Dismantling the DOCTRINE of Discovery

BIBLE REFLECTIONS
For individuals, small groups and congregations
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The Rich Man and Lazarus

Iris de León-Hartshorn

Text: Luke 16:19-31

I just love parables, and the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in particular. This unique parable is not found in any other gospel. It is the only parable that actually names a person with a proper name and sets a scene of the afterlife.

In most parables, characters are not called by proper names, as is the case of the Rich Man. His riches set him apart. The text says he dressed in purple and fine linen everyday, not just for special occasions. His wealth was earned on the backs of the poor through the oppressive patronage system of his time. This system was based on wealthy patrons who loaned money to poor clients with heavy taxation. When the clients failed to pay their loan, their land was confiscated.

The parable says he feasted lavishly, not just on special occasions. Feasting on special occasions seems reasonable, but everyday? This action was one of self-indulgence and self-gratification rather than one of reasonable need. Flaunting his wealth and feasting everyday was not his biggest sin, but rather an indication of where he was spiritually. His greatest sin was omission, what he didn't do.

At the gate of this Rich Man's house lay a poor man named Lazarus. Note this is the only time in a parable when a proper name is given. Lazarus means “God Helps.” Lazarus begged for crumbs, asking for help – but no help came. The only help would have come from those who proclaimed to follow the Torah, which is clear the Rich Man did not. The Rich Man was deaf to the cries of Lazarus.

Lazarus finally died and found rest and comfort, and the Rich Man never recognized his sin. Even to the very end, he continued to see Lazarus as his servant and asked Abraham to send Lazarus on an errand to warn his family. But Abraham did not grant his request and told him that if they didn't listen to Moses and the prophets, why would they listen to anyone else? It is interesting to note that the hearers of the parable had the words of Moses and the prophets, who taught justice for the poor, and could still respond. We who hear this parable today also have the words of Jesus that speak of justice for the poor, and still have time to respond.

Some interpretations of the parable lead into some connection of heaven and hell, rich and poor and God's judgment, but I believe what God is trying to tell us is far deeper than one of just judgment. The scenario of heaven and hell is like a theatrical backdrop to express the critical nature of human action and inaction in this life. This is not primarily a moral judgment of rich over poor but rather a cosmic event of the advent of God's kingdom that at the same time reverses our values and judgments so that the kingdom finds its way into our human awareness. John Dominic Crossan, in his book entitled In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus, writes, “The Kingdom is not one's ultimate concern but that which undermines one's ultimate concern.” In the parable itself, the ultimate concern for the Rich Man was wealth, self-satisfaction and indulgence. However, in the end, God demonstrates God's ultimate concern is for the poor and responding to their needs. In other words, it's about the transforming power of God's kingdom, turning our own understandings upside down in order to fully engage in the presence of God's kingdom in the here and now.

I find the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus both exciting and scary. What does this mean for me? What does this mean for the church? In the next few years, Mennonite Church USA will be engaging in an education and action project on the Doctrine of Discovery. Floyd Westerman of the Lakota First Nation said the following:
I would like to quote a very prejudicial doctrine that was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1823. It was written by the Church... Here is the doctrine: "Indian Nations do not have the title to their lands... because they weren Christians. That the first Christian Nations to discover an area of heathen and infidel lands has the ultimate dominion over those lands and the absolute title." This is a doctrine that we should... withdraw and renounce... to establish a new basis for relationship between indigenous peoples and other peoples of the world.¹

Here is the current reality of this quote: Native Americans have the right of occupancy but not ownership. They can live on the land until the U.S. government decides otherwise. That is why just recently the U.S. government had the authority to give title to sacred Apache land to a foreign mining company, despite much ongoing opposition.²

The church and Christians gave biblical justification for and benefitted from the use of enslavement, extraction of resources and extinction – the destruction of indigenous people and their way of life. We firmly believe it is the church that must now work against the continued use of the Doctrine of Discovery and acknowledge its destructive force, the benefits we have received, and work toward right relationships with indigenous people here in the United States and around the world.

Like the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Doctrine of Discovery is about wealth. The dominant cultural narrative in the U.S. says that those who have wealth have earned it, which for the most part is not true. The hidden truth is that wealth was built upon the backs of Native Americans, enslaved peoples, Chinese railroad workers and migrant farm workers, just to name a few. As I mentioned earlier, the Rich Man’s wealth also was not earned but was based on economic exploitation through the patronage system of his time.

We can continue to be blind about our wealth and its foundations, or we can embrace the advent of God’s kingdom and first acknowledge our omission by acknowledging our sin, something the Rich Man never did. If we are to fully engage in God’s kingdom, we must be open to allow God’s kingdom into our human awareness and then allow what we think we know to be turned upside down. Let the advent of God’s kingdom continue to unfold in our lives and in our church as we continue to follow Jesus! There are many ways of recognizing that God’s kingdom is here; there are many chances to accept it, enter into it, live it, and establish the work of God’s kingdom. Are we willing to be involved in joining God, who is turning the world upside down? This work is not for the faint-hearted but for those who are willing to be open to receive and accept the transforming power of God’s kingdom. Remember: we still have the message of Moses, the prophets, and Jesus calling us to do justice for the poor. What further words do we need?

Questions for discussion:
1. How have you heard the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus interpreted in the past?
2. What do Iris’ reflections on wealth mean for you personally, and for the broader church?
3. Why should churches become involved in work against the continued use of the Doctrine of Discovery

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Iris de León-Hartshorn is director of Transformative Peacemaking for Mennonite Church USA. She works within the denomination on core issues such as immigration, anti-racism efforts and intercultural competency to build bridges among cultures and move toward a transformed intercultural church. She is the co-author of Set Free: A Journey Toward Solidarity Against Racism (Herald Press, 2001). She is also a featured writer in the anthology Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry—Conversations on Creation, Land Justice and Life Together, edited by Steve Heinrichs.

The repudiated Doctrine of Discovery, a gospel of conquest, has its roots in the premise that the outsider, the cultural other, the person most unlike Western European Christians, is somehow unfit to receive basic human rights and privileges. This view seeks to dehumanize those considered “other” while simultaneously lifting up Western European Christians. What might Jesus say to those who propagated the idea that White Christians of Western European ancestry deserved all the lands and resources of Indigenous peoples all over the world? What story would Jesus tell to those who justified their theft and attempted genocide with the “Christian” Doctrine of Discovery and its subsequent manifestations, such as Manifest Destiny, White Supremacy, and American Exceptionalism?

The context of the story in Luke 15 is found in verses 1-2. The Pharisees and Teachers understood the tax collectors and notorious sinners, who were among the most marginalized in society, to be somehow less than themselves. When a structured theology creates categories of exclusive truth claims, delimiting the humanity of “the other,” all humanity stands in jeopardy. Jesus knew exactly what the Pharisees and Teachers of his day were missing in their perspective. His response was confrontational, artful and vulnerable. He told the Pharisees three short stories that were actually just one story.

First, Jesus asked them to imagine themselves as shepherds. Images of the Good Shepherd in the 23rd Psalm would not have been the Pharisee’s first thoughts. In first century Palestine, shepherds were most often Gentiles who were hired to do the work (see work by Joachim Jeremias). The Pharisees no doubt would have responded to shepherds through the lenses of what we now call classism (“lower-class” shepherds) and racism (“lower-race” Gentiles). Wealthy land developers also played a part in the larger economic picture of Palestine at the time. In the past, they had to fight legal battles over land claims in order to allow cities to grow, and so were quite happy about shepherds having no legal rights, since lack of rights prevented them from testifying in a court of law. As a side note, this practice is reminiscent of the actions of settler-colonial governments who took away Indigenous people’s legal rights so the state would not have to deal with Indigenous people’s protests over stolen land on an equal level as the colonizers. Jesus knew what he was saying. He was asking the Pharisees to imagine themselves as Gentile Shepherds; a thought that put the self-righteous Pharisees well below their presumed station and offended them greatly! The Pharisees had just received Jesus’ first spiritual punch in the nose that day!

Another group who had no legal rights in 1st century Palestine were women. It was bad enough that Jesus had asked the Pharisees to imagine themselves as a Gentile Shepherd, but now he was going too far. Was he asking them to imagine themselves as a woman? And a widow at that? Many scholars believe the situation of the lost coin to be about a widow because of the importance of the one coin. Widows were allowed to keep only ten drachma as a dowry to be used to secure all their needs. A widow wore the ten coins on a headdress around her forehead. Besides that, they were somewhat helpless. What was Jesus up to?, the Pharisees must have wondered.

