratitude shared between settlers and Indigenous people.

But there is so much more to this story of encounter. As we know, the landing at Plymouth Rock was, in its simplest terms, a story of European colonization, of claiming land despite the vibrant presence of entire nations and communities already dwelling on this land. The mission behind coming to and claiming this "New World," religious freedom, is beside the point.

Yet, even general understanding of "the real story behind Thanksgiving" does not do this history justice. I am grateful for the careful scholarship and prophetic truth-telling of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, author of *An Indigenous People's History of the United States.* As we prepare for next year's 400th anniversary of the encounter at Plymouth Rock, Dunbar-Ortiz's work helps us approach this milestone with a more complete understanding of this human history.

I am also grateful to another indigenous leader, Clint Tawes, a former Pentecostal minister and member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Savannah, Georgia. I met Mr. Tawes last year as he was seeking home hospitality. As a person of Coosa and Nachez descent, he was traveling north to participate in the Day of Mourning in Plymouth, held each year on Thanksgiving. I was happy to offer my guest room for this pilgrimage. Mr. Tawes's sermon, reflecting on his experience in Plymouth, "Memories and Monuments," also informs this reflection.

In his sermon, Tawes tells a different origin story, the story of the Day of Mourning protest. In preparation for the *350th anniversary* of the Plymouth landing, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts organized a commemorative celebration. Leaders asked Wampanoag elder Wamsutta, also known as Frank James, to represent the Native perspective. His draft speech referenced Pilgrim accounts of violating Native gravesites, stealing food stores and kidnapping Wampanoag people to sell into slavery. The commemoration organizers rejected the speech as, in their words, "the theme of the anniversary celebration is brotherhood and anything inflammatory would have been out of place." They asked him to read another speech, written by a public relations consultant instead.[1] Wamsutta refused. He organized a gathering on Cole's Hill, across the street from Plymouth Rock, on Thanksgiving and read his original speech. Since then, Native people and their allies have continued the tradition of bearing witness on Cole's Hill on the fourth Thursday in November.[2]

This story of how the National Day of Mourning began reveals how intensely some defend the elementary school narrative, that of peaceful co-existence and an organic evolution of a new country that today reveals the gifts of many cultures including those of indigenous nations. Do you enjoy canoeing? Lying in a hammock? Holding barbeques? Thank a Native American![3]

---

[1] United American Indians of New England". Uaine.org. Retrieved 2009-04-09.

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Day_of_Mourning_(United_States_protest)

But this story is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, dishonest. If we are people of faith, which is to say people of integrity, we have a responsibility to seek a more complete and authentic narrative. And, when we discover the story we have been telling does harm, we have a responsibility to set it aside along with it's correlating monuments, no matter how reverently they are enshrined.

Having twice read Dunbar-Oriz's *Indigenous History*, the chasm between the story of settler/indigenous "brotherhood" and the stories rarely heard in US textbooks is profound. And the stories Dunbar-Ortiz brings forward are devastating – unprovoked murder of civilian Natives, forced removal from ancestral lands, countless dishonored treaties and separation of Native children from their families – sound familiar? – to be sent to abusive boarding schools for English socialization. One reason I read this *History* twice is the intensity of the brutality made the narrative hard to follow. I became easily overwhelmed by the human suffering revealed in this history.

These horrific stories should be told but they should not be told in sacred space. Yet, this is a place where we may hear the invitation – nay, maybe the expectation – by Native people to bear witness to these stories and allow them to reshape not only our understanding of American history but our place in the collective national narrative. If there is grace to be found through learning these hard truths, it will come through changing how we see not only the past but also the world. It will be through what one could call "decolonizing the collective mind."

There is an important moment in history that predates 1620, that of 1493, Pope Alexander VI's release of the "Doctrine of Discovery." This document, a legal and spiritual monument on paper, deputized European colonizers to claim any land and its people to the end that – in the words of the Doctrine - "the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread…and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself."[4] Thus Catholic colonizers received permission from their highest religious authority to engage in conquest as a holy act. Later in US history, the Doctrine would be upheld as legal precedent in support of disenfranchising Native nations. Perhaps you heard it subtly referenced in this morning's reading as the Indians of All Tribes claimed Alcatraz "by right of discovery."

---

[3] https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs141p2_024206.pdf

[4] https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/04093_FPS.pdf

This assumption of divine right to land and dominion over its original inhabitants sometimes dwells in our collective thinking. When Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz taught in the University, she would begin her Native history classes by asking her students to draw a map of the United States immediately after the Revolutionary War. Consistently, the majority would draw a contemporary map of the US even though the nation began as only the former colonies along the eastern seaboard.[5] Dunbar-Ortiz sees this error as a modern-day reflection of how "Manifest Destiny" impacts our thinking, the subconscious belief that western and southern expansion was inevitable.

One of the most eye-opening observations Dunbar-Ortiz makes is the way a changed understanding of how human beings relate to the land in England directly impacted conquest of this continent. Traditionally, English people understood land as a common resource, often sustaining themselves through agriculture and natural medicine. When land became privatized, many became landless and poor.[6]

So, making the courageous journey across the ocean to join the colonizing effort was one of few choices available to struggling former farmers. These disenfranchised English people thus became foot soldiers for powerful landholders, hungry for more land.

