

ALL MY RELATIONS  
Sermon by Petra Thombs  
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All Souls Church, New York City

The freedom we claim at Juneteenth is to own our own truth, and be recognized for all of who we are. It stands in opposition to July Fourth, which is not a day of declaring freedom for all but excluded women, non-landing-owning white men, Natives, and Africans who were not even considered, and the earth itself was to be subdued and conquered. I acknowledge my African American heritage and my Native heritage, and claim my voice in defining myself. I am one with all my relations.

But you know, it is a challenge to be in relations with some folks. My father and grandfather, did not always see eye to eye. But the best picture of my Trinidadian father and my mother's southern father, was of them sharing cuttings of plants and seeds – it was like a sacred ritual – a communion of souls in that exchange. They both loved the land and I would be the one to assist in the planting and harvesting of seeds for the interchange. Respect for these beings created an understanding between people from different worlds.

My father's love of animals was evident when he brought in all kinds of strays: cats, dogs, especially wounded birds – daddy would take them into the basement, make a splint for their wings, and tend to them. It was his gentle, healing touch and his patience with them that taught me the most, that we should take care of those in need.

I think that is why I became a special education teacher. The 70's documentary on Willowbrook and Creedmoor state schools by Geraldo Rivera, exposed the nightmare that existed for mentally and physically disabled children, those who society hid in the shadows because they were not "pretty to look at," those with disabilities locked away, thrown away. How could that be? How could we begin to honor ALL my relations? It seemed to me the luck of the draw that we who are considered whole in body and spirit get to be that way, and it is our place as kinfolk to care for those less able. We all have our gifts and talents – we have to take the time to discover what it is in the next person. Today, we do so much better for those with mental and physical challenges, but we still seem determined to lock some children up and the cry goes out – **ALL** my relations!

I have always wanted to be a priest ever since I was a child, but the church of my faith could not see a woman's priesthood. As an adult, I came to this faith tradition, but the memory of being excluded came back to me when a week before the presidential election, Pope Francis made an announcement about something that was not even a new revelation, that women would never be catholic priests. One week before our election. It seemed to me that he was placing his finger on the scale to tip the balance – while Russian meddling has been established, we never considered Papal meddling. Not sure what he would think about his decision to do that now... but reinforcing the belief that women are not worthy to be ministers, and yet creator has ordained women to be life givers! And even if you don't ascribe to believing in God, you know you have to come through the body of a woman... to enter this world! Some truths have to be acknowledged! Our world, for so long, has lost its balance! How can you shun half of humanity and call yourself loving, or call yourself holy?! All my relations – that's a ministry for all of us.

I want my ministry to be one of creating and supporting community, of working with my relatives, the indigenous people of this land. While at Union Theological Seminary, I did my field education with the Center for Earth Ethics and met Chief Perry. That was the beginning of my community ministry. This past April, we both attended a small, yet powerful gathering called the Indigenous-Vatican Dialogue, where ten native leaders from around the globe came and shared their concerns for Mother Earth and wisdom for how to heal her and heal ourselves. A priest from the Vatican was also there.

We had thought that Fr. Zampini would expand on the Pope's message from his 2015 writing entitled, "Laudato Si: care for our common home." Here the Pope showed his love and support for indigenous people; they should be heard and respected, they should take the lead in protecting the land and the water. He spoke **against** the fossil fuel industry, **against** commodifying water. He spoke of our relations to other species, plant and animal life that we had decimated with our technological advancements. "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves...we are a part of nature, included in it and in constant interaction with it." He then said that, "special care should be given for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They... should be the principle dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best."

But in our Indigenous-Vatican Dialogue, the voices of the leaders were clearly saying "hear us!" The first was Tom Goldtooth, a Lakota leader, who began by saying, "The original instructions from creator began with how we treat each other, second is how we react with the rest of creation." The Judeo-Christian tradition honors conquest and domination. This is in opposition to the indigenous ways in which we acknowledge that water has a spirit, is intelligent, and is sacred. The power structure ridicules our worldview and does not allow for us to own our own understanding. Our traditions are not being honored, our knowledge and care for the earth is not protected. There is genocide against us when we resist. Seven generations into the future, how will our descendants fare? We are part of an integrated whole – no one is better than anyone else. We live in balance – all my relations!

He continued, "The carbon trading that countries and corporations use to fool nature when they are still polluting, only increases inequality and it abuses nature. All life on earth is in danger! There is only one God and that is creator. How can we live in peace with Mother Earth and restore indigenous knowledge and integrity?" He urged the Pope to transform the power structures – adopt the United Nations rights of indigenous peoples, restore the balance, treat with respect Mother Earth, who has her own natural law.

The next speaker was Betty Lyons of the Onondaga Nation who said we need to be in right relations with all beings. She spoke directly of the Doctrine of Discovery and its system of domination, based on the papal bulls of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. She said, "Today's development model is not about economic growth but continues the system of exploitation, it is forcing people to flee their lands in search of safety." She said, "My people choose differently. The voices of women and Mother Earth are in our democracy. Societies have been matrilineal, but men have repressed these lines. Until the root caused is addressed, nothing will change. The churches need to honor the voices of women-it is important to have balance." She ended by saying, "All my relations!"

We know the conditions of the earth are dire! Our sister Bernadette from Alaska, told us how her people are suffering due to food scarcity – 80% of their cultural diet is the caribou, and yet

these animals are infected with ticks, other people are coming into their territory and taking food. The ice is melting at tremendous rates – it was 70 degrees in February. Animals are falling through the ice and drowning. Her grandchildren are frightened because nothing is as it was. Our faces were wet with tears as she spoke and we gathered around her and prayed over her.

