

Sermon by Kerrel Ard  
Nov 13, 2011

Call to Worship and the Lighting of the Chalice and the Peace  
Candles/Calling the Four Directions

*lead by Kerrel:*

- **“Spirits of the East we call you, we look to you for beginnings as each day is new, your color is red. You are the home of the Eagle who teaches to see the larger picture and that love is the beginning of all things. With our offering and blessing, we call you here. *Cynthia lights the candle of the East and leads the People in saying “We light a candle for peace in ourselves,***
- **“Spirits of the South we call you. We look to you for strength as a warrior as the noon day Sun, you color is yellow, you are the home of the Coyote who teaches us to laugh at ourselves so we can truly learn from our mistakes and the Mouse who teaches small vision seeing the details of all around us so our decisions are made in a good way. With our offering and blessing, we call you here. *Cynthia lights the candle of the South and leads the People in saying “We light a candle for peace in our church,***
- **“Spirits of the West we call you. We look to you for self-knowledge and the healing it brings. We look to you as the sun sets because this knowledge is held in the dark places of our souls. Your color is black and you are the home of the Great Bear who guards the cave into which we must travel to seek this knowledge. With our offering and blessing, we call you here. *Cynthia lights the candle of the West and leads the People in saying “We light a candle for peace in our community,***
- **“Spirits of the North we call you. We look to for the power and confidence to lead that comes only from the trial of the north, of walking the wheel of life. Your color is white, you are the home of the White Deer and the White Buffalo. Both are the brothers who bring us abundance and blessings. With our offering and blessing, we call you here. *Cynthia lights the candle of the North and leads the People in saying “We light a candle for peace in our world.***

Readings – [Bonnie reads 1st one [poem by Marilou Awiakta (Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation an Memphian) and the last 3 by Kerrel]

**I Offer You a Gift**

Still of the night...  
moon on the wane  
sun deep in sleep.  
Cricket, bird and wind lay low

as rhythms of earth and sky  
suspend  
prepare to turn.

Awake in the dark  
you know  
I know  
We may not make it.  
Mother Earth may not make it.  
We teeter  
on the turning point.

Against the downward pull.  
against the falter  
of your heart and mine.  
I offer you a gift  
a seed to greet the sunrise...  
Ginitsi Selu  
Corn, Mother of Us All.  
Her story.

[Kerrel's part]

“Everything I know I learned by listening and watching. Now-a-days people learn out of books instead. Doctors study what man has learned. I pray to understand what man has forgotten.

Vernon Cooper, Lumbee Elder

“Another of the Natural laws is that all life is equal. That's our philosophy. You have to respect life – all life, not just your own. The key word is “respect”! Unless you respect the earth, you destroy it. Unless you respect all life as much as your own life, you become a destroyer, a murderer.

Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation.

“My life belongs to my People. That makes me a very busy man. ... you guys hang around if you like. Maybe you'll learn something. There is one price. I ask you to pay – and, I'm sorry, but it's a very high price. I ask you to pay the price of attention!”

Eddie Benton-Banai, Ojibwa Elder

**“Who we Are and what that cost; a story of the First People”**

I – Pre-Intro: (done by Ralph) –

As I am sure you know today's service is in honor of Native American History Month. It is our intention to do just that; honor our Native American brother's and sister's. We have and will, to the best of our ability, do that using some of their traditions. One of those is that a leader does not introduce himself. It would be rude and self-important for one to "blow their own horn" so to speak. So part of my task is to introduce Kerrel so you can know with what authority he speaks.

2- Personal background: (done by Ralph) –

Some of you know that Kerrel was born in Pontotoc, MS, which is the very heart of the Chickasaw homeland. There were inter-marriages on both sides of his maternal lineage. All the southeastern tribes count only matrilineal lines when tracing family ties. The most recent of these was about 4 generations ago.

What drew him to explore this part of heritage was first his maternal grandmother's stories and second an inexplicable pull that some might attribute to the call of those ancestors or the very land he grew-up on.

By the time, Kerrel was in his late 20's he had meet a few traditionally raised Natives and his study and pursuit of a deeper spiritual life through his ancestral traditions began in earnest. This personal search lead him to become involved in local and national Native Rights issues, which brought him into contact with even more "traditionalist". He was not always welcomed but this did not dampen his spiritual search and practice.

This path often leads him in to leadership roles with non-natives and mix-heritage folks who wanted to pursue a similar spiritual path. Now in his middle age Kerrel is a Pipe Carrier. This means he was recognized as and called to be a spiritual protector of the People.

In this role, he speaks to you today.

3- Message:

I have little doubt that everyone in this room knows in very real ways just what it might cost to be who you are. In the world we live in the word

“liberal”, especially when used as a label, has become difficult to bare. The majority of our fellow citizens, correctly or not, see people who carry this label, as surely less than patriotic. If applied in the religious world one is likely to be judged as evil and a threat to what “god” wants for the world.

