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Just Land: What are the Key Justice Issues for Native People in the U.S.? (Chapter 12 of The Justice Project)

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JUST LAND

What Are the Key Justice Issues for Native Peoples in the U.S.?

RANDY WOODLEY

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! (Luke 15:1–2 NLT)

Why were the Pharisees so *furious* with Jesus? After all, they were themselves dedicated to giving alms to the poor and feeding the hungry sinners. But there was one key difference: Jesus “ate with sinners.” This one simple act of Jesus sitting down at the table and eating with them granted a new sense of dignity to hungry, hopeless people, and it enraged the Pharisees and teachers of the Law.

The Pharisees needed the poor, hungry sinners in order to exercise their sense of “mercy.” Feeding the hungry and giving alms to the poor gave credence to their ministry. By sitting at the table with these poor folks, Jesus showed his acceptance of them as equals. To



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the hegemonic Pharisees, this truth was too much to bear. After all, without the qualified leadership of the dedicated Pharisees, how could anyone ever hope to find God? Social classism needed to be imposed.

The dynamics of this paradigm are painfully familiar to Native Americans, especially when it comes to dealing with Christians. Christians, particularly white Christians, require Native Americans to be poor and needy. By necessity we must have the worst health, the highest infant mortality rates, the lowest life expectancy, the worst living conditions, the least education, the highest unemployment, the highest teen pregnancy and suicide rates in the land. From a missionary point of view it is essential for us to be pitiable. Kipling scratched the surface of this in a poem when he coined the phrase "white man's burden." My friend Brian McLaren refers to this as the "excessive confidence of European peoples." If we were to become "equals" where, but the reservations, would all our youth groups go for affordable short-term mission trips? One can't go to Mexico or Central America every year! Do I sound cynical? Perhaps. But I think you can find some truth through my cynicism.

The key justice issues facing Native Americans today are many—economics, social inequities, the criminal justice system, political prisoners. (Like Nelson Mandela in South Africa, there are real Indian political prisoners in the U.S., such as Rocky Boice Jr. and Leonard Peltier.¹) Injustices toward our people are *legion*, and they even include the way almost every church and mission agency still maintains and plants paternalistic, culturally hegemonic churches on our reservations.

But none of these issues can be effectively dealt with until we are invited to the table. I'm not even sure if Natives want others to do justice *for* us until they can do justice *with us*. You see, there are many things about us you need to know.

I was teaching on racism to a predominantly white seminary class when one young man raised his hand in desperation. "Just what do you want from us?" he demanded. I felt it was a fair question, and perhaps by now you are asking something similar. In order to begin to reverse the ravages of a brutal U.S. government and an American Christian colonial past; in order to start to expose the true history of this country as it relates to the theft of our land, the extinguish-

ing of our cultures and the genocide of our people (wrought in part by the willing participation of American Christianity); in order for all sides to heal and for justice to occur: (1) we (Native Americans) need an open invitation to the “table” where we can participate as your equals and (2) you (non-Natives, but particularly whites) need to stay seated at the table when we say things that are painful and even offensive to hear.

An Open Invitation to Equality

When Jesus sat at the table with people in desperate physical and emotional need, he sat as one of them. We don’t know much about those mealtimes, but it is unlikely that he sat at the “chief seat” or that he “lorded over” them. Jesus simply sat at the table as one of the people. His mere presence demonstrated equality and conferred dignity to those needing affirmation. Jesus must have fit in well, because his enemies accused him of being a “drunkard” and a “glutton.”

During the recent “State of the Black Union” panel, Jesse Jackson referred to the Civil Rights Movement as a time when black people fought not for their freedom but for their equality. Using his metaphor, freedom only gets you to the playing field; equality is when you have a level playing field. As Native Americans, we do not have a level playing field. Our accumulated “capital” (lands, money, education, health, etc.) has all been stolen and still we are expected by Western Christians to show up “ready for the game.” We are in many ways where African Americans were in the pre-Civil Rights days. An open invitation means that there will be a commitment on the part of Christians to continuously invite us to participate equally at the table, even if it means a sacrifice on the part of others to get us there.

White Americans can afford to get up from the table whenever things become uncomfortable. They are not required to go through the anguish of hearing our stories. They get to go back to the privileges afforded them by colonialism while Natives must return to the conditions relegated to us by that same colonial process. It hurts to hear our stories; they are sometimes even too tough for us to bear. So sometimes we laugh. We want others to be there to cry with us,

but we also want them there when the pain is so tough that we all start laughing—even when we don't understand why. This is the way relationships are made. It takes time together as equals.

You also need to stay at the table because you need *us* more than you realize. We are a part of the body you shouldn't ignore. We have special giftings and understandings without which, the Scriptures say, you are incomplete. And we need to be needed for who we are—not as tools used out of a sense of duty. You need us for who we are—in all our strengths and in all our attributes given us by the Creator. If we don't become fulfilled in Christ, the whole body will suffer. While there are many ways the dominant Western church is suffering as a result of our absence, I will mention just one, which is perhaps the most important: the land.

