

## “Reflections from Pine Ridge”

Matthew 25:31-45 • Psalm 72

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I returned last night from a mission trip to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. This was the fourth time a group from our church has gone to Pine Ridge; it was my first. It was a powerful experience, and I need to reflect on it. We just heard some scripture. They're great passages. But they were far from my mind this past week. I was instead thinking about passages like these:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matt. 25)

“May he judge your people with righteousness / and your poor with justice. / May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, / and the hills, in righteousness. / May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, / give deliverance to the needy, / and crush the oppressor.... / For he delivers the needy when they call, / the poor and those who have no helper. / He has pity on the weak and the needy / and saves the lives of the needy. / From oppression and violence he redeems their life, / and precious is their blood in his sight.... / May there be abundance of grain in the land; / may it wave on the tops of the mountains; / ... and may people blossom ... / like the grass of the field....” (Psalm 72)

Now... why Pine Ridge? Why drive seventeen hours away, when there are Native Americans right here in Michigan whom we could help? That's a good question; it's a question I have heard some of you wonder about. There's an answer to the question. There's also a flaw in the question itself.

The answer to the question: the average life expectancy on Pine Ridge is 47 years for males and 52 years for females. Oglala Lakota County, which is entirely within the boundaries of the Pine Ridge Reservation, has the lowest per capita income in the country (\$8,768), less than a third of the national average. The official poverty rate for Indians living on the Reservation is 53.75%, compared to the U.S. average of 15.6%, but many independent assessments place the actual poverty rate at greater than 80%. The school drop-out rate is over 70%. The tuberculosis rate is eight times the national average. The infant mortality rate is five times the national average. Teen suicide is four times the national average. The situation for many people in Pine Ridge is so desperate that the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe here in Michigan has done numerous relief efforts to support the Lakota people in Pine Ridge over the past fifteen years, including Christmas gifts for families, backpacks for school children, and mission trips from churches comprised of Chippewa natives. The Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Chief wrote a letter several years ago on behalf of his Tribal Council to Re-Member, the non-profit organization that we partner with and support financially, expressing appreciation for Re-Member and its “mission to improve the quality of Reservation life through relationships, shared resources and volunteer services to the Lakota community.” So when Indians here in Michigan are sending support and aid to the Indians in Pine Ridge, well, you can begin to see why we send mission trips to Pine Ridge as well.

Earlier I said that there is a “flaw” in the question about whom we could “help.” Re-Member makes a distinction between *helping* and *servicing*: “Helping is not a relationship between equals. A helper may see others as weaker than they are, needier than they are, and people often feel this inequality. The danger in helping is that we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity or even wholeness.” One day this week, after the work crew that I was part of built a handicapped-accessible ramp on a trailer home, the woman who lived there came out and thanked us. I said to her, without thinking, “We were happy to help.” It would have been better if I had said, “We were happy to *serve*.”

We built bunk beds, to serve households where family members sleep on the floor. We built outhouses, to serve homes that lack indoor plumbing. We put siding around the base of trailer homes, to better protect those homes from the cold winter wind. We built ramps, to serve those with mobility issues. We tended to a large vegetable garden, that serves the community by providing much-needed vegetables in a region where grocery stores and farmers’ markets are basically non-existent. We also had an opportunity to *learn*. And there was a *lot* to learn. For starters: why is that part of the country so impoverished? Why is the situation so desperate? What *happened* here? Tough questions. Tougher answers. It all has to do with history: a history that we might or might not have learned about in school, a history that sometimes gets obscured, a history with a legacy that we cannot avoid.

From the moment Europeans began arriving in the New World, they discovered people living here in these lands. “Indians.” “Native Americans.” “First Peoples.” They lived all over the land. They lived *with* the land. Today there are 574 federally-recognized tribes living in various places around the U.S. Each, as Re-Member says, has “its own past, its own history, each deserving a book of its own.”

The most populous tribes here in Michigan were the Ojibwe (or Chippewa), the Ottawa, and the Potawatomi. In the area where we live, it was primarily the Ojibwe. They *lived* here, but they did not claim *ownership* of the land. The whole idea of “owning” a piece of property, of “buying and selling” land, was a foreign concept to the natives. The land belonged to the Creator. The idea of “owning land” was like “owning sky.” It didn’t make sense. But the Europeans liked maps, they liked fences, and European countries were in the habit of competing and fighting over boundary lines. The native peoples got caught up in those disputes, as much as they might have wished to avoid them.

In the War of 1812 between the U.S. and Britain, the Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi tribes aligned with Britain, which they hoped would slow European encroachment into their ancestral lands. But the British lost. The U.S. Government then pressured those tribes to sign the Treaty of Saginaw, which “forever” ceded a very large tract of land – more than six million acres – in central Michigan, stretching from just north of Jackson and Kalamazoo all the way up to Thunder Bay, excluding some small tracts which were “reserved” for use by the Indians. In exchange, the tribes were promised an annual stipend of one thousand dollars, and the right to hunt, fish, trap, and gather wild rice on the land that had been ceded. Chief Okemos was one of the signers of that treaty. The long-term result was the near-complete removal of the Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi tribes from our region. Today only 0.3% of Okemos – the community that bears the Chippewa chief’s name! – is Native American.