Each of us, simply by being members of this church, made a decision that living congruently with our personal beliefs is worth the price of this judgment. I suspect that many of us here today have experienced even a heavier price for simply being the person we see ourselves to be.

If you will, close your eyes for a moment and just feel the weight of that price, the price of just being your total self. (pause)

Despite this weight, we have endured even thrived. In the midst of the difficulty we are content, we continue to live with joy.

Now imagine that you stand in your own home with your dearly loved family and friends, firm in whom you are and in your place in the world. In a fleeting moment, a stranger appears and says to you and ever one around you that your home is not yours at all but rather it is his. Surely, he is crazy or just telling a joke. You laugh, as he begins to throw all of your belongings on to a trash heap to be burned. Still he must be joking; you and your entire ancestor have always been in this place.

Then the killing begins as he announces the choices before you; leave, become our slaves or die. Then the final and most painful blow, he steals your children, you are helpless to stop him. You never see them again. Stories come back to you that many have died of a broken

heart, for speaking the language of their birth or praying the way you taught them. The few who do return home to you are not recognizable. They have become tragic sad copies of your tormentors.

(pause) Can you even really imagine this happening to you and those you love?

This, in short, my friends is the story of the First People. Understand I am not here to offer a history lesson. We all know that the history of this country as it was taught to us was grossly inaccurate and often simply a lie. At best it is told through the filters of the conquerors. Nor is it my wish to impose guilt, yet this is where today's story begins.

True understanding, respect and appreciation of our Native brothers and sister cannot begin anywhere else. Our history before the invasion was just like any other People of the world. We were on this land, science tells us, for at least 10,000 years but our own oral history tells us we have always been here. We had our joys and struggles, some of us were good some were not. We fought each other for many reasons. We had good years and bad years, always evolving and adapting to our environment.

Our readings today reflect to things are central to the hearts and minds of the First People both today and thousands of years ago.

One is our connection to the Earth. This goes much deeper than just reverence and care for the Earth in general. This connection is deeper even

than our history of careful use and management of the Earth and Her creatures around us. We were and are connected to place, to particular places on the face of Mother Earth by blood and bone. So much so, that to take us away from those places is as if an arm or legs has been chopped off, perhaps it is more like killing a piece of our brain.

Gerry White Deer, a Singer of the Chickasaw Nation and one of my teachers, once told that often when Natives leave the reservation, the home of their ancestors, they go crazy. Our behavior reflects the lack of balance that is in part provided by the spot of dirt that flows through us like blood. Land was and is so sacred that it could not be “owned”.

When Europeans offered to buy our land the concept could not even be grasped. Therefore, we accepted their gifts with laughter thinking how silly surely these folks are just playing a joke. A group, tribe or nation, for the communities use, could claim land so perhaps that is what they meant. They offered gifts for the right to share our hunting grounds. That made a little more sense. The result of our inability to comprehend the concept of land ownership and its buying and selling was the beginning of over 600 years of war, death and destruction for both of us. The consequence of losing this war haunts us today almost 100 years after the last armed conflict.

Today, Native Americans have a chemical dependency rate 3 times that of any other group in our country. Natives are 6 times more likely to die from causes other than “natural”. More than 50% of all Natives live in poverty today. Natives were not granted citizenship until 1924. The Native American Voting Rights Act was not passed by the US congress until 1962

and New Mexico was the last state to grant Natives the right to vote in 1962. Even today, Indians are legally wards of the US government that means that the courts/government can enforce its will on them in the same way it can minors or mentally incompetent members of our society. As recently as 2008, the US government has lost court decisions both in US courts and world courts. Yet to date at least 99% of these decisions have been unacknowledged much less acted upon as the courts ordered.

The other part of us that reflected by today's reading is our connection to each other, to community, to the People, what we call the Hoop of Life or the Hoop of the People. Just like the connection to place, the breaking of this bond will leave us broken and lost. In the old days, the worst punishment to which one that had broken the law of the People would have been sentenced to be banished, sent from the Sacred Hoop – the community of humans. We were and are taught to live our personal vision for the good of the People.

As we began to lose control of our own lives, this was one of the strongest tools used against us. Beginning as early as the 1830's (perhaps far earlier) through the 1970's it was the policy of the U.S. government to take – by force if necessary – all Indian children from their families – ship them (often in cattle cars) so far from home that they could not return on their own – force them to change everything about themselves (hair, clothes, food, language and religion) so the “Indianess” could be forced out of them making them useful as servants or laborers. This policy was carried out almost exclusively by the various religious groups of the dominant culture.