The third act of Jesus’ narrative involved two sons; one of whom makes himself a virtual orphan for all the wrong reasons. The younger son’s impudence is shown by his choice in loose moral living. In first century Palestinian Judaism, what he did to receive his inheritance was unforgivable. As the second son, he was only entitled to 1/3 of the father’s inheritance (the first son received 2/3). By asking for his inheritance before his father’s pass-
It was the spirit of those Pharisees in Jesus’ story that accompanied the European Christian explorers and lawmakers, who maintained their religious certainty while they committed land theft and genocide justified by what we know as the Doctrine of Discovery.

The Gospel of Vulnerability

Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were looking for shalom. They were waiting for that one hopeful Sabbath. They were looking for the great day of Jubilee when all things would be made right… but how would they know? They would know, according to their prior instructions, by how they treated the orphans, the widows and the foreigners. Treatment of this holy triad was the standard of measurement of a shalom existence. In an agriculturally-based and patrilineal/patriarchal society, it was the foreigner, the widow and the orphan who were the most vulnerable. In Jesus’ story:

The shepherd who went after his one lost sheep was a foreigner.
The woman who searched for her one lost coin was a widow.
And, the youngest, wayward son had made himself an orphan.

While each sub-narrative reflected the end of the story by everyone joining the party - a shalom community party (a.k.a. “the kingdom”) demonstrating the very kind of community that Jesus was enjoying with tax gatherers and notorious sinners - the Pharisees and Teachers could not join the party because they understood themselves as more deserving of God’s favor than the ones whom Jesus loved, ate with and accepted.

It was the spirit of those Pharisees in Jesus’ story that accompanied the European Christian explorers and lawmakers, who maintained their religious certainty while they committed land theft and genocide justified by what we know as the Doctrine of Discovery.

What would Jesus say to those White, Western, European Christians? And what would he have the beneficiaries of such atrocities do now?

I believe Jesus was saying to them then, “Stop, make yourself vulnerable. Submit yourselves to the co-sustainers of the lands and look for me in their stories and values. Find shalom in their villages and live in peace.” But that time is long past. Now I believe the Pharisees and Teachers of his stories in Luke 15, and in most of the Gospels, are the Christians in America’s story. What should they do? Nothing less than radical humility and vulnerability through repentance will suffice. The fruit of this type of repentance must include thoughtful restitution and open-handed restoration, regulated by the victims, otherwise, the souls of those Christians in the American story may be lost forever.
Questions for discussion:
1. What insights emerged for you after reading these three stories that Jesus tells as one story?
2. How do you see the spirit of the Pharisees and Teachers alive in those who used the Doctrine of Discovery to justify land theft and genocide?
3. To answer Woodley’s question, what do you think Jesus would say to those who have benefitted from the Doctrine of Discovery?
4. What might “radical humility” and “vulnerability through repentance” that includes restitution and restoration look like for the Mennonite church? What might that look like in your congregation’s particular context?

About the Author:
As a distinguished lecturer, teacher and wisdom keeper, Randy Woodley (Keetoowah Cherokee) addresses a variety of issues concerning American culture, faith and Indigenous realities. He serves as Distinguished Professor of Faith and Culture and Director of Intercultural and Indigenous Studies at George Fox Seminary in Portland, Oregon. He is a founding board member of NAIITS, the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies. Randy and his wife Edith (Eastern Shoshone) maintain Eloheh Farm and Eloheh Village for Indigenous Leadership Development, a permaculture, regenerative teaching farm, school and community in Newberg, Oregon. His most recent book is Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision, 2012 (Eerdmans).
We tell ourselves stories in order to live, or to justify taking lives, even our own, by violence or by numbness and the failure to live… We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind.
—Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*

“We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us….”
The Promised Land narrative is a story that has told us. It has provided a biblical rationale for violence and oppression that has spanned centuries. In this particular lectionary text (Deut. 30:15-20), the Israelites are camped on the verge of entering the Promised Land and receive instructions from Moses before he turns over leadership to Joshua. This band of escaped slaves from Egypt are instructed to choose life by loving God and obeying God’s commandments, by not turning away to idols. I like the sound of this lectionary text: choose life, not death! Love God and live long in the land!

But after Deut. 30:15-20 comes Deuteronomy 31:1-6, which tells us more about the part of the story we don’t like to talk about—the dispossession and slaughter of the original inhabitants of the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 31 describes how God will cross over the Jordan River ahead of the Israelites and utterly destroy the people there, then give their land to the Israelites. This text doesn’t go into the graphic details of that dispossession; however, other passages like Deuteronomy 20:10-18 do describe how Israel should conduct holy war against the people of Canaan. There, the Lord commands them not to let “anything that breathes remain alive” (v. 16, NRSV). The text says that the purpose of this mass genocide is that the Israelites won’t learn the wicked, idolatrous ways of the people of Canaan.

Robert Allen Warrior writes that in this story, Yahweh the Deliverer becomes Yahweh the Conqueror. One oppressed people, the Israelites, are delivered by God out of Egypt only to become oppressors of another group, the Canaanites.1 Warrior is a member of the Osage Nation, and reads the Exodus story from the perspective of the Canaanites, the vanquished ones.

The Promised Land narrative is the theological bedrock beneath America’s faith in the divine right of Europeans to conquer Indigenous lands, and a warped quasi-Christian tenet of faith that is still deeply entrenched in the American psyche.

As European Christian settlers, Anabaptists entered the Promised Land story, and saw new “wilderness” lands through the lens of Manifest Destiny, the providential mission of the U.S. to expand. Some were fleeing persecution and dispossession of their own lands. I believe they were tough and intrepid people. They loved God and they sought to obey God’s commandments. Yet I wonder—was there another way for our Anabaptist ancestors (by blood or by faith) to interpret the Promised Land story? Could a people once persecuted perhaps have identified with the

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2From the conquistadors to Puritan preachers like Cotton Mather, Native peoples were likened to the Canaanites, Amalekites, and other nations of the “Promised Land” to justify their dispossession. In her book *Conquest*, Andrea Smith has shown how Europeans based their conquest of Native peoples on perceived idolatry and sexual abomination, linking them with the nations God punished through Israel. [Duke University Press (2015)]. Examples abound of the early U.S. colonists identifying with God’s chosen people entering the Promised Land. In 1776, for example, when the U.S. was looking for an image for its great seal, Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin both proposed images from the story of the Israelites crossing over the Jordan and entering Canaan. This was nearly the image that would represent our nation. [Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Discovery*, Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing (2008), 53.]
Dismantling the 
DOCTRINE of Discovery

BIBLE REFLECTION

Trail of Death, Trail of Life

What potential relationships would we have today with First Nations peoples if things had gone differently, if our nation and our communities had chosen another story of peace instead of dispossession? And since that did not happen, how do we seek shalom today?

oppressed? But in their desperation for peace and their desire to be model farmers and good citizens, the “quiet in the land,” they participated in conquest. Anabaptist settlers followed closely behind the U.S. military, often tilling the soil where only a few years earlier, native homes and farms and hunting grounds had been.2

The first Amish/Mennonite settlers came to northern Indiana around 1840, only two years after the Potawatomi were driven out by the military, in 1838. Like many other immigrant settlers, they saw the empty land as their God-given Promised Land. Only two generations or so later, some of their descendants, along with other students from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, stepped into a parallel story, the story of the Trail of Death.

Fifteen of us participated in the week-long seminary class in 2015 called The Trail of Death: A Pilgrimage of Remembrance, Lament, and Transformation. Our journey began near Twin Lakes, just down the road from the site of the chapel where, in 1838, a few hundred Potawatomi people were rounded up by a U.S. militia at gunpoint. We knelt to be blessed on our journey by members of the Citizen Band of Potawatomi, George Godfrey, Janet Pearl and Bob Pearl, descendents of those who were forced from their homelands under the 1830 Indian Removal Act.

