

HYMN SERIES: MANY AND GREAT, O GOD. JULY 28, 2019

This morning is the final morning of this month of hymn themed sermons, and I have to say I have really enjoyed learning more about each of the hymns on which we've focused. Two weeks ago, we focused on Be Thou My Vision, a hymn with history reaching back into Medieval Ireland, but the other two hymns we've already looked at have been solidly American. The first week, we looked at America the Beautiful, written in and about America by an American woman, so it certainly qualifies as American. After our brief foray into Medieval Ireland the second week, we returned to America last week, when we focused on Just A Closer Walk with Thee, which can be traced back to African slaves in pre-civil war times and is set to a Dixie Land tune, very uniquely American also. But perhaps today's hymn focus could be arguably the most American of all for this month, as this morning we are learning about the one Native American hymn that is reasonably known and sung within Christendom; Many and Great, O God. This hymn was written by a man of French and Dakota ancestry, and utilizes a traditional Dakota tune, and so is a strong contender for being about as American as any hymn can be, in that it is directly reflective of the original inhabitants of the Americas.

Now, I'm not suggesting that this hymn is extremely widely known and frequently sung, but we usually sing it once or twice a year, often on a Sunday like today with a creation focus, and I think you'll recognize it. I purposely chose a much more familiar hymn that praises God's greatness as Creator as our closing hymn---How Great Thou Art. That's one we and everyone know for sure! And it's of Scandinavian background, with which most of us are far more familiar than Native American culture, and when you play it with a lilting tempo like Carol does,

you realize it's a Swedish folk tune. You can picture some tall, blond Viking like soul hiking through the mountains of Norway or Sweden and singing about God's greatness in Creation, as he or she strides along the fjords. Lots of people are hiking the Superior Hiking Trail these days, and for all I know, they do the same. The really cool and remarkable thing, though, is that our familiar Scandinavian hymn and this not-as-familiar Native American hymn reflect the exact same sentiment: awe at God's creative power and beauty. The hymn for our sermon is more reflective than lilting, a thoughtful and serious offering of praise to God as Creator. Our two Scriptures this morning speak of God in just that way; the lesson from Genesis in liturgical language, using repetition and sequence to portray God's majesty; the lesson from Job also in poetic language, using mind-stretching imagery to represent God's creative power. And so it is this universal and same experience of God as Creator that inspired writers throughout Scripture, and hymn writers both Scandinavian and Native American, and even inspires us, to this very morning, to look to God and say, "Many and great, O God, are your works. How great thou art."

Like many of our sacred songs that were preserved orally for decades or centuries, this hymn also had existence prior to it's being written down and preserved in the 1830s. But it was a man named Joseph Renville, a remarkable bridge builder between cultures, who preserved this majestic praise song for us and all. He was an Indian guide and a fur trader, and being both French and Dakota, he was educated in a Roman Catholic environment. He served as a British captain in the War of 1812. He lived and trapped for the most part near Lac Qui Parle, a lake and region in Western Minnesota near the Minnesota-South Dakota border. The name of the lake is Lac Qui Parle and means, "lake that speaks." Good name, isn't it? Our Lake speaks, too. The name of that Lake gave our traditional Ojibwe hymn tune its name. Renville would travel to Fort

Snelling in what is now Minneapolis at times, and in 1835, the Major stationed there persuaded Renville to allow a missionary presence back in his home area. There had been conflicts between settlers and the Ojibwe and Dakota in the area, and it was hoped the mission might help. Surprisingly, given the usual grim history of our interaction with the indigenous people here, it did help. One scholar described what happened as “an experiment in cross-culturalism the likes of which the prairies had not seen.” Because the encounter between the missionaries and the indigenous tribes produced a Dakota/English dictionary, Dakota translations of the Bible, a Dakota grammar, a Dakota newspaper and school curriculum, and a Dakota hymnal, including our hymn for this morning. All of which came about because of an unusual willingness on both sides of that ethnic divide to build some bridges.