The Land

Western Christianity, including its American version, lacks a good theology of the land. (A stolen continent is not really the best location in which to build such a theology.) First Nations view land as alive, and something with which we are in relationship and covenant. All of creation is viewed this way. We see ourselves not as over and above nature but simply as a part of it and as participants in covenant relationship with it and the Creator. This covenant relationship between God, the people, and the land is the source for our Native American spirituality.

When we speak of living with the land, the preposition *with* should be understood as paramount. One can live *on* the land and still ignore or even abuse it. Yet living *with* the land implies a harmonious relationship, a partnership between human beings and everything else: soil, rocks, water, trees, wildlife, birds, insects. This understanding of a relationship with the land is the overall framework we have inherited from our native forebears and that which we have incorporated into our Christian understandings and beliefs. We have a deep sense of the “groanings” of the earth, as St. Paul puts it.

American Christians usually see the land as a commodity. They see it from their sterile economic paradigm, not the richly relational biblical paradigm. Yet, from the standpoint of good stewardship,

there is a need for a renewed sense of relationship and partnership with the land. In other words, living *with* the land means one views the land as much more than mere dirt. This broader view of the land seems to be the natural view among most indigenous peoples.

Even Christian environmental activists view the land differently than we do. I once accompanied such a group to protest mountain-top coal removal. The wonderful people who were exposing this evil gave logically persuasive speeches and called for action to stop the plunder of the land, yet I could only feel a deep sense of grief. While I applaud their efforts, I can't understand why I never heard or saw anyone weep or mention our natural relationship with the land.

In addition, we need to understand that humans are "walking earth." We also are the earth in which the Spirit dwells. When we die our bodies make a beeline back to the dust. The Creator has given native peoples the sensitivity to understand the simplicity of these things, and to value the land as a result. Conversely, we believe the dualism found in much of Western theology is odious to the Creator and a breach of this sacred covenant.

Indigenous people see a good earth that has been created by a good God. Scripture substantiates this view. God walked the earth in the garden (Gen. 3:8), and he still inhabits every inch of it (Ps. 139:7–12). The land is sacred in part because all living things are made to live on the earth (Genesis 1–2). First, man is made from the earth (2:7); sacred space is made and then given to humans (v. 8); and various ethnic groups are given places on earth (Acts 17:26). Land is made even more sacred because it is Jesus—the Creator-Son—who created the earth (John 1:3, 10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2). Jesus became an earth-being and walked the land (John 1:14). Jesus promises to come back to the earth (Matt. 24:30), at which point it will become renewed for eternity (Rom. 8:21).

A theology of land is central to understanding the Creator, the cosmos, and our place. This relationship between the Creator, human beings, and the land is as sacred as anything else in Scripture. In my experience it has been difficult for the Western mind to understand these things. For First Nations, America is the holy land. Non-Natives need us to help them understand this relationship with the earth so they can learn to live in harmony with it.

Currently, a shift in the Western worldview is occurring at several levels. An increasing number of Euro-Americans have been successful at living “greener” lives. As an indigenous person and a Christian, I applaud all attempts at restoring what I consider to be a more natural view of creation and more natural ways to live with Mother Earth. Yet one vast difference between First Nations and the Euro-American worldview is the latter’s emphasis on the individual above community. As First Nations followers of Christ, we believe that by forming and maintaining community, by practicing the way of Jesus, and by using the land for its intended purposes, we can bring about healing and even new blessings to the land. By restoring harmony, the land returns to the purposes for which the Creator intended it.

A range of practices will help us restore that harmony between the Creator, people, land, and all of creation, including praying to the Creator, loving one another, building sacred communities, practicing our traditions and ceremonies, reinstating natural wildlife, growing our own local foods, sharing resources (especially with the poor), doing justice, living more simply, living in peace and sending out messengers of good news to others, and telling the truth about what happened in this land—the good and the evil, the beautiful and the repulsive. It behooves us as Native American followers of Jesus Christ to encourage and participate with communities that follow these practices.

In a real sense, the Indian nations have “married the land” (*Beulah*), which Scripture speaks of in Isaiah 62:3–5. America’s indigenous peoples love the land because we know it, because it is beautiful, and because it supplies our needs. It is a gift from the Creator. Each portion of the land has an important history. Many Native American nations have covenant stories with the Creator concerning their own land. We would like to welcome you, the strangers to our land, but for this to happen correctly the land must first be returned to us. What other conclusion could a Christian reach except that they should return that which has been stolen? What could it mean for the land to be returned? Aren’t these the kinds of questions that deserve to be considered together, around a table of fellowship, among equals?

In sitting at the table with those in deep need, Jesus gave them the gift of community. This is the same invitation he extends to everyone. Perhaps the first gift of community is listening; simply by listening