A journal kept by one of the military conductors of the Trail of Death records the heart-wrenching story of a little settler boy who, when he saw that his Potawatomi friends were being deported, ran after them for at least a mile until his mother compelled him to return. I imagine his tears, and those of his friends, as they were torn apart. How many friendships were broken by the Trail of Death? What potential relationships would we have today with First Nations peoples if things had gone differently, if our nation and our communities had chosen another story of peace instead of dispossession? And since that did not happen, how do we seek shalom today?

Questions such as these occupied our minds and conversations as our Pilgrimage group drove and walked the route that the Potawatomi traveled to Osawatomie, Kansas.3 The journey took us seven days while the original group walked for about two months. We camped along the way to get a small taste of their experience, setting up tents and cooking our food each evening, and gathering to reflect and pray together at the end of each day.

Accounts of their trip describe choking dust, difficulties finding clean water due to drought, with intense heat in the beginning of the trip and freezing conditions at the end. More than forty people died of disease and exhaustion, most of them children and the elderly. The phrase “another child died” became a repetition we dreaded hearing as we read aloud from the original trip journal each day. We stopped several times each day at different stone markers and signs that commemorate the Trail of Death to pray a litany and to sing hymns together. Along the way, our pilgrimage group met with five descendents of those who traveled the Trail, listened to their stories, shared food together, and learned about each other’s lives.

We arrived at our destination near Osawatomie, Kansas, where the Potawatomi ended their journey in the cold of winter. They had been promised houses and plowed land by the government, but not surprisingly, the U.S. broke its promises and none of this was provided at the end of the Trail of Death. So the Potawatomi sought refuge at St. Mary’s Mission among Catholic sisters, and they hung animal skins over holes in the side of cliffs to try to keep out the cold. Thirty more died that winter, mostly small children under age two. Crosses at St. Mary’s list the names of the dead. That is where our group of fifteen gathered to share communion together, tasting but still longing for the fullness of Christ’s reconciliation and healing. We broke bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, with these crosses looming behind us. The cross on which Jesus died was a symbol of conquest, a tool of Empire, a weapon of destruction against the native Palestinian Jews who dared resist Roman occupation and land theft.

I think it is significant that Jesus’ name in Hebrew is Yehoshua, or Joshua, meaning Yahweh saves.4 Because on the cross, Jesus shows how Yahweh saves: through non-violent resistance to evil and overwhelming love that risks even suffering and death. Jesus, the new Joshua, does not conquer by the sword, by dominating the dominator. Instead, he walks the Trail of

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2The route of the Trail of Death is marked with signs and memorial plaques, a labor of love that historian Shirley Willard started in the early 1990s in partnership with descendants of the Trail of Death. See Potawatomi Trail of Death Association for more information: [http://www.potawatomi-tda.org](http://www.potawatomi-tda.org)

3[http://biblehub.com/greek/2424.htm](http://biblehub.com/greek/2424.htm)

4[http://biblehub.com/greek/2424.htm](http://biblehub.com/greek/2424.htm)
Death alongside those who suffer and identifies fully with the oppressed. Mysteriously, in so doing, he creates a new story, a new path for us to follow. Jesus, the new Joshua, creates a Trail of Life.

In the gospel reading from Luke, Jesus tells us that we can only follow the Trail of Life through costly discipleship. Costly discipleship is painful. Jesus says it will cause splits with our family, for many of us, splits with the stories we’ve grown up hearing and telling that are only partly true. He says that it means we will have to give up our possessions. Note that Jesus, the new Joshua, does not say we will “take possession” of the land and its bounty. No, costly discipleship means we loosen our grip on what we consider our birthright, our inheritance. It’s easy to say, “we weren’t the ones who took Native lands, that’s the past, that wasn’t us, so we don’t have any responsibility today.” It’s harder to admit that our inheritance includes milk and honey that was never rightfully ours. And to recognize that resources extracted from Indigenous communities today often pad our own mutual funds and investments through corporate profits. That kind of truth-telling paves the way for costly discipleship.

But let us give thanks to God! Because we have Jesus, our new Joshua. He leads us into a new story and shows us how to live and how to be in solidarity with those crushed by empire. So we pray, Jesus, Yehoshua, guide our feet on a Trail of Life!

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Questions for Discussion:
1. From what perspective have you learned to read the Promised Land story? With whom do you identify?
2. What changes when the Canaanites are more central to our reading of the passage(s)?
3. How has the Promised Land narrative shaped settler Mennonite stories and identities?

About the Author:
Katerina Friesen is a writer and community builder, and currently serves as the interim pastor of Belmont Neighborhood Fellowship. She will be leading the next Trail of Death pilgrimage through Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in June, 2017. See the following website for more information on this pilgrimage class: https://www.ambs.edu/academics/Trail-of-Death.cfm
Ancestral Narratives: An Alternative to Conquest

Safwat Marzouk

Text: Genesis 26:1-33

One of the most transformative discussions I have ever led happened during a Bible study focused on land and migration. It started when I asked participants to tell the story of their ancestors: where have you come from? And how did your ancestors relate to the Indigenous peoples of the land? Many of the participants were able to recall the stories of the migrations of their ancestors to North America; others did not know their stories. These questions led the participants to reflect on their different histories as migrants. Then I connected this process of reflection to the Old Testament and the way the people of Judah retold the stories of their ancestors upon their return to the land after the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE.

Those who returned from the exile in Babylon passed on different stories about the relationship between their ancestors and the land. In some traditions, like the Exodus-Conquest tradition, God’s promise of the land entailed dispossessing the Indigenous peoples of their land (cf. Exod 3:6-10; Deut 7). However, in other traditions, such as some of the ancestral stories, the promise of the land was not fulfilled through conquest. In the ancestral narratives, it is striking that the three major ancestors of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose stories were formative to the identity of the Israelites, are described as “migrants, aliens, and strangers” (cf. Gen 23:4; 47:9). Through these ancestors, God’s promise of land and progeny was linked to the identity of the community of faith as migrants whose well-being was tied to the well-being of other communities already dwelling in the land.

This Bible study will look at one of these ancestral stories from Genesis 26, which focuses on the relationship between Isaac and the Philistines. What difference does it make when the people of the promise recognize their identity as a community of migrants? How does the recognition that the faith community is a community of aliens and strangers shape and transform the ways in which it relates to others?

In Genesis 26:3, God commands Isaac: “Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham” (NRSV). Isaac’s status as an alien who lives by the promise transforms his identity and that of his descendants. The promise gives a sense of orientation, direction, rootedness and connection; it gives a sense of hope and a meaning for the sojourn. Living by the promise and claiming the status of alien as an identity marker liberates them from the rigid boundaries that are constructed by fear. They are liberated to take the risk of not only sharing the land and the resources, but also of opening themselves to right relations with their neighbors.

The famine that sets the stage in Gen. 26 likely occurred because of a decrease in rainfall, and led Isaac to migrate to Gerar. Once again, the survival of the faith community hinges on the generosity of outsiders. The outsiders, the Philistines in this case, become a refuge. They suddenly become insiders with the power to show either hospitality or hostility.

Being an alien is about facing the risk of being under the power of an “other” to whom we entrust our very selves. Famine leads to migration; migration holds a risk for the host and the guest. Will the host and the guest find a way to avoid conflict and violence? Will they overcome the fear of the other?

As a refugee, a migrant, and an alien in the land of the Philistines, Isaac initially prospers. His agricultural produce is blessed by the LORD: “Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him. And the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy” (26:12-13). He has possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envy him. His prosperity be-
comes a threat. Fear rears its face at the relationship between the Philistines and Isaac’s family.

Envy and fear ruin peaceful relationships. They distort the ability to show hospitality. They hold people back from sharing land or resources. In this story, these emotions lead to two interrelated developments: the Philistines fill the wells with dirt so that Isaac will not be able to sow the land or offer water for his cattle and family (26:15). Then Abimelech asks Isaac to leave: “And Abimelech said to Isaac, ‘Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us’” (26:16). Furthermore, “the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herders, saying, ‘The water is ours’” (26:20a). Because Isaac lives by the promise and by the status of a migrant, he does not use force to conquer these neighbors who become afraid of him. He simply moves away. Before we fully blame the Philistines, we should note that Isaac lied to them about Rebekah (Gen 26:6-11; cf. 12:10-20; chap. 20). It is possible that this incident contributed to the fears of the Philistines since they probably lost trust in him.

