

July 2, 2017
James 3:2-18
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Baard

We the People

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

A few weeks ago, when I chose today's scripture reading, I knew it was appropriate for our times, but I had no idea just how it would resonate with this week's political turmoil, both at the state and the national level.

Last week we also heard from the Letter of James where we heard him encourage us to be *doers of the word and not merely hearers*. In today's reading James focuses on the human tongue and how quickly it can set things ablaze.

SERMON

Emily Dickinson was a person who lived her life with words, intensely pondering them, choosing them, and then sending them into the world in her poems. Here is her poem called *The Word*.

*A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.*

Emily reminds us that the words we use take on a life of their own – for good and for ill. Words matter. Words matter a great deal. Just notice how quickly young children learn what words will get a reaction and start a blaze.

At the Deacon's meeting, this week, we discussed our distress about the polarization, the demonization, and the lack of listening in our public discourse. James reminds us - *Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger*. He points out that the human tongue is like a rudder on a ship. Even though it is a small part of the body; it moves us in a particular direction.

From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. With the tongue we bless God, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. With these words, James warns us to be particularly careful about what we say about other people. When we curse someone, we lose sight that they too are made in the likeness of God.

How often have we said something and then wished we could stuff those words back into our mouths! Or these days maybe stuff them back into our fingers. With today's technology, words are not simply released into a room; they are now facebooked, emailed, tweeted into the whole world –sometimes starting a wildfire!

This week we will celebrate again the birthday of our country. There will be fireworks, barbecues, family gatherings, and political arguments, I suspect. It is a time to give thanks for the Declaration of Independence. It is time to tell stories of courage and compassion in the fight for liberty and justice for all.

It is also a time to be challenged again by the deep, visionary, character of the opening words - *We the People*.

It is not "I" who forms this country, no matter who that "I" is. It is not even the "we" of my own particular group. It is "we" -all the people. From this point in history we recognize that the writers of the Constitution really only thought of white, male, land owners as the People to whom they were referring. Yet, those three seemingly simple words – *We the People* - have forced us time-and-time again to reexamine our heritage and our commitments.

Today I want to talk about a challenging thread in the fabric of U.S. history and life. I want to talk about Native Americans and the ways they have been excluded from "We, the People." This story covers many centuries and weaves together a pope, a Supreme Court, and First Parish Church.

In 1493, Pope Alexander VI made a pivotal and cursing decree, which has come to be called "Doctrine of Discovery." It was the legitimization for all European claims in the Americas. It declared that any land not inhabited by Christians was available for "discovery." The goal was that *the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that the barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.*

With the very same tongue with which the pope blessed God, he cursed those he would call heathen, but who also were made in the likeness of God.

In Jim Wallis' new book, *America's Original Sin*, he speaks primarily about the institution of slavery. However, in the very beginning he recognizes the racism and devastation in the ways that European settlers interacted with the Native Americas.

Why did the Native peoples allow the Europeans to get such a stronghold in this land? It wasn't by choice. It was mostly because of disease. In the history of the Native peoples of New England, the Wabanaki, the people of the Dawn, they refer to the time between 1616 and 1619 as the Great Dying. In that short time, *an estimated 75% of the Native American population died when a pandemic raged throughout New England. The Great Dying was caused by diseases introduced by Europeans, presumably small pox, cholera, measles, hepatitis, and whooping cough.* (*Exploring the Spirit of Maine*, Karen Wentworth Batignani, pg. 94) The Europeans met less resistance after that time because there were so many fewer Native peoples.

A hundred years after the Great Dying, in 1717, we come to First Parish Church and our worship service, down by the river. When I first read Rev. Ashby's history of First Parish Church I was very surprised to read that at the first service there were *soldiers, a few settlers, and a few Indians.* (pg. 12) My first thoughts were how wonderful! However, I was thinking through the lens of my experiences today of interreligious dialogue. As I kept reading I could hear the echoes of the Doctrine of Discovery.

You see our first service came about because the governor of Massachusetts, of which we were a part, sent out missionaries *to bring the Indians over to the Christian faith*. In August of 1717 the Governor and Council sailed for Arrowsic to hold a conference with the Indians. With them was the Reverend Joseph Baxter as missionary. Ashby describes the encounter this way:

At the conference, the Indians freely stated their grievances. The Governor, a haughty man, both in manner and speech, replied by handing them an Indian Bible and saying: "This Book contains the true religion. Mr. Baxter will remain with you and teach you its principles." To this, one of the chiefs, with equal haughtiness replied: "We will not keep your Bible. We have our own religious teachers and we should offend God by abandoning them."

Nevertheless, Mr. Baxter remained as the first Protestant missionary to the Indians in Maine. He made Georgetown his headquarters, and from this place visited the outlying regions. He first came to Brunswick on August 24, 1717, and the next day, Sunday, preached at Fort George, the newly erected defense of the settlement, which stood near the Falls on the site of the "boarding house" of the Cabot Mill. The congregation consisted of the soldiers, a few settlers, and a few Indians.

As far as I know, as our congregation became established, no Native Americans were part of that community. In fact, the intervening years of U.S. history show the devastating policies and practices (including taking children away from their families) of the cursing of native culture and spirituality.

You may be surprised to hear that the Doctrine of Discovery became embedded in American civil statute with the 1823 Supreme Court case, *Johnson v. McIntosh*. Chief Justice John Marshall's opinion in the unanimous decision stated that *the principal of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands*.

Religion and state colluded together to curse the Native people, rather than recognize that all of us are "We, the people."

With the tongue we bless God, and with (that very same tongue) we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

The thing I learned this week that shocked and distressed me is that it was not until 1978 with the passage of the Indian Religious Freedom Act that it was no longer illegal for native peoples to practice their traditional religion. (Batiganani, pg. 95)

For us to truly be "We the people" of these United States, we must acknowledge the cursing that has been part of our past and any cursing that is still part of our present.

It is sobering and tiring to realize the difficulty that we have living out Jesus' wisdom to love God and love neighbor, but that is our calling. We are called to it in each time and each place.

When Jane Hagness was telling me about the spiritual she is going to sing for us this morning – *I Don't Feel No-Ways Tired* – I told her that sometimes I'm tired. Jane said that's why she sings it. It gives her hope. Jane, thanks for sharing hope with us.