

## *Empty Chairs*

I want you to bring to mind the most lavish banquet you can imagine: rich foods prepared just right, tender-crisp vegetables fresh from farm to table, your favorite beverages served with a flair, perfectly ripe fruits and a ginormous dessert trolley. That is the image painted for us today in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah.

These words are so vivid, because they were expected to happen soon. It's hard to place the exact point in history, because in some places Isaiah is very vague about locations and in other places very specific. But the suggestion by the Biblical commentator Christopher Seitz, is that this was written right at the cusp of the Jewish exiles coming back home.

Jerusalem and all of Judah had been ransacked by the Babylonians and the healthiest of the people hauled off to exile, but now Babylon was under siege and nearly ready to fall. Now it was time to prepare for a feast, back on the holy hill in Jerusalem. Israel and Judah would soon be restored but so would other nations, as they turned toward God...and there would be rejoicing and food for all.

Though many Christian commentators have viewed this scene in Isaiah 25 as a far off prophecy of a heavenly banquet at the end of time, that doesn't fit the mindset of this Jewish prophet; the banquet described by Isaiah is an imminent time of restoration, enemies and unhappy neighbors reconciled to one another at a banquet, surrounded by holy intention.

Jesus also spoke of banquets in his parables, and his banquet metaphor typically has two aspects. One aspect is the "heavenly banquet" of everlasting heavenly joy, and the other aspect is a very earthy image, of a world where all people were treated fairly in the here and now. Jesus' promise of a new realm or Kin-dom where all may sit together at table freed from rivalries, is both a statement of the final destination of this human journey and a challenge to expand the tables we eat at right now. And so to underline his words with actions, Jesus chose to enjoy the company of dining partners who were systematically excluded in his culture. By his actions, he demonstrated that we feast best when nobody is excluded from the table.

And yet, our tables often have missing guests. A Jewish Passover tradition is to have an extra cup of wine and, in some settings, one extra chair at the Passover table. Known as "Elijah's seat" this chair is set out in recognition of the prophet who will usher in the Messiah; making room for Elijah and the Messiah at Passover and other rituals also symbolizes the people's desire for a day of equity and justice, a day when all those who are in need, will have a place to come and eat. What a beautiful, powerful tradition to include at a sacred meal.

Many of us have empty chairs at our tables. Loved ones who have died, family members from whom we are estranged, hopes abandoned or not yet realized...many of us have that sense of incompleteness.

It has felt to me that every congregation I have served in the United Methodist Church has had empty chairs at the table. If we view each Sunday gathering and each pot luck luncheon and each committee meeting, as places where we sit around God's table, there are always empty chairs. We'd like to hear younger voices at the table. We'd like to hear a variety of accents and languages at the table. We hope the table talk can include the struggles of those who have a

hard time holding a job and those who have deep doubts about God, and those seeking a safe place as they battle their way through addiction.

We'd like people with a variety of opinions, experiences, sexual orientations and gender identities, to feel equally welcome and equally valued at the table, knowing how much everyone's experience is enriched by such diversity.

We'd like to be at tables where we have done everything within our capacity to eliminate physical or emotional or cultural barriers to having a place at the table.

We know that there will always be some empty chairs at the table, because God's circle of care will always be bigger than we are able to bring into being and that gap creates in us a healthy yearning for a table that is inching closer to fullness.

One place where the empty chairs have been noticeable has been in our denominations relationship with Indigenous congregations.

How many of us have turned away from the epidemic of missing and murdered Native women and girls? They don't make the newspaper because they aren't blond haired and blue eyes. In the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report of 2022, countless Indigenous households have empty chairs and anger and sorrow and enduring fear, as chairs continue to empty

. According to a [report](#) by Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, whereas the US Department of Justice's federal missing persons database, NamUs, only logged 116. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported that murder is the third-leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls. Their families must fight every single day to get their stories told, hoping that someone will care.

Just last month, the Vatican came out against the Doctrine of Discovery. The doctrine that is over 500 years old was invoked as a legal and religious standing by Europeans who "discovered" new lands and violently seized it from people who had been living there for generations. It has been cited in different arenas for centuries, including by the United States Supreme Court as early as 1823 and as recently as 2005.

The doctrine was laid out in a series of papal "bulls" or decrees, the first one was issued in 1492. They authorized colonial powers such as Spain and Portugal to seize lands and subjugate people in Africa and the "New World", as long as people on the lands were not Christians.

These decrees were not considered valid just 30 to 40 years after they were first issued. They were in fact nullified by the Vatican by the late 1530s but it was too late to stop the destructive impact of colonialism. NPR says that the European expansion was fueled by a sort of missionary sense that the Western monarchies had a right to go to these new lands and take from them their resources and if necessary to put down people, including enslaving them."