Despite the fear and broken relationships, the Philistines reach out to Isaac (v. 26). They bridge the gap that has resulted from fear, mistrust and envy. The political and military leaders go to Isaac, not to fight but to seek peace. When Isaac sees them, he does not reject them, but at the same time, he does not sweep the recent conflict under the rug. He peacefully confronts them: “Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?” (v. 27).

In response, they recognize that Isaac is blessed, and that there is an alternative to fear, envy, and broken relationships. They ask for a covenant between them re-establishing relationship. As a result, Isaac shows hospitality, and even before they establish the covenant, he plans a party for them: “So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank” (v. 30). A new morning dawns. A new beginning emerges for the relationship between Isaac and his neighbors, and they exchange oaths and make a covenant.

Through the covenant, both parties not only enjoy peace in the present but also offer one another a commitment for the future. When the Philistines first asked Isaac to leave (v. 16), he left in peace with no harm. And now when they leave, they leave in peace with no harm. The chapter ends with Isaac’s servants delivering the good news: “We have found water!” (v. 32). God’s blessing of water, of life for the community, seems to seal the covenant of peace between neighbors.

In summary, although things initially go well between Isaac and the Philistines, fear of the “other” disturbs the clear water. Isaac fears the Philistines, so he lies to them about his wife Rebecca. Yet both parties manage to reach a resolution that overcome conflict and allows them not only to share resources, but also to be in communion with one another. Isaac and the Philistines are able to establish a covenant, show hospitality, share resources, and show concern for the well-being of the “other.”

This text offers an alternative to the Conquest narratives by asserting that families of different tribes and nations can coexist and share the land and resources. In this episode, peace between Isaac, the sojourner, and his neighbors happens neither by creating rigid borders nor by losing boundaries. Rather, peace happens when both parties treat each other as subjects capable of being accountable partners in a covenant that seeks to find a way for a politics of coexistence to overcome the politics of fear and mistrust.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are your reflections on this text as an alternative to the Conquest narratives?
2. Between 1778 and 1871, the U.S. government ratified over 370 treaties with Native American nations, and broke, changed or nullified every single one. In this context of broken relationships, is it possible for Christians and/or U.S. citizens to live as people of covenant? If so, how?
3. For those who are settlers, how could an understanding of yourselves as migrants and sojourners change how you view your rights to the land and your relationship with host peoples?

About the Author:
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Tabula rasa and terra nullius: Biblical Misinterpretations that Justified Colonization

Mziwandile (Mzi) Nkutha

Indeed, our colonizers were legitimating our political and economic dependence by appealing to a theory of tabula rasa.1 They claimed that people of African descent had invented nothing, created nothing, written nothing, painted nothing, and sung nothing.2

—Leopold Senghor

I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still, part of me.

—Thabo Mbeki

Text: Deuteronomy 1:8, 1:25

See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land the Lord swore he would give to your fathers—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them… The land the Lord our God has given us is indeed a good land.

In the 1930s, some African students in Paris and their friends of the African diaspora launched a movement that they called "Negritude." Negritude is an example of Africans’ imaginative ways of pointing out and addressing the limitations and oppressions established by the colonial project. The opening quotation by Leopold Senghor are words of lament that he expressed during one of the Negritude gatherings. Statements like these do not just emerge out of mere frustration at finding oneself in a foreign land (France), nor are they merely a critique of the colonial master’s racist attitudes. Senghor’s words carry a truth that profoundly resonates with me as a South African: the realization that there is a strong connection between the notion of tabula rasa (empty slate of the mind) and terra nullius (empty space).3 Both these ideas were incorporated into political ideology and theology to justify colonization under the guise of civilization and Christianization.

It could be said that the Israelites had a similar experience of colonizing other nations when they found themselves in foreign lands. After their exodus from Egypt, they transitioned from Mount Sinai and the wilderness to “the land of the Canaanites and the Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Deut. 1:7, NRSV). The experience of both domination and victimization seemed to paradoxically define the Israelites. Once they were a people who found refuge in Egypt, and subsequently were oppressed under Pharaoh’s leadership. How interesting that after those experiences, the Israelites would later dispossess land occupied by other nations! That land was never empty when it was colonized by the Israelites; it was dispossessed from people and often violence—justified under YHWH—was implemented to amass it.

Old Testament narratives of land occupation in passages such as Deuteronomy 20 and Joshua 23 influenced applications of such texts by modern colonialists, from the continent of Africa to the Americas. I believe that colonial interpretations were

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1 Tabula rasa is a Latin phrase often translated as “blank slate” in English and originates from the Roman tabula used for notes, which was blanked by heating the wax and then smoothing it.


3 Papal Bulls of the fifteenth century gave Christian explorers the right to claim lands they “discovered” and lay claim to those lands for their Christian Monarchs. Any land that was not inhabited by Christians was considered terra nullius and available to be “discovered”, claimed, and exploited. If the “pagan” inhabitants could be converted, they might be spared. If not, they could be enslaved or killed. http://www.doctrineofdiscovery.org/ [accessed on December 20, 2015]
blatant misreadings of the text. One wonders what really took place when God told the Israelites, “See, the Lord your God has given the land to you; go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you; do not fear or be dismayed” (Deut. 1:21, NRSV).

Regardless of what actually happened historically, this text has been re-acted to justify colonization, civilization and Christianization. Thabo Mbeki, the second post-apartheid president of South Africa from 1999-2008, made the connection between civilization and Christianization very well. In his presidential inaugural speech, he reflected deeply on the impact of colonization in South Africa with these moving words, “I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still, part of me.”

The process of forming community in the newly colonized lands necessarily meant un-forming or re-forming the communities that existed there already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement, and rebellion. These practices continue throughout Africa today under neocolonial resource extraction justified under the original Doctrine of Discovery.

A gathering known as the Scramble for Africa, which took place in 1884-1885 in Berlin, Germany, strategically cultivated and reinforced the notion of tabula rasa and terra nullius. The themes of nothingness and emptiness that so benefited the colonialists emerged from a misrepresentation that J. Kameron Carter articulates as:

…a problem linked to the severance of Christianity from its Jewish roots. As Christianity came to be severed from its Jewish roots, it was remade into the cultural property of the West, the religious basis for justifying the colonial conquest that took off in the fifteenth century:

Thus the justification of colonialism by Christians, particularly in Africa, was not only caused by re-imagining biblical narratives of conquest, but also by the fragmented reading of the Bible and its Jewish roots. This misreading or misinterpretation led to the dehumanizing of the African people and to land dispossession. In my home country of South Africa, for example, the Dutch and British unanimously embarked on the quest to civilize and evangelize ‘heathens’ as the reenactment of the biblical narrative. Their act was to faithfully respond to the call of God that says, “See, I have set the land before you; go in and take possession of the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them” (Deut. 1:8, NRSV).

John Mbiti in his book African Religion and Philosophy confirms this assertion. He argues that the image of Christianity that Africans received, and to a great extent still hold, is very much coloured by colonial rule and all that was involved in it. We are still too close to that period to dissociate Christianity from colonialism.

Mbiti continues to deepen this idea, this time providing an illustration, a Gikuyu proverb summaries this fact very well: “There is no missionary priest and a European (colonizer)—both are the same.” This reality is also well captured in the words of Desmond Tutu, “When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray’. We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.”

Senghor, Mbeki, Mbiti, Carter and Tutu reveal and unmask the subtle political ideologies that continue to influence theological perspectives embedded in misinterpretations of biblical narratives. The question is: what happens when the reading of the biblical story compels Christians to justify colonialism? What happens when there is a conflict, not only of race, knowledge and politics, but a conflict over which God we represent or misrepresent?

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3. See, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Berlin Conference of 1884-1885” http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195337709.001.0001/acref-9780195337709-e-3500 [accessed on December 22, 2015]. Tensions between the European powers seeking African spheres of influence increased. In response, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany convened the Berlin Conference. The European participants at the conference recognized King Leopold as the legitimate authority in the Congo basin, but, more importantly, it was decided that a European power could only claim an area of Africa that it “effectively occupied.” In half a generation France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Belgium had acquired thirty new African colonies or protectorates, covering 16 million sq km (6 million sq mi). They had divided a population of approximately 110 million Africans into forty new political units, with some 30 percent of borders drawn as straight lines, cutting through villages, ethnic groups, and African kingdoms.
6. Ibid.
Questions for Discussion:
1. What emotions arise for you after reading Mziwandle Nkutha’s piece?
2. How do you see what Nkutha calls “the experience of both domination and victimization [that] seemed to paradoxically define the Israelites” displayed in the Bible, especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy? How do you see this condition in the world today?
3. What are some connections between what happened to African people and to other Indigenous peoples around the world under colonialism?
4. How might we be God’s “ambassadors of reconciliation,” in light of how the Bible has been misinterpreted to support colonialism and to represent an unjust God?