Back in England, some challenged this dramatic change in how we regard the earth. Many resisters were older widows, traditional healers in their communities. Those in power branded some of these women as witches and, with their execution, resistance was eliminated.[7]

By the time English settlers focused on this continent as a land source, techniques of genocide had already been refined. For when the English sought dominion over Ireland, they attacked Irish social systems and banned traditional songs. The

---

[5] Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*. (Beacon Press: Boston, MA,) 2.

[6] Ibid, 34.

[7] Ibid, 35.

English even attempted creation of an Irish "reservation." Bounties were paid for the heads of slain Irish people. In time, only the scalps were required.[8]

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz makes clear that what Indigenous nations endured at the hands of Europeans was genocide. And it was genocide grounded in a radically different understanding of the relationship between the earth and human beings than that upheld by Native peoples. Whatever racial hatred whites felt towards Native people resulted from a European sense of entitlement to land. To eliminate entire nations requires a dehumanizing process for the aggressors to do their work.

So with the blessing of the Vatican and a zeal fueled by belief in earth as private property, with some exceptions, settlers used the natural impact of imported diseases plus violence to try to eliminate what Native historian Thomas King calls "the Inconvenient Indian"[9] from this continent.

Thus, the emerging narrative called US history – and its correlating monuments – is defined by a practice coined as "firsting and lasting."[10] As printed on the plaque in front of First Parish Bedford, European settlers are falsely named as the first inhabitants. Other monuments reflect extermination and death of Native people – the popular fictional novel "The Last of the Mohicans" and the iconic sculpture "The End of the Trail." As I have shared before, I will not forget the New Hampshire history class I took in high school that celebrated the first statue erected in honor of a woman. In the midst of settler/Indigenous conflict, Hannah Dustin became a folk hero for killing her captors and escaping. In the statue that honors her, she holds a tomahawk in her right hand and a handful of scalps in her left.

This frame of "first and last" defines the current telling of history. And it is a history that repeats itself as we, as a nation, have not ended our hunger for land, such as land in the Middle East with rich oil reserves. Nor have we ended our practice of invasion. Too many nations have been subject to our power, including those in Central America, resulting in refugees from these countries seeking sanctuary within our borders and, at least in Bedford, in our churches. The same impulse behind settler colonialism can be found in hostility towards immigrants and refugees. Hoarding is a close cousin to stealing; dehumanization is their common tie. [pause]

---

[8] Ibid, 38.

[9] https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-inconvenient-indian

[10] Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne, 9.

Having received the gift of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's work, I experience it as a call to all of us to set aside old stories, to desacralize old monuments and to behold a broader narrative. It is a call to let this narrative relieve us of old frames and assumptions towards one that recognizes the equality and sovereignty of the Native nations who once served as the primary stewards of this land.

This call is nothing less than "a doctrine of recovery," of spiritual recovery from the legacies of colonialism and genocide. Native people would be best served by such revisiting of national history; it is time for them to be "first" once again. But they are not the only ones.

If you are of Irish descent or if your ancestors came to this nation to escape ethnic violence, you are invited to see your resilience echoed in the endurance of other survivors.

If you are of English or Spanish descent, you are invited to draw from the positive gifts of these cultures and to further honor these identities through your own actions, challenging a settler colonialist mentality, in our own time.

If you are an environmentalist, you are invited to claim a renewed relationship with the earth, grounded in mutuality, not in ownership. And should you struggle in your advocacy, remember the Sioux who, despite the desperate poverty on the Pine Ridge Reservation, have regularly refused millions of dollars the US government has awarded its nation for seizure of their sacred Black Hills. For, as they understand it, the earth cannot be bought and sold; to accept this money would be to violate this most basic spiritual tenet.[11]

These are opportunities for many of us to experience spiritual growth through learning Indigenous history. Yet opportunities also come with expectations. If we learn this history and we live in a town with a Native mascot, heeding Native leaders who name this practice as demeaning, I believe we are called to change it.

---

[11] Ibid, 208.

I close with Clint Tawes's experience from last year's Day of Mourning. He writes:

> Native people from various tribes as well as non-Native allies stood together in 14-degree temperatures, the icy wind blowing off the water, cutting through my wool coat and the four pair of socks I was wearing. But the frigid temperatures did not deter us from our purpose…We were there to speak the truth not found on the inscriptions of monuments. We gathered to tell the stories of our ancestors…
>
> Standing on that cold hill…the sound of the drum beat and the smell of burning sage drifting through the air as we turned to each of the four directions to offer prayer, I began to think and reflect on my ancestors…
>
> I was overcome by a sense of thankfulness. Thankful to descend from men and women who could endure the most extreme of circumstances …Thankful that despite everything they lost, my ancestors held on to one thing that they passed on to me – a rich and sacred culture…Though I gathered for a Day of Mourning I found that by tearing down monuments to mythology and embracing truth, the fourth Thursday of November became a genuine day of Thanksgiving…[12]

---

[12] https://www.uusavannah.org/member-sermons-2