Something similar happened out west later on. Various treaties acknowledged the sovereignty of the native peoples over the Great Plains, in exchange for allowing settlers free passage on the Oregon Trail. But the U.S. Government failed to enforce those treaties, and many settlements were established illegally. This resulted in a series of skirmishes and battles. A treaty in 1868 promised the natives that whites would never, ever settle the Black Hills. But gold was discovered four years later, and prospectors quickly followed, taking precious resources that then rightfully belonged to the Sioux tribes. In 1876, the U.S. Government took back the Black Hills. All told, the U.S. Government made several hundred treaties with the native tribes, and almost all of them were broken. The native tribes sometimes responded with violence. The U.S. sent in the military, and encouraged the soldiers to exterminate the buffalo that the natives depended on for food. Fiercer battles followed. So Congress expanded the Army. The tribes were confined to reservations, and forbidden to hunt beyond those boundaries. The Government promised to provide them with rations to compensate for all the buffalo that U.S. soldiers had killed. That created a welfare state. Later, those rations were cut in half. The Government also tried to teach the tribes how to grow crops that grew on the Plains, but those crops failed to flourish in the arid Black Hills climate. The Lakota people were in danger of starvation.

In 1889, a native spiritual leader who had been taught by Christian missionaries had a vision: “God told me to come back and tell my people they must be good and love one another, and not fight, or steal, or lie. He gave me the dance to give to my people.” This dance was called the “Ghost Dance.” It was similar to other tribal dances, but it had a messianic element. Word spread among the tribes that Jesus had come to earth. They believed that by performing the dance, all evil on earth would be wiped away. The Lakota people also believed that Ghost Dance would also remove all European Americans from their lands. U.S. authorities got nervous; they interpreted the dance as a prelude to war. Police tried to arrest the Lakota leaders. A skirmish ensued. Sitting Bull was shot and killed.

Two weeks later, a group of grieving Lakota families were encamped on the banks of Wounded Knee Creek. U.S. officers tried to make the men hand over their weapons. One young Lakota man resisted. Somebody – we don’t know who – discharged a gun. An officer told his men to open fire. All hell broke loose. By the time it was over, 25 U.S. soldiers were dead, many killed by friendly fire. 153 Lakota were also dead. Most of them were women and children. One survivor, John Little Finger, remembered: “In this ravine where we took refuge, most of them were women and children and, of course, defenseless and helpless; above them the soldiers just got near them and shot those people down.” Another survivor, Louise Weasel Bear, said: “We tried to run but they shot us like we were buffalo.” Charles Allen, a white journalist, wrote: “I walked around east of the grounds viewing the sad spectacle. On reaching the corner of the green where the school boys had been so happy in their sports but a short time before, there was spread before me the saddest picture I had seen or was to see thereafter, for on that spot of their playful choice were scattered the prostrate bodies of all those fine

little Indian boys, cold in death.” We visited the site of the massacre. That tragedy broke whatever remained of the Lakota spirit. Military leader Kicking Bull handed over his weapon and surrendered.

The Lakota people, like many other tribes, were forced to hand over their children to be raised at boarding schools, often run by Christians. In those schools, children were forbidden to speak their own language, wear their traditional clothes, eat their peoples’ food, or wear their hair long. There were three boarding schools like that here in Michigan. Native Americans who are alive today tell stories of what their grandparents and great-grandparents had to endure. One Lakota girl wrote about the day her hair was cut off: “I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids.... Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.” Child abuse was widespread. You may be aware of the mass graves that have been discovered at some of these schools in the last few years. These schools continued their practices for several generations, a hundred years in some cases. Many Lakota never had a chance to learn their native language or practice their traditional values. In recent years, many of them have been trying to recover what was taken from them, learning the language and customs of their people.

Jesus told us to “make disciples of all nations.” He never told us to take away other people’s land, break important promises, eliminate a people’s food supply, kill innocent women and children, take children away from their parents, strip them of their identity, or abuse them. All of those things happened here, in our country, and often at the hands of people who called themselves “Christian.”

The cumulative impact of all this trauma is staggering. Poverty. Depression. Suicide. Poor nutrition. Lack of adequate health care. Widespread alcoholism. Many of these people are *broken*. And it’s *not their fault*. But ... is it *our* fault? We weren’t alive back then. We didn’t do those things. We didn’t commit those atrocities. We didn’t abuse those children. What responsibility do we have?

Well, let’s think. Three groups of people committed those atrocities: (1) The U.S. government, and its military. (2) Folks who look like me. (3) Christians. If you belong to *any* of those groups – and most of us do! – then you belong to a group that needs to do some repenting. Some *serious* repenting. A lot was *stolen*. A lot needs to be given back. A lot was *broken*. A lot needs to be rebuilt. Those atrocities happened over a period of *generations*. It’s going to take *generations* to heal it all.

You don’t have to participate in that process if you don’t want to. You can choose to bury your head in the sand, pretend the issues don’t exist, live in denial of the great wrongs that were done, and try to persuade yourself that you don’t bear any responsibility. You have the freedom to do that.

I would hope that your commitment to the Gospel values of Jesus Christ would make you think twice about that choice. “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

“May the mountains yield prosperity for the people.... For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak ... and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.... May there be abundance of grain in the land; ... and may people blossom ... like the grass of the field....”

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