About the Author:
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Collateral Damage
Regina Shands Stoltzfus

Text: Judges 11

The Book of Judges pulls its readers into an accounting of Israel’s spiraling out of control after the conquest of land described in Joshua. The collection of stories knit together in Judges offer a cautionary tale; a warning against hubris. The spiraling events, of which chapter 11 falls just about dead center, are best understood when the events in Joshua are in mind. That narrative begins with conquest, and ends with Israel a seemingly unified confederate of tribes. In Judges, however, the uniform nation begins to fall apart. Episode after episode shows the reader/hearer that the tribes regularly fall into a series of crises. Will Israel survive? Was “conquest” the way to build a strong nation? Was “conquest” God’s vision for God’s people?

‘Collateral damage’ is the term applied for noncombatants who are harmed during war – the unintended victims. It is a sanitized term that erases the reality of death, destruction and displacement that happens to innocent people because of decisions made by people in power. In the book of Judges, we read a lot about collateral damage. Chapter 11 is the central example of this, and also illustrates how collateral damage, in the case of Jephthah and his daughter, is generational. Jephthah is introduced as “the son of a prostitute.” As a person whose legitimacy is contested, in view of patriarchal law, he is a marginalized person. He is driven out by his half-brothers, and becomes the leader of a gang of other marginalized folks. Jephthah’s place in the front line of the battle is strategic, because quite truthfully, his loss is no great loss.

The books of Genesis through Deuteronomy trace the beginnings of God’s people with a special emphasis on the men and their descendants – lineage and the births of sons are very important – and the acquisition and distribution of land and property. The narratives in Joshua represent a shift in the focus of the story into nation building. By the time we get to the stories in Judges, the tribes are in an incessant series of crises that threaten the demise of what has been so carefully structured. The narrator repeats over and over what the problem is: every person did what was right in their own eyes.

Every person did what was right in their own eyes, and frequently someone becomes collateral damage; much of the time, it is women and children, mothers and daughters. In Judges 1, Caleb’s daughter Achsah is given as a spoil of war. In chapter 5, Deborah, the judge, wins a battle for Israel while Jael, caught between loyalties, kills the enemy Sisera. The victory song for Jael imagines the mother of Sisera, sitting by the window, waiting for a son that will never return. But even as she waits, she imagines her son and his comrades dividing the spoils of war. The spoils of war include women. Women on the losing side of a war can expect to be given over to the men, raped, killed or carried into slavery. Judges illustrates how, over and over, violence and war hold special danger for women.

The story of Jephthah and his nameless daughter comes just about in the middle of the book. Jephthah, the expendable brother, is now a father and a military leader. He is anxious to prove himself worthy, to be victorious in battle, and so makes a bargain with God to sacrifice the first thing he sees on return from battle. Tragically, the first thing he sees is his own daughter. To make good on his promise, he must sacrifice his daughter. Adding insult to the most grievous injury, he blames his daughter for the predicament. She becomes collateral damage. Nothing good has come from this story, which stands at the center of this narrative of Israel’s unraveling.

The connection of this text to the narrative in Joshua is important because the archeological evidence to support the conquest narratives are not there. The passages that have been used to justify the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny are disturbing.
and yet they seem to have not been carried out historically. A subversive reading of this text leads the reader/hearer to note that nothing good can come from warfare. These texts about the destruction of marginalized people (Indigenous people, women, ‘illegitimate’ children) stand in stark contrast to the biblical prophets’ (including Jesus’) persistent and sustained call for God’s people to protect and defend the orphans, the widows, and the foreigners. When we read these texts, we lament the historic ongoing violence against women and the most vulnerable under conquest.

Unfortunately, the collateral damage of war and terror is not limited to biblical stories or long ago history. It happens today. Horrific instances of this nature still occur and one community of women – Native women – is vastly overrepresented, especially considering the current percentage of the Native population in the Americas. These crimes represent the result of negligent government policies, racism and misogyny; the combination of violence against communities of color such as police violence and colonialism, and violence specifically aimed at women, girls and people who do not fit into mainstream society’s notion of a gender binary. If you don’t know much about the thousands of Native women who have been sexually assaulted, disappeared and killed, it is no surprise. Crimes against women of color are less reported and less prosecuted than crimes against white women.

A faithful response to this continuing epidemic of violence must include, as a first step, naming it. Like Jephthah’s unnamed daughter in Judges 11, the lives of Native women and girls matter; they do not deserve to be snuffed out without a word of protest by those who claim to follow the way of peace.

For more information and further reading:

Questions for Discussion:
1. What emotions arise when you read this text and Regina’s reflection?
2. How might Judges 11 help us tell the truth about the impacts of conquest?
3. Have you heard about the ongoing epidemic of sexual violence, disappearances, and murders of Native women in the U.S. and Canada? How is this connected to conquest?
4. In what ways could your community join in lament and protest against crimes against Native women?

About the Author:
Regina Shands Stoltzfus is an assistant professor at Goshen College teaching courses in Bible and Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies. Her publications include “Set Free: A Journey Toward Solidarity Against Racism.” She has worked for various church institutions from her home congregation in Cleveland to Mennonite Mission Network and is a co-founder of the Damascus Road Antiracism Process. She is the mother of four grown children, lives in Goshen, Indiana, and attends Assembly Mennonite Church.
I am a Canaanite Woman
Sarah Augustine
Text: Matthew 15:21-28

I live in central Washington State, on the homeland of the confederated tribes of the Yakama Nation. I am a woman displaced from my own tribal homeland, and I am thankful to live as a guest on the homeland of the Yakama People. My grandmother was a Tewa woman, a “Pueblo,” from a territory that is now called Northern New Mexico. I am also a Tewa woman, although my father was separated from my grandmother and from the lands of his people at birth, like so many of his generation. I call myself a displaced person. Like many Indigenous people in the United States, I have been assimilated into a country where I still do not enjoy the status of those from the majority culture because I am plainly a person of color. I am also a Mennonite.

When I began studying the Doctrine of Discovery several years ago, I began to realize that I am the descendant of a People outside the fold of the “chosen.” I am a Canaanite woman, displaced from my homeland and the lands of my ancestors to make way for a chosen people according to divine mandate to take possession of the “promised land.” The early framers of the Doctrine of Discovery made clear that the Christian Church inherited the birthright of Israel with the coming of Christ and his message. Thus, the promised land could span the globe, the entire “discovered” world. My tribal homeland became the covenantal inheritance of settlers from Europe.

Matthew 15:21—28 reveals the tale of the Canaanite woman as she encounters the Christ:

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly. (NRSV)

The Canaanite woman appeals to Jesus three times. In response, she is ignored, brushed off, and insulted. Yet she persists.

This woman is desperately advocating for her child. Her first request is simply, Have mercy on me! My child is suffering. Jesus’ first response to her is silence: he does not answer her. The implication is that her request does not merit even an answer.

Despite his silence, she keeps crying after Jesus and his disciples; her second appeal shows that she does not accept silence as an answer. At this point, the disciples intervene and ask Jesus to send her away because she won’t shut up.

Jesus’ second response is to absolve himself of responsibility by defining his mandate, which does not include her. He states, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). Although Jesus healed the servant of the Centurion in chapter 8, explaining to his disciples at that time that many would come from the East and West and sit in the kingdom of heaven, in this passage he effectively tells the Canaanite woman, I am sorry, but your problem is not within my mandate.
Her third request is a desperate one: “Lord, help me!” She gets in his way by kneeling in front of him, blocking his ability to walk away. This persistent woman is demanding some action from him. Yet Jesus’ third response is to insult her – “It is not fair [or right] to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” – implying that she, in her status as a Canaanite, is no better than an dog. Her people are not worthy of the same dignity as the Children of Israel. Her claim is invalid and her status so worthless, she does not have any claim on him.