So what began as a religious decree in the 1400s then became the basis for a legal concept in the United States, when the Doctrine of Discovery was invoked in an 1823 U.S. Supreme Court

ruling that indigenous people had only rights of “occupancy” and not ownership over lands they had long lived on. The land, then was open for the taking.

As a result of this being written into the American property law, it was actually considered a precedent including citations as recent as a 2005 case in Upstate New York, involving the Onieda Indian Nation.

Indigenous advocates have previously called on the Catholic church to issue a formal repudiation of the doctrine, saying personal apologies fell short, given the magnitude of the policy’s effects.

Last year, Pope Francis stunned observers when he personally apologized to Taylor Behn-Tsakoza, a youth delegate with the Assembly of First Nations who lives in British Columbia, for the Catholic Church’s role contributing to years of suffering. Months later, the pope apologized to Indigenous people for the systemic abuse inflicted upon Native children at Catholic-run residential schools. But he stopped short of formally rescinding the doctrine.

What Pope Francis said recently about the doctrine is important though. He said “The Catholic Church therefore repudiates those concepts that fail to recognize the inherent human rights of indigenous peoples, including what has become known as the legal and political ‘doctrine of discovery.’”

The church also said it stands with Indigenous peoples now and strongly supports the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which it says can help protect Indigenous rights as well as improving living conditions and development “in a way that respects their identity, language and culture.”

And then Pope Francis said “Never again can the Christian community allow itself to be infected by the idea that one culture is superior to others, or that it is legitimate to employ ways of coercing others.”

And lest we start to think that the Catholic Church is the only denomination that has literal blood on their hands, the United Methodist Church is just as guilty.

As we consider the history of Methodism in relation to Native American communities, we recognize complicity in genocide and trauma. Sadly, the Sand Creek Massacre was led by a Methodist pastor in 1863. The attack destroyed a village and slaughtered 230 people, two thirds of whom were women, children and the elderly.

Boarding schools, including those run by Methodists in the United States, inflicted trauma on Native American children. Some of the Indian boarding schools were established by Methodists, including the Shawnee Methodist Indian Manual Labor School in Fairway, Kansas, and Asbury Manual Labor School in Fort Mitchell, Alabama.

It was just a few weeks ago that we observed Good Friday. We continue to participate in the crucifixion of God’s people when we fail to repair the harm against our Native siblings who are asking for our support and recognition.

Do we recognize the power of resurrection that is possible through God's grace? Do we recognize the restoration of God's people in acts of repentance, healing and celebration?

The United Methodist General Conference resolved in 2016 to affirm "the sacredness of American Indian people, their languages, cultures and gifts to the church and the world."

We celebrate the ministries of our Native American family that are a source of hope and sustenance not only in communities they serve but for all of us in the United Methodist family. For more than 180 years, First Americans have been working through Methodism for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In November 2022, the Rev. David Wilson was elected to become the first Native American bishop in the history of the United Methodist Church, serving as the Episcopal leader of the Great Plains Conference. As a member of the Choctaw nation, his election to the episcopacy is but one more sign that the gifts and graces of God's children that can bring about restoration.

Today we have an opportunity to continue that restoration of relationship in partnership with God. By supporting and celebrating Native American Ministries with our offering, we begin to repair the past harm and participate in sharing Christ's love through seminary scholarships and annual conference outreach, engaging in ministries that equip and empower Native American pastors, congregations and seminary students to worship and serve Jesus with the fullness of culture and heritage. If you look at the postcard that is in your bulletin, all you have to do is aim your phone camera on the QR code and it will take you to where you can donate.

Our embracing an agenda of inclusiveness, our yearning for a table of diversity, our acknowledgement of our part in the harm caused to Indigenous People, is a profound, ongoing way of saying "yes" to Christ's own heart for inclusion. It accepts responsibility for past hurts and moves us toward the future of reconciliation and grace that is both intended and energized by the Holy Spirit. And it very much understands that to be affirming and inclusive demands ongoing efforts to build good relationships with our Indigenous siblings.

I invite you to turn in your bulletin to the insert for our litany entitled "A Litany for the Healing and Restoration of Our Church."

Amidst the pain of life's empty chairs, we seek reassurance that there are better days ahead: reassurance from God and from one another

In the great arc of life, and in the small decisions of our days, we know how much fuller everything is when our tables are open and diverse and everyone knows that they are welcome, and honored and beloved. We have learned that the heart of Christ is closer to us when we walk together, and listen to one another. May all we do as disciples of Jesus Christ, may our actions proclaim this belief. Amen.