This hymn, then, reflects both Christian and Native American spirituality, and in regards to reverencing God as Creator, those two are remarkably in sync. One of the recognized resources for understanding Native American spirituality is a book written by Charles Eastman and published in 1911 called “The Soul of the Indian”. Eastman was another bridge builder, a man of both Dakota and Caucasian descent, and his goal in publishing this book was to present a primer, in the most general terms, of Native American religiosity prior to Christianity. Listen carefully to these few sentences I am taking from his writings and think about how the ideas are reflected in the hymn we will sing. He wrote, “The worship of the Eternal, the Great Mystery was free from all self-seeking.....There were no temples or shrines among us, save those of nature....We believed that the spirit pervades all creation and that every creature possesses a soul in some degree, though not necessarily a soul conscious of itself. The tree, the waterfall, the

grizzly bear, each is an embodied force, and as such an object of reverence...Here is the supreme mystery that is the essence of worship...to behold with awe the Divine in all creation..."

"To behold with awe the Divine in all creation..."...that is what this hymn does. "Many and great, O God, are your works, maker of earth and sky. Your hands have set the heavens with stars; your fingers spread the mountains and plains. Lo, at your word the waters were formed; deep seas obey your voice." And that awe and reverence for God as Creator draws forth a longing for intimacy with this Creator, in the second verse: "Grant unto us communion with you, O Star-abiding One. Come unto us and dwell with us; with you are found the gifts of life. Bless us with life that has no end, eternal life with you." That same spirit of worship and reverence for God and creation can be found in the Scriptural psalms of 3000 years ago; in our readings from Genesis and Job, also ancient; in our hymns from Sweden and Native Americans of the past few centuries; and within ourselves in the present as well. But whereas western Europeans tended to see nature as a force to be dominated and controlled, Native Americans tended to see nature as a force with which they looked to live in harmony and balance. So they may have the leg up on us when it comes to deeply reverencing both the Creator and the Creation. We have much to learn from them in this regard!

Our ability to do that learning is dependent upon people like Joseph Renville and Charles Eastman. They were bridge builders of great importance, who continue to educate us, as we reflect upon our relationship as a whole with the indigenous people of this land. Our Synod has a group called "Together Here" which is an attempt to create such bridge builders in our time and place. The effort is named "Together here", because we are all, in fact, now "together here."

Anyone can join this group, or follow their page on Facebook, or attend the educational forums they are holding. In June, Randi Alreck and Bill Berg attended on such forum on the Blanket Exercise, a traditional indigenous way of telling the story of the history of interaction between Western Europeans and Native Americans. The forums for the month of August are focused on the Indian Boarding School experience. My husband and I recently attended a July forum featuring a documentary on The Doctrine of Discovery. This is frankly not a pleasant topic, but I feel literally compelled to share about it, because this forum was a pretty potent experience for us. Now, I had read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* as a teenager, and I had a general idea that things hadn't gone so well when our forebears met up with the indigenous people of this land. But it was harrowing to hear the accounts, many written by Catholic priests, of the barbaric behavior on the part of Europeans in regards to the Native Americans. It wasn't merely that we felt we had a right to their land and took what we wanted, but we dehumanized, enslaved, and not infrequently butchered the indigenous people in ways that are stomach turning to learn of. The worst part of all of this, is that it was done with the blessing and encouragement of the Christian Church at the time. Which I had not previously fully grasped. Papal decrees actually endorsed this behavior as a means of building up the Kingdom of God on earth....to say nothing of being a means of building up the gold filled coffers of both the church and the monarchies of Europe. In 1493, Pope Alexander the 6th issued a decree of the Doctrine of Discovery. I am quoting a current description and critique of this doctrine now: " Native inhabitants have no property or any other rights which colonizing European nations and their sovereigns are bound to respect. This principle promotes the myth that the Americas were a largely empty land that European conquerors and migrants had a right to claim, occupy, and possess simply by virtue of