In her fourth request, she contradicts him. She says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Although she believes in his power and clearly understands who he is, she dares to challenge him! She puts her body in his way and tries to persuade him to change his mind. This nameless woman is in Jesus’ face and in the face of his disciples, demanding to be dealt with. She is tenacious, pushing him to respond to the question, are you who you say you are?

Who does Jesus say that he is? The preceding verses in chapter 15 tell us that he has recently come from a debate about purity with the Pharisees. They accuse his disciples of “breaking the tradition of the elders” because they do not wash their hands before they eat, therefore defiling themselves by eating “dirty” food.

Jesus retorts, “Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (15:3). He is calling them out for keeping the letter of the law, and in so doing, violating the spirit of their cherished faith. He explains to the crowd that is listening, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (15:11).

Later, he tells the disciples, “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evilintentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile” (vv. 17-20).

Now in the very next scene after he says this, Jesus is confronted with a woman who is apparently defiled, unwashed. She does not accept his silence; she does not accept his mandate; she does not accept his insult. She demands an answer: are you who you say you are? She is effectively telling him: You accuse the Pharisees of being hypocrites, but where do you stand? You have the power to help my child. Will you deny me based on my status, based on the framework of your “religion?” Or will you listen to the spirit of your faith and extend healing to an outsider?

Jesus is forced at this moment to confront his own racism, and the contradiction between what he says he believes and his actions. Will he deny helping a vulnerable child because she is in the wrong category, because she is unworthy, a “dog?”

He says, “Woman, you have great faith!” and heals her daughter with a word.

This is the situation of the Christian church: Indigenous Peoples around the globe cry out; in the Congo where the developed world extracts rare earth and precious minerals; in Suriname where the developed world extracts gold, bauxite and timber; in Indonesia where the west exports gold; in North America where Indigenous women are disappeared by the thousands, where reservations are mined for uranium and are used as dumping grounds for toxic waste.

The Canaanites of the world, displaced by the tenets of the Christian faith, cry out for justice.

How will we respond?

With silence?

With a rational explanation for why their problems are not within our mandate?

With insults?

Or will we join our voices with theirs in a cry for justice?
Questions for Discussion:
1. How does Sarah’s perspective as a Canaanite woman interpreting this text speak to you?
2. Given the definition of racism as a structural injustice that privileges one group of people and degrades other groups on the basis of racial categories, how do you respond to the idea that Jesus needed to confront his own racism? How do you see racism at work through the Doctrine of Discovery in your own life and experiences?
3. How has the designation of a “chosen people” been helpful or not helpful in the lived-out interpretations of Scripture historically and today?
4. What are your hopes for how the Christian church will respond to the people Sarah calls the “Canaanites of the world?”

About the Author:
Sarah Augustine is Professor of Sociology at Heritage University where she is also the Director of Student Spirituality. Along with her partner Dan Peplow, she is the co-founder of Suriname Indigenous Health Fund (SIHF), a private, international charity (http://www.sihfund.org/). Sarah led a team of Indigenous and church leaders to draft the World Council of Churches (WCC) Statement on the Doctrine of Discovery and its enduring impact on Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted in 2012, and has worked with numerous other church bodies to draft statements repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery. She played a key role in founding the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition of Anabaptists, and continues to lead efforts for advocacy, structural change, and international solidarity with Indigenous Peoples.
Global Market Capitalism and the Image of God

Wati Longchar

Text: Genesis 47:13-22

Joseph is typically considered to be a man of God who shows great wisdom, a man who can see the future, a good planner, a person who has the ability to mobilize people, a God-fearing person of high morality, and an able administrator. However, Genesis 47:13-22 presents Joseph as a man who took advantage of a famine to make Pharaoh into a dictator, a slave-owner, and a landlord. He protected and contributed to an unjust system.

For Pharaoh’s sake, Joseph did four things. In each of these acts, the Egyptian people were the losers.

1. First, Joseph gathered all the money from the people in exchange for grain. He made the people moneyless.

2. Second, he gathered all the livestock from the people in exchange for grain. He dispossessed people of their means of livelihood.

3. Third, he gathered all the lands from people in exchange for grain. He made the people landless.

4. Fourth, he bought all the bodies of people in exchange for grain. He turned people into property by making them slaves.

How might we see this passage in the context of global capitalism today, and the Doctrine of Discovery that created the conditions for robbing God’s people and God’s land around the world? How does market competition destroy God’s image? How do Christians protect and contribute to unjust economic systems and relationships, and how can Christians protect and contribute to more just economic systems and relationships?

Joseph’s style of exploiting people and land can be compared with global capitalism. Its underlying principal is maximum profit, maximum capital accumulation, and maximum exploitation of labour supported by a global military hegemony. All human power and earth’s resources are directed to the market for the purpose of commodity production and profit-making. In the globalized free market, the only people who count are those who have goods to sell and those who have the money to buy. This in turn drives many to the margins of economic life. The small entrepreneurs and Indigenous communities who depend on land and forest resources have very little chance of survival in this system. Furthermore, in a globalized economic context, the sole criterion of judging human society is economic. Who is superior and who is inferior is determined by one’s purchasing power. Global capitalism utterly undermines the cultural and moral aspect of human society. When this ideology is applied to human society, particularly to Indigenous communities, the logic is very clear: the more we are developed industrially, the higher we are on the ladder. Indigenous Peoples are seen as industrially backward and therefore inferior human beings, including their culture, religion and spiritual heritage. That is why anything that does not conform to the western value system is considered “devilish,” “irrational,” “backward” and “primitive.”

In my home in Southeast Asia, we hear the following deceptive voices:

“The minority should sacrifice for the sake of majority benefits.”

“Development and industry is good for people and our nation.”

“Governments are pursuing development for the future generations of the people.”

“What will young people do if we do not invite development and industry?”

“People need industry to enhance their economy and living standard.”

“Sell your land! The government will give adequate compensation.”
“People who oppose industry will always remain backward and primitive.”
“Development is sign of progress and civilization.”
“The U.S.A. is the world economic power because of industrialization.”

In the name of development, Indigenous Peoples’ land and resources are forcibly taken away. Indigenous people are faced with a dilemma of survival. We are asking the following questions:

“If we leave our ancestral village, what will be our cultural and spiritual identity?”
“If you do not allow us to cultivate, what will we eat? Do you want our children to die?”
“If you do not allow us to fish, how can we send our children to school?”
“If you do not allow us to practice shifting cultivation, what will be our religion and identity? Our religion and identity are centred on the soil! How can we worship God?”
“When all the trees have been cut down, where will the animals and birds find a home? Where will we find a home?”
“When all the waters are polluted, what will we drink? Do we have to buy water?”
“When all the air is unsafe to breathe, can we buy air?”

In contrast with Joseph’s actions, the Bible teaches that each person is created in God’s image and thus is worthy and valuable to the Creator. Any economic system that marginalizes human life falls short of the Divine standard. Therefore, in economic life, any individual, class, caste, gender or community should not be regarded as an object whose value is determined by “market logic.” As beings created in God’s image, we may not be bought and sold or dispensed at the whim of those who possess economic power. Human life is not to be treated as a means but as an end. These ideas may sound basic to us as Christians, yet the Doctrine of Discovery has followed the logic of Joseph and impoverished millions of people through permitting the theft of their land, livelihood, and labor under global capitalism. Thus, the image of God in Indigenous Peoples has been degraded.

The Bible so often plays into the hands of those with vested interests in continuing exploitative practices, and who satisfy their unbridled thirst for power and pleasure at the expense of their fellow humans and the earth. Yet the Biblical perspective on the inherent dignity of humans and creation is very clear. The central preaching of Jesus is the Kingdom of God, a symbol with universal implications. The Kingdom of God embraces the message that all are brothers and sisters in the one family of God, and demands justice for all, which entails special concern for marginalized people. It demands a more equitable distribution of the world’s resources, not accumulation of resources in the hands of a few. Global capitalism is definitely not the way of the Kingdom because it uses human beings as cheap labourers and does not respect humans as persons in the image of God. This value system is contrary to the biblical teaching of the Kingdom’s values. The Bible upholds a community where justice is expressed in equality and sharing, and affirms a community economic system with reciprocal sharing and hospitality.