This forced acculturation is the deepest scar in the collective soul of our People. There is not a Native whose family was not touch by this. It seems that either today the people of the dominated culture repress this knowledge or simple cannot process the shame of such cruelty directed on children. All of us today live in privilege built on the genocide (in both body and spirit) of the First People of the land.

Despite this history, there is much more truth to share, truth full of hope and life. Not long ago, I was watching a PBS series titled “Appalachia; a History of Mountains and People”. Certainly, this subject could not be accurately presented without the inclusion of the Cherokee people. One statement of a young Cherokee man who is today the archivists of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation sticks in my mind. He said, “sure I could be angry, I have every right to be angry but we endured so what purpose would it serve. I would rather be proud of my ancestors and my People today because no matter what was done to us we continued to be Cherokee.”

Even as we weep for our loose, we are alive, reclaiming who we are and evolving.

Several years ago I was attended a Pow-wow here in Memphis. As I stood in the crowd enjoying, the wonderful Fancy Dances do their energetic, skilled and sacred dance a woman with white hair and pale skin just in front of me said, “They did not have those pastel colors back then.” (She was referring to the bright satin ribbons dangling from the ends of the feather bustles.) She said this with some venom and disgust in her voice.

Frankly, her statement was true but it reflects an often-observed belief, in one form or another, of non-natives that Native culture is frozen in time. That belief can imply somehow that we do not want to change and demand a total return to the old ways.

As I mentioned early, nothing could be more antithetical to who we are. We have always adapted to our environment. This is in no way assimilation but rather making the currently available resources meet our needs. That is one of our great strengths. We can change how we do things without changing who we are or why we do a thing. We do not attempt to make our world adapted to our desires but rather we adapted our way of doing things to what the Creator's gifts to us are at any given moment in time.

Yes there have been and still are times when that creates a high price to continue to be who we are. A number of years ago I heard a Paiute Elder explain why she still goes to Mass even though she regular attends the traditional religious rituals of her people. She said, "At first we pretended to become Catholics so we would not killed. Now some of us have forgotten we were pretending."

Native People, not just Native Americans but aboriginal people all over the world, do not need you pity, your guilt or shame. In fact, we do not require you respect. We do need your honesty, your compassion and an understanding that we will not ever become like you. We do need your intervention in the actions of your government to insure that we are dealt with fairly or at least as fair as this system treats anyone.

In 1993, I was asked to speak to a graduate class of counselors at the University of Memphis concerning Native culture and how these you professional counselors might better work with us. They were very attentive and respectful, as you would expect. Near the end of the class one very well meaning white male student ask, “don’t you think the condition of Native Americans will improve as more of them are educated and become counselors for their own people?” I smiled and quickly answered, “no – things will improve when you accept we don’t need to be like you and that our own Medicine People can provide all we need if you allow them and simply see our way of doing things a just as valid are yours.” The room went deadly still and quiet as the professor broke into laughter. No one had a question after that.

Conclusion:

I know that the people of this congregation are exception to the rule in the world. You are sensitive to the pain of others; you want and work for justice. I suspect that for some of you nothing I have shared today is new information or surprising at all. I very likely have been preaching to the choir.

I ask this one thing of you, take the message to those who will not hear, who’s shame and quilt, or maybe their greed, keeps them in denial. What I hope you will take from here today is a more honest picture of just who Natives are. I hope I have strengthened your ability to see history

through different filters. I hope I have encouraged you stand strong in who you are no matter the cost, trusting that you, that we all, will endure.

As I close today, I would to return to our first thought, the cost of being who we are. All of you have heard the often-quoted statement “it is a good day to die”. I never really know what people make of that proclamation. Perhaps they think some Indian leader lost all hope and simply prepared to die, or that it was a call for killing. Neither is correct, it simply means today I will pay the price of being who I am and who I hope my children will be. I know everyone in this room likely thinks surely the cost is never that high. We all hope not, but it has often been in the past and may be again. That is not the point, what is important is our willing to pay the price.

In her poem, “Some Like Indians Endure” the contemporary Native and lesbian poet/novelist Paula Gunn Allen expressed the same idea this way:

Dykes remind me of Indians  
Like Indians dykes  
Are supposed to die out  
Or forget  
Or drink all the time  
Or shatter  
Go away  
To nowhere  
To remember what will happen  
If they don't

They don't  
Anyway  
Even though it  
Happens  
And they remember  
They don't

Because the moon remembers  
Because so does the sun  
Because so do the stars  
Remember  
And the persistent stubborn  
Grass  
Of the earth

**Benediction** – *Kerrel*

Attending Spirits we thank you for your guidance and blessings, we release  
you from this place and this time. Hear me my People, go in a good way,  
know the path is worth the price, take your place on the wheel, endure grow  
and help each other.