their Christianity and their European civilization.” I had not fully understand that in fact, both monarchies and church believed it absolutely their right to take this already occupied land and either force the inhabitants to become baptized converts, though always to be regarded as less than human; or to kill them if they refused. What kind of an evangelism strategy was that? But it *was* an effective empire building strategy, the same strategy many civilizations had utilized for millenia. And the document from which I just quoted is part of the *repudiation* of the Doctrine of Discovery. This repudiation by both church and secular authorities has been going on for a while now. In other words, with the hindsight of history and a broader understanding, many authorities, both secular and churchly, have recognized they need to say “no” to this once hallowed doctrine of discovery. In terms of church bodies, our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America only got on board relatively recently in 2016, but the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada , The Episcopal Church, The United Church of Christ, The United Methodist Church, and The Moravian Church, had already done so and other church bodies are even now acting. The Catholic Church has not repudiated the doctrine, though it has acknowledged wrong-doing. To further quote the document of repudiation: “We explicitly and clearly repudiate the European Christian-derived “doctrine of discovery” as fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and as a violation of the inherent rights that all individuals and peoples have received from God, with its continuing impact upon tribal governments and individual tribal members to this day, and we acknowledge and repent of the churches complicity in the evils of colonialism in the Americas.” This was passed by our churchwide assembly in 2016 and a version of it was endorsed by our Northeastern Minnesota Synod in 2017. The Together Here group which I have referenced is one of the results of the passing of that resolution in our Synod---an effort to

educate, foster understanding, build bridges, and admit that we were wrong. Sadly, this Doctrine of Discovery became a part of our Federal Law and judicial process in 1823, and since our judicial process is based on precedent, it continues to haunt Native Americans to the present. Sorry to share such grim facts on a beautiful day in a beautiful setting, but it's truth, and it's important to acknowledge truth. And while some of the social issues of our times seem a little far away from us....issues around the border with Mexico, for example... this one is right here. In fact, when our forebears first showed up along the North Shore in the early 1800s, according to our own Church history book, "the vast, forested wilderness was occupied only by native peoples who harvested what they could from the forest, fished, and hunted game. The name Knife River is a direct translation of the Ojibwe name: Mokomani Zibi." Our church history goes on to state that in the 1840s, copper was discovered and the Treaty of LaPointe opened up the North Shore for settlement by non-Indians, and the rest is history. Which is to say, that most of us probably live on land that once belonged to someone else of a group of people that were here first. We can't realistically give it back. But we can acknowledge that we treated the indigenous people badly and that our actions were certainly not in keeping with Christ and our faith, regardless of papal decrees and manifest destiny and whatever rationale was devised. Which explains the use of the Confession we prayed this morning, early in the service. It is valuable to name sin and to repent, and we as Church and Christians, who know that all humanity is created good by God, and all humanity is broken and flawed, and God looks to make all things new, including us, surely ought to be willing to do so.

So this morning, we sing songs of praise to God as Creator, songs from Native American and Scandinavian traditions, and we read Scriptural words praising God as Creator written

thousands of years ago in the Middle East, because God has been and is known as Creator throughout time and around the world. We seek to sing and read and listen with a spirit of genuine reverence for the goodness and generosity of God, displayed universally in Creation. And with a recognition that God's good creation is for all: for those of the past and future, as well as ourselves; and for those of all different ethnicities and races. We have a responsibility to God as Creator, to the Creation as wise stewards, and to each other, as co-inhabitants of this amazing world. We have abused all of those relationships, because we're part of a fallen humanity---we dishonor God and creation and other peoples by our attitudes and actions. But we also repent of that sin, and look to find ways to be "Together Here". We look to honor God through being made new and becoming bridge builders and Creation caretakers in our own ways. "Many and great, O God, are thy works. Oh God, how great thou art." Amen.