The land, the river and forest have been the home and life-sustaining source of Indigenous peoples for centuries. But today they are being misused and raped to meet the growing demands of capitalism. This is all legal under the Doctrine of Discovery, but it is perverted in God’s eyes. Forest and fishing resources are depleted for quick profits. Mining companies abuse the land with little regard to human persons and to environmental and social costs. The sustaining power of the earth for nurturing life is being destroyed. The whole planet is under threat.

Like Joseph who took away the land from the Egyptians, we see that in the name of capitalist development, Indigenous Peoples’ lands are disappearing and inequalities are worsening. People who live by the values of the Kingdom of God need to make our voices clear:

- For the security of life, the land should not be reduced to a mere commodity. If all lands are turned to commodities, it is global capitalists who will buy and control the whole world. Privatization and commoditization is a strategy employed by global capitalists and this strategy must be resisted at any cost.

- Privatization, commercialization and commoditization of public enterprises and agrarian lands must be discouraged in order to secure the fundamental base of livelihood for the people. Agrarian lands must be protected from large-sized commercial farming.
We must oppose any form of monopoly inside and outside the nation. Monopoly is like a cancer killing the life of the whole body. We need to promote people-oriented development and their own management of resources.

Community self-sufficiency and interconnectedness with our ecological home needs to be the vision of life; there is no human security when water, air, animals, plants and other beings suffer ecological injustice.

Questions for Discussion:
1. How do you respond to Wati Longchar’s reading of the Joseph story as a cautionary tale about Pharaoh’s economic system?
2. How does the Doctrine of Discovery in relation to global capitalism degrade the image of God in people?
3. How would you contrast Joseph’s actions in Egypt with Jesus’ inauguration of the Kingdom of God?
4. Which of Wati Lonchar’s calls to action for people of faith stands out to you? How do you see this call already being promoted, and what steps are needed to more fully realize this vision?

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Wati Longchar is an ordained minister from Nagaland, India. He currently teaches Bible and Indigenous Theology at Yu-shan Theological College & Seminary in Hualien, Taiwan.
Lessons from Deuteronomy in Communal Justice and Solidarity

Elaine Enns and Ched Myers

Texts: Deuteronomy 5:6-7, 5:15, 15:12-15, 16:12-13, 24:18, 22

According to the tale related in II Kings 22, during the reign of King Josiah a mysterious scroll of the Law is “discovered” in the course of renovating the Temple. This scroll, which launched the most significant social reform in the history of the Israelite monarchy, should probably be identified with the book of Deuteronomy. Throughout this “second telling of the Law,” one refrain articulates the rationale for Israel’s ethic of justice in the land: it is the sharp reminder that Israelites were once themselves slaves in the land of Egypt. This deep memory of their own traumatic servitude, the Deuteronomist believes, has the power to prevent the people from re-creating (or tolerating) conditions of oppression in their own society.

The first lesson, according to Deuteronomy, is a theological one: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before Me” (Deut 5:6-7, NRSV). The Israelites knew God only because of this dramatic action of redemption from imperial bondage; it signaled divine love and fidelity, a point reiterated more than a dozen times in these chapters (e.g. 7:8). Thereafter, however, this refrain functions to animate social vision and enjoin communal justice.

Four examples suffice to make the point:

1. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (5:15, NRSV). Here the entire Sabbath ethos, which was and is so central to the life and consciousness of Israel as an alternative community, is grounded in the primal experience of historic disenfranchisement.

2. The reiteration in 15:15 builds upon this, grounding the command for seventh (Sabbatical) year manumission, in which Israelites were to release those who had fallen into bond-servitude because of debt and provision them with adequate resources to survive (15:12-14).

3. In a third example (16:12-13), the memory of oppression motivates observation of the harvest festival of “booths,” in which Israel symbolically returns to the wilderness by living in a sukkah for seven days. This ritual space reminded Israel that the wilderness was where God delivered their catechism on how to live justly.

4. The last example pertains to another Sabbath principle: “gleaners rights.” The command to leave the “edges” of one’s field, orchard or vineyard “for the alien, the orphan, and the widow” represented a practical hedge against impoverishment, an agrarian social security net for vulnerable groups. This statute was so important that it is introduced and concludes with the signature appeal: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” (24:18, 22).

Clearly, the Deuteronomist believed that a people’s identity is rooted in their communal past, and that Israel’s experience of injustice should nurture not victimhood or rage, but an ethos of compassion and justice for others. Despite their history of being dehumanized, the Deuteronomist’s litany about God’s liberating initiative reframes the people’s vocation: they are not objects of oppression, but subjects challenged to carry on the tradition of Yahweh’s liberating justice which they have “seen and heard.”

This Deuteronomic ethos is important for Mennonites struggling to make sense of both past wrongs suffered and present responsibilities to solidarity. For example, Mennonites who trace their descent to the early Anabaptist movement have a deep memory of trauma, having endured a long history of violence and displacement. During the European Reformations, Mennonites were heavily persecuted by both
Protestants and Catholics, and for much of the 16th and 17th centuries were essentially undocumented people who often could not legally own property or were denied citizenship. Violence has also afflicted Mennonites more recently, for example during and after the Russian Civil War and through World War II. How have these experiences shaped us?

In the last 25 years, much research has been done on how trauma is passed down intergenerationally. It is now clear that trauma can be inherited through biology and genetics, through family systems and communication, and through communal narratives. We are interested in how Elaine’s Canadian Prairie Settler Mennonite community, for example—“Russländer” who endured horrific violence and displacement in Ukraine and Russia after the Soviet revolution two generations ago—tells its story of suffering. How might that communal narrative help or hinder building relationships of solidarity with their Indigenous neighbors?

Like those of most other European Settlers, there are consequential silences in the Russländer narrative around land, displacement and the invisibility of Indigenous peoples. My (Elaine’s) extended clan has produced multiple family history books, all of which highlight how Catherine the Great invited Mennonites to settle the steppes of Russia/Ukraine in the late 1700s. Yet no mention is made of the Nogai and Cossack peoples (traditional inhabitants of these lands) who were forcibly removed by the Tsarina just prior to Mennonite colonization. Similarly, a century later and half a world away, Mennonite settlers from Manitoba and the U.S. procured land in Saskatchewan that had just been taken from Cree tribes by the Canadian government — but not a whisper of the latter in my family books.

In most cases, Indigenous peoples are simply not a part of our Settler Mennonite narrative. This silence functions to perpetuate the dangerous fantasy that the land upon which we settled was uninhabited. 

However, some Settler Mennonites protest that “we survived horrible violence and pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps—why can’t Native people do the same?” This attitude ignores the long history of systemic dispossession of Indigenous communities through broken treaties, land confiscation, forced assimilation and racist law enforcement. Nor does it take into account the preferential treatment some Mennonite settlers enjoyed, including, as the Stoney Knoll Saskatchewan case study describes, being granted land in the late 19th century that Canadian the government took from Cree tribes.

The historic suffering Settler Mennonites endured has sometimes distorted our perspective. The Martyr’s Mirror, for example, chronicles early Anabaptist persecution in order to confirm commitment to discipleship, shape Anabaptist identity and make sense of losses. But martyrologies can contribute to a phenomenon social-psychologist John Mack called “egoism of victimization,” in which communities who have survived significant violence are only able to see their own pain. Larry Miller, previous General Secretary of Mennonite World Conference, acknowledges that “we have sometimes nurtured an identity rooted in victimization that could foster a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance, blinding us to the frailties and failures that are also deeply woven into our tradition.”

Carolyn Yoder, a Mennonite therapist, agrees: “Mennonites’ pain is so great we are blind to how we harm or oppress others.”

Martin Luther King Jr.—whose people were slaves under American apartheid, a moral authority that undergirded the Civil Rights movement—put it best in his 1963 Letter from Birmingham City Jail: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” For Settler Mennonites, has a subconscious preoccupation with our own history of pain impeded our ability to seek justice with and for others who experience marginalization today? If so, we need again to listen to the Deuteronomist. In biblical faith, memory of oppression should animate a commitment to justice, compassion and solidarity regarding Indigenous peoples.

