

October 10, 2021
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 23), Year B
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

My mother's last name before marriage was *Michelli*. That name, Michelli, is an Americanization, tweaked in both spelling and pronunciation. But there's no mistaking the origin of its concluding vowel. My mother's paternal grandparents were part of a large late-nineteenth-century wave of immigrants from Sicily to New Orleans. Because south Louisiana is better known for its French influence, it might surprise you to hear about all those Italians. But you can see it when you're there. For example, one item on the lengthy list of regionally unique food is an Italian sandwich called the muffaletta.

I was told that, during my great-grandparents' crossing of the Atlantic, my great-grandmother was thirteen years old, pregnant with her first child, and sick the entire way. They eventually had eight children, including my mother's father, Alphonse. My mother's mother, Vivian, was of French ancestry. People of French ancestry carried a lot of prejudice against those of Italian ancestry, no matter that both groups were predominately Roman Catholic. Vivian and Alphonse met in the late 1920s. Her parents would not allow them to date, so they eloped to marry. Vivian's family members reacted horribly. They wouldn't allow Alphonse into their homes. One of her brothers stopped speaking to her, until the day that Alphonse died.

Sadly, that day came all too soon. Alphonse died young, in a terrible accident at the state capitol building in Baton Rouge, where he was a maintenance worker. It was 1936. There was no financial compensation for his family. It was the Great Depression. Vivian was left with three small children. She made sure they knew their father's family, people who had treated her so well when her own family had fallen short. My mother, Virginia, was only two years old when her father died. She used to speak especially lovingly of her Italian grandmother, who never did learn to speak English. She also talked about being bullied in school because she was half Italian. Sometimes older boys would take the sandwich she brought for lunch. They didn't eat it. Instead they stomped it into the dirt and handed it back to her.

Tomorrow is the holiday sometimes known as Columbus Day. Some Italian Americans say that the name doesn't matter, that it is simply a day to celebrate a heritage that has at times been vilified. Others feel differently. It seems to me that we now know too much to uphold Christopher Columbus as a hero or even as a cultural icon. His actions didn't just open the door to the horrible things that followed, though that would have been bad enough. Rather, he actively participated in those horrible things. This is a small excerpt from one article I read online:

On his first day in the New World, [Columbus] ordered six of the natives to be seized, writing in his journal that he believed they would be good servants. Throughout his years in the New World, Columbus enacted policies of forced labor in which natives were put to work for the sake of profits. Later, Columbus sent thousands of peaceful Taino “Indians” from the island of Hispaniola to Spain to be sold. Many died en route.¹

Many more died because Columbus and his men introduced infectious diseases to which the natives lacked immunity. They also forced natives to convert to Christianity. To all this, the Church didn’t just turn a blind eye—it quite explicitly waved a green flag. It’s hard to imagine how the participants could have let themselves believe it was okay. One clue might lie in a phrase from the article I just quoted: “for the sake of profits.” The Church buffeted them up with the belief that drastic action is sometimes necessary to save a person’s soul.

Pockets of that particular attitude persist even today, as some members of the LGBTQ+ community can attest. Tomorrow is annual National Coming Out, so I’ll repeat something I’ve said before: despite what many Christians would have you believe, Jesus didn’t have a thing to say about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, but he had plenty to say about people who are wealthy. We got one dollop of it in today’s reading from Mark. “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

Jesus understood that humans are tragically subject to the temptation to accumulate wealth, along with the power and privilege it affords. Where money is involved, it is shockingly easy to justify chipping away at even the strongest moral and ethical foundations. The individual taps of the hammer may be tiny, but they add up, until nothing is left standing, and the resulting pile of shards itself becomes the object of idolization.

Thinking about all this, I began to wonder how I would have managed Purdue Pharma if I was a member of the Sackler family. Would I have sacrificed wealth to prevent the opioid crisis? If not that, would I now donate my vast resulting fortune to those who are still suffering? I fear not. And while I’m not a Sackler, it all scales down. What temptations do I accept? What compromises do I make? Who suffers as a result of my choices? It is such a slippery slope. If I’m honest, I have to admit that Jesus is right: the only sure way to manage wealth is to give it all away.

I’m honest, but I’m also realistic: I’m not going to do that, and neither are you. But we’re not without hope. Fortunately for us and for the world, Jesus has more to say: “for God all things are possible.” We are part of that possibility. Make no mistake, God is at work. Right now, the signs are everywhere.