Chief Ninawa of the Amazon, Huni Kui peoples began by saying, “Thank you, Creator! Speaking from my heart for my people. Your words are an invitation for the indigenous people of Brazil. The invaders were not willing to see our humanity and our spirituality. They enslaved us, prevented us from speaking our languages and keeping our traditions, we were not allowed to speak for ourselves. We are now accused of being obstacles for development and experience profound discrimination and racism. Hear us! We condemn false solutions. Indigenous people did not cause the problem – it is not ours to fix, but we are open to fix it. Carbon trading is not a solution. Respect our spirituality and respect nature... our thoughts are not considered by capitalism. The prophecies of indigenous people have a great deal in common. If the church is eager to align itself with a good life, that is good. We need concrete measures in order to change. No living being is superior to another- superiority is a myth.”

He continued with this teaching, “Prayer should be given to plants before harvesting with an explanation as to why the gift is needed. You must ask permission before taking from that being. Nature communicates with us, therefore privatizing natural resources defiles the sacred. Economists do not get it! But I will tell it like it is. There are three things you must remember: participate in dialogue and try to understand. Indigenous leaders were persecuted – spiritual leaders were burned at the stake. But they always spoke of **love for all no matter what**. Prejudice gets in the way. There must be respect. Lastly, our sacred sites must be respected. We need solidarity. Tell the Pope, the church must stand with us so we can walk on the path together.”

From the West African country of Senegal, Dr. Aliou Niang, a professor of New Testament at UTS, explained that his people, the Diola people who live in the southern part of Senegal, resisted the centralized colonial government. The French initially brought in the Holy Ghost Fathers who were actually sensitive to the people. They shared their religion, but did not force the people to give up their spiritual practices. A hundred years later, the colonizers became oppressive. The Diola people’s culture taught them the language of nature, to ask permission and to offer thanks to plants and animals before harvesting or hunting, Nature has a language that we need to learn. The shrines that were built were to assist with these rituals. The Europeans imposed their ideas on the people’s culture and prevented these practices. Some priests were co-opted by imperial interests. Many began to critique the Diola people, calling them satanic. The people’s tradition was to farm as a collective in family groups, keeping with the cycle of nature to produce rice. These crops are believed to be sacred and could never be sold. The French enforced the growing the cash crop of peanuts, which disrupted the culture, lifestyle and the harmony they had with the Earth. They always saw farming as spiritual work, now they are forced into commercialism, and now the people are poor! They were never poor before colonization. They worshipped their one, non-gendered God and with their ancestors and kept the practices and wisdom of their traditions.

Africans and Native Americans may be separated by an ocean, but from the top of the Americas to the States, to Central, to South and across the ocean to Africa, my people’s cause was one, they were one in heart, mind and spirit.

The pope's representative Fr. Zampini, appeared at first very friendly, but after listening to the indigenous leaders, he became agitated, perhaps annoyed. He said that he did not want to apologize for the church's deeds of the past. He was interested in development – which was exactly what the indigenous leaders knew to be destructive to people and the Earth. Given the belief in Christian supremacy, it would be difficult to let go of patriarchal perspectives and to hear the Indigenous leader's wisdom.

They had said, 'first we need to listen.' "The original instructions from creator began with how we treat each other, second is how we react with the rest of creation." The understanding of ALL my relations, lines up with the Christian teaching of love for God and neighbor, and the **emphatic** call to love, no matter what, which is akin to loving one's enemies, as we are called to do. It is that radical love which most challenges us, frightens us even, and yet calls us to recognize the love for humanity, we all need to show. That allows us to live into our Unitarian Universalist principles of the inherent worth and dignity of all beings, and to live as part of the interdependent web of all creation. All persons, which, some still need to be reminded, includes women, and all other beings, which means all of the created world. "All my relations" is a call for balance. And that balance is freedom!

How do we begin to change and live our lives fully respecting Mother Earth? It has been my daily prayer to see this and just two weeks ago I experienced that prayer, being answered! Chief Perry introduced me to a friend of his who provides programming for camps and after school sessions on how to live as one with nature. Strawtown Inc., run by Laurie Seeman, speaks to nature with reverence, honors every being and demonstrates how-to walk-in wonder of the world around us. I participated in their summer training and felt immersed in the very words that Chief Ninawa used to show respect for Mother Earth. It brought me back to planting with my father and grandfather, to the tender care and love for animals. We acknowledged the woods, we asked for permission to enter, we requested safety, as we promised to be respectful of all the beings living there. We asked permission before gathering plants, before taking water from the stream, and we gave thanks for their gifts. At the river, we gave greetings and again, asked permission to enter.

The lessons we need to learn may not be taught by those who wield power and authority, but by those who choose to live in the truth of what creator has taught. So, listen and remember, "The original instructions from creator began with how we treat each other, second is how we react with the rest of creation."

You need to know from whence you came,  
The earth and the people are one and the same,  
if you stand up for one and neglect the other,  
humanity will fall and so will our Mother.

These ancient truths have always been relevant; **all** people come from an indigenous past. We must be reminded to know from whence we came.

All relations show the path to take,  
Renew our world, for lives are at stake,  
Reverse the damage and end the greed.  
Heal our Earth, with love as the seed. Ashe, all my relations!