In most cases, Indigenous peoples are simply not a part of our Settler Mennonite narrative. This silence functions to perpetuate the dangerous fantasy that the land upon which we settled was uninhabited—a destructive myth that dates back to the terra nullius aspect of the Doctrine of Discovery. Another common and equally problematic myth among Settler Mennonites is that we came and made this land better and more productive, insinuating that before Europeans arrived, the prairies were neither tended nor cared for properly. Inconvenient to such heroic pioneer narratives are those instances in which Mennonite settlers, like so many other European newcomers, survived initially only because of the aid, compassion and knowledge of their Indigenous neighbors.

Questions for Discussion:
1. What do you know about your ancestors’ encounters with Indigenous peoples, or how the first settlers in your family acquired their land?
2. What stories have been passed down to you about suffering in your family? Do you see these stories as reinforcing a victim mentality?
3. What kind of solidarity does remembering the lessons of Deuteronomy compel your church toward?

About the Authors:
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Justice is the Fast that God Requires

Jennifer Henry

Text: Isaiah 58:1-12

I serve at KAIROS, an organization that brings Canadian churches together in common commitments to ecological justice and human rights. Through our imperfect gestures of solidarity with Indigenous peoples over 40 years, and more recently through an extended national Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we have become painfully aware of our multiple complicities as settlers, as Christians; painfully aware of how some of our ancestors of blood and faith were collaborators or protagonists in colonial horror; painfully aware of our own alienation from the land that is inextricably linked to our violations of the people of the land; painfully aware of how our citizenship still links us now to the re-colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the globe through relentless resource extraction pursued in our name.

Convicted by the truth, we are working—very imperfectly—to un-settle ourselves from colonial injustice and re-place ourselves in right relations. Invited undeservedly by Indigenous peoples, we are striving through an embrace of justice to be reconciled anew to the land and the original peoples of the land.

I can tell you today that the ancient words of Isaiah 58 are a strangely faithful companion in this journey. This text is poignant in its challenge to us but also in its promise. We know that it is likely post-exilic, from the period when the people of Israel are returning from Babylon, struggling with the possibilities but also the challenges of community reconstruction after trauma. They are holding in their hearts the hopeful promises that come to us from earlier Isaiah, even while facing anew the day-to-day practicalities of nation-building. It is an unsettling time.

We do not know the precise controversy that provokes verses 1-5. Perhaps there were rivalries between different forms of religious observance. But the prophetic message is clear: to turn away from empty fasts and from religious piety that serve primarily one’s own interests. The critique here is not about the religious—who do not know Yahweh or who have forsaken God—but those whose religion is found to be false pretense.

Speaking into our Canadian context, this feels like a piercing challenge. Our colonizers were not irreligious. Christianity was moral architecture to this project; it was fuel for the colonial fire. The faith of so many of our Christian ancestors, of my ancestors, got distorted by racial superiority, their own interests in land and security, and a missionary zeal. In the name of Christ, four Canadian churches sat with empire and collaborated with the federal government in a 130 year project of boarding schools intended to “kill the Indian in the child.” Seven generations of Indigenous children—young children—were isolated from their families, cultures, languages, and traditions in Indian residential schools run by the churches.

Seen through Isaiah’s critical eyes, and with the benefit of hindsight, what might we call that distorted sense of mission? A self-serving religion—I fear so. It not only failed to do justice, to accomplish the compassionate justice that is the prophetic challenge, but it perpetrated injustices in religion’s name. In the schools, there was unspeakable cruelty, humiliation, and abuse—sometimes even in the name of Christ.

The problem is that it is a little too easy to join ourselves to Isaiah and criticize our colonial ancestors for their practice of faith. The challenge of Isaiah in the present is to ask: Have we really turned away from this kind of religion? Are there colonial remnants in our faith? How might our religion continue to serve our own survival and security ahead of justice? Are we actively seeking reconciliation to the land and the peoples of the land? Where do we have residue of “subdue and dominate,” even in our more sophisticated stewardship concepts? Where are we still more monuments than Jesus movement, more institution than community convicted by the radical gospel?
Isaiah is clear: turn from false religion; embrace the ways of justice. Beginning at verse 6, the prophet delivers the call to “loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke.” Offer bread, home, clothing, hospitality… This text, echoing similar themes in Micah and Amos, and anticipating Jesus’ teaching, defines true worship in terms of expressions of justice. This turns on its head all the ways in which we make false divisions between faith and witness and justice and peace, between acts of worship and acts of justice. Our expressions of justice are liturgies of holiness and faithfulness. Actions of justice are as a prayer. Justice is the fast that God requires.

For the Canadian churches, this means that their apologies for colonial complicity in residential schools and their prayers for Indigenous peoples mean little without a commitment to Indigenous justice in the now. There is no way to decolonization that fails to address the situation of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, that is unconcerned with “boil water” advisories in reserve communities, or that ignores scathing deficiencies in First Nations education.

This means deep solidarity with Indigenous people who are demanding free prior and informed consent before any development project impacts their traditional territories, wherever that happens in the world. This means the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. For some settler Christians, it may very well mean standing in front of trucks with Indigenous peoples in British Columbia as they block the building of a pipeline across their traditional territory, or kneeling with Indigenous women in New Brunswick as they put their bodies between fracking and Mother Earth. Our failure to do justice—to rise to the solidarity call—will confirm that not just our ancestors’ faith but our own may be for naught.

Today Indigenous peoples are seeking our partnership in justice—not for their own rights only, but for the health and wellbeing of the whole inhabited earth. What a humbling and generous invitation!

Turn from false religion, embrace the way of justice… Beginning in verse 8 is the final challenge, but it has turned into a promise—a promise of restoration, a promise of identity, hoped for renewed integrity, and new names. In a wonderful series of “if… then” expressions, the prophet confirms that it is only from justice, that restoration flows. If you embrace justice, then… your bones will be strengthened, your gardens watered, your ruins rebuilt.

It is this just action that will reveal your identity, that will change your name: “You shall be called repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in” (58:12). Only this just action, will confirm your integrity. For settler Christians, it may just be possible to find new names from the ones theologian Tink Tinker accurately but bluntly summarized as “liars, murderers and thieves.” Maybe we could be allies. Maybe we could be treaty partners. Just maybe, we could be friends, like in the peace and friendship treaties that were originally extended. What we must be is “nation to nation,” in a new covenant written on our hearts.

For Isaiah, justice is the precursor to restoration. The “if… then” construction is essential. We cannot expect reconciliation within our churches, within our country, without our tangible, sustained commitment to justice. Reconciliation will follow rather than lead actions for justice, which becomes a form of testing intention and resolve. What I love about this passage is that as clear as the critique of hollow religion, as clear as the call to justice, that same kind of clarity is also present in the commitment of restoration. Look at what is promised: both personal healing (strong bones, satisfied needs) and communal restoration (restored houses, rebuilt ruins).

I need the promise of Isaiah because sometimes the horror at what we have done to one another, the depth of our failure to protect traumatized people or a traumatized creation, the relentless challenges of the present injustices—somewhere in there, my hope is obscured. I can’t see for the anger or the guilt or the shame. I can’t see for the tears.

But Isaiah makes restoration tangible, a reality of transformation confirmed for us as Christians in the Easter event—in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. Justice, peace, reconciliation can be so. It must be so. Our actions must live up to that promise.

This reflection was originally part of an Ash Wednesday homily, “On the Edge of the Wilderness,” given by Jennifer Henry at the Festival of Radical Discipleship on February 18, 2015. Used with permission from the author.
Questions for Discussion:
1. What challenges you after reading Jennifer Henry’s reflection? What gives you hope?
2. Do you see remnants of false religion and colonial understandings of the gospel in your own faith practices? How about your home congregation and larger church organizations? As Jennifer asks, “Where are we still more monuments than Jesus movement, more institution than community convicted by the radical gospel?”
3. Jennifer writes from her context as a Canadian settler Christian on the journey of painful truth-telling and the pursuit of justice. What truths need to be told in your own context? In what ways might your worship be integrated with your practices of justice?
4. How is justice for Indigenous Peoples connected to restoration for all creation?

About the Author:
Jennifer Henry is Executive Director of KAIROS, a coalition of 11 Canada Church groups striving for social justice and human rights. She has worked for KAIROS for 20 years including manager for Dignity and Rights. She serves on the Primate’s Commission on Discovery, Reconciliation and Justice. Originally from Manitoba, Jennifer was influenced by the Mennonite tradition of living out faith and the Catholic idea of working in solidarity with others, and the strong commitment to the social Gospel.
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