Today’s worship began with something new, a land acknowledgment. In case you haven’t heard that term before, one Canadian resource describes it this way: “Territory acknowledgement is a way that people insert an awareness of Indigenous presence and land rights in everyday life. This is often done at the beginning of ceremonies, lectures, or any public event. It can be a subtle way to recognize the history of colonialism and a need for change in settler colonial societies.”²

St. Thomas's is located on Quinnipiac land. The history of the Quinnipiac in this area seems not to be particularly well-known, perhaps because the Quinnipiac were nearly eradicated so early in the history of European settlement. Coincidentally, Tuesday's edition of the *Daily Nutmeg* gave what seems to be a pretty good summary of that history, taken from a couple of books. I encourage you to check it out.³ According to the article:

[In 1633] a smallpox epidemic originating with Europeans at a fort near what is now Hartford decimated the area's native population, killing an estimated 80% within two years. By the time the English arrived five years later in what would become New Haven, war between the English and the Pequots of eastern Connecticut—a conflict in which the Quinnipiac had attempted to remain neutral—had further reduced the local population. ... by 1638 the Quinnipiac population comprised just 400 to 500 people living in and around four villages stretching from present-day West Haven to North Haven to Clinton.

...

By the turn of the 19th century, most of the surviving Quinnipiac in the area had migrated northward to join their extended families and other groups of "native refugees" The longest-lasting Quinnipiac settlement was located at West Lake in Guilford into the 1830s, after which its people, too, moved to merge with other groups.

Eventually, the summer of 2020 may be known less as the first summer of the COVID-19 pandemic, and more as the summer when the statues came down. Instigated by the murder of George Floyd, this mostly involved Confederate statues in the South. But there was more, including the June 2020 removal of the statue of Christopher Columbus from Wooster Square Park in New Haven. Some people are still trying to bring it back. Others insist that there is no going back. In August the Wooster Square Monument Committee unveiled its design choice for a replacement statue. It depicts an immigrant family of four—parents and children—newly arrived from Italy.⁴ I saw a photo of the model, and it felt a lot better than old Christopher.

Gina Panza, the Head of School of St. Thomas's Day School, tells a great story related to Christopher Columbus. Gina Panza, the Head of School of St. Thomas's Day School, tells a great story related to Christopher Columbus. It was four or five years ago, and she was with the third-graders. Gina asked them, "What do you know about Christopher Columbus?" She got the usual answers: he discovered America; he arrived in 1492; his ships were named the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. Then she said, "What else do you know about Christopher Columbus?" There were several beats of silence until one quiet voice replied, "He wasn't a nice person." Gina then unpacked that with the children.⁵

History is catching up to us; we are in the midst of an era of huge awakening, as we come realize just how much needs to be made right. Sometimes it feels like there is just no end to the troubled history that we are being called to confront. It's hard. Sometimes it feels like an impossible burden. But it feels less like a burden when you let yourself imagine the outcome. The outcome is a better world, for everyone and everything.

I've recently been seeing a lot of references to the idea of *kinship*, particularly kinship as understood in Native American communities. For Native Americans, as for many indigenous communities, kinship is broadly defined, placing people in extensive networks of relationship with other humans and also with various elements of the natural world. It's a whole different way of being. My understanding of it is yet very elementary. I opened this sermon with some of my own kinship stories. Such stories don't have to be reasons to build walls. Instead they can be avenues that help us empathize with the stories of others. Maybe that's how we build new and more extensive communities of kinship. And maybe, in these challenging times, that's how we can begin a reset, as we reach toward God's reconciled creation.

At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned the regionally popular muffaletta sandwich. The muffaletta is said to have been invented in 1906 by a Sicilian immigrant in New Orleans. Each restaurant has its own recipe, but every muffaletta is a conglomeration—several types of cured meats, Swiss and provolone cheeses, and an olive salad that includes several other types of chopped vegetables—all piled on Sicilian bread. It's wild, and it works. It's kind of a nice metaphor for the best of America.

God is calling us into deeper and more authentic relationships—with reality, with ourselves, with one another, with all creation, with God. Yes, it's hard, but I don't think we would have it any other way. We are becoming better people; we are becoming better Christians. Thank God that “for God all things are possible.”

Notes

¹ “Why Columbus Day Courts Controversy,” *History*, October 9, 2020, available online at <https://www.history.com/news/columbus-day-controversy> (accessed October 10, 2021).

² “Territory Acknowledgment: Why acknowledge territory?” *Native Land Digital*, available online at <https://native-land.ca/resources/territory-acknowledgement/> (accessed October 10, 2021).

³ Kathy Leonard Czepiel, “At the Dawn,” *Daily Nutmeg*, October 5, 2021, available online at <http://dailynutmeg.com/2021/10/05/quinnipiac-dawnland-collection-dudley-farm-museum-at-the-dawn/> (accessed October 10, 2021).

⁴ Mark Zaretsky, “Design selected to replace New Haven's Columbus statue is a ‘celebration of the human spirit,’” *New Haven Register*, Aug. 3, 2021, available online at <https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/Celebration-of-the-human-spirit-Here-s-16360099.php> (accessed October 10, 2021).

⁵ Shared with permission. Gina Panza emailed me on October 10, 2021, to confirm the details of the story, adding this: “You could also add I shared with students how sad and confusing it was to learn this. How proud I felt as a youngster each year when we celebrated Columbus—it was the only time my culture was highlighted in our history books.” I received the email after the sermon was delivered.