

What is the right thing? Are we always sure that we are doing the right thing?

Has there ever been a time in your life when you thought you were doing the right thing—or even the only thing you thought you could do under the circumstances, only to find out later, you didn't – in fact—do the right thing-- and you finally realized it yourself. Or worse: someone let you know.

Some of us might have gotten defensive—after all—we THOUGHT they were doing the right thing. It was only in hindsight—sometimes years later—we discovered that we had hurt someone deeply.

What happens when we do that? Do we hide it? Do we ignore it? Deny it? Try and cover it up?

Zacchaeus was probably in the camp of “I thought there was nothing else I could do but be a tax collector. The occupying army didn't give me much choice. And I had to feed my family.” That's probably an excuse everyone can understand—it's hard to make a family suffer. But that still didn't make it right.

Jesus invited himself to share a meal with him. Imagine how that felt to Zacchaeus. Here he was, daily breaking Hebraic law by collecting taxes for the Romans: overseeing the customs charges on the trade routes through Jericho and exacting taxes on his own Judean people. Not only that—many tax collectors padded the tax bills a bit—since the Jews never knew how much tax they were supposed to pay anyway!

He knew he was sinning against his own people. He might be rich, but at a great cost: he soon lost his friends and extended family in the community.

And Jesus saw this, saw him, and said he would break bread with him. This teacher who was bringing his people hope, the man who worked miracles, the prophet who preached love—this Jesus-- was looking at him with eyes full of love. Zacchaeus was overwhelmed, grateful—and suddenly full of remorse.

Then Zacchaeus surprised the onlookers and probably even himself by exclaiming, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Jesus smiled and acknowledged this true son of Abraham.

Remorse is just words if all it consists of is a weak apology, excuses for behavior, and no real restitution. Zacchaeus backed up his words with something that cost him more than just acknowledging his complicity. He wanted to make it right.

Now--I said I was going to talk about the diocesan convention this week. This story has everything to do with the bulk of our discussion at that meeting.

We, of course, talked about the budget, church happenings, a new celebration on the calendar: “Deacons Day”, and there were a slew of courtesy resolutions. But the vast bulk of our conversation was about Tribal Sovereignty. You may be new to Maine, or not be aware of this discussion in the state government, so here's a little history.

When the first Colonizers came to this country, it was *not* a vast empty country just waiting to be colonized. It was a land filled with many million indigenous people who were living lives in various tribes throughout this vast country. Sometimes they lived in peace, sometimes there were disputes that erupted into wars—kind of like the world today, right?

The early colonizers- Europeans, Spanish and French decided that these people weren't “civilized enough” – in their eyes of course—to be able to continue to get in the way of their land acquisitions. Over the course of the

next 200 years they villainized the first nation peoples, and waged war on them, drove them from their homes and land, and even tried to eradicate the buffalo--their primary source of food-- so they wouldn't survive. Those remaining-- they forced to live on reservations comprised of the least desirable, arid and usually unsustainable land—land that the white people didn't want.

It gets worse.

The colonizers decided to “help them be more white” to fit into this new white society. We'll ignore the fact that this new society was once the tribes homeland, and their parent's homeland. That was irrelevant to the new ruling citizens. These new Americans knew that they were far better, more civilized and worthy human beings than the first nation savages—as they called them. In the 1800's they came up with a plan to “help them”. They would take the first nation people's children away from their families and culture and put them in special “schools” where they were no longer allowed to dress, speak, or worship God according to their own traditions--or even to communicate with their families. This would “encourage” the tribal people to assimilate into the “better” white culture. Try and imagine someone of another race, or culture doing this to us. This is the textbook definition of racism, and it had dire consequences.

Many hundreds of children died in these schools from abuse, malnutrition, and lack of medical care. A year ago I was shocked to learn that this practice of removing tribal children from their families continued here in Maine until 1976. Since then, horror stories about mass graves have arisen all over this country and in Canada.

Since then, I have been privileged to listened to people from first nation families as they were finally allowed to tell their stories. The trauma was still palpable.

Now, in 2022, most of the states in our country have done what they all said they would do hundreds of years ago: make the reservation lands sovereign: independent and self-governing. All states, that is, except Maine. So—at convention, we talked about it. We could have gotten defensive—after all—many of us only discovered recently what our state had been doing. But we didn't.

We didn't hide it, we couldn't ignore it, and we decided we will no longer try and cover it up. We talked about what we thought would be the right thing to do moving forward.

We took Zacchaeus as our guide. Remorse is just words if all it consists of is a weak apology, excuses for behavior, and no real restitution. Zacchaeus backed up his words with something that cost him more than just acknowledging his complicity. He did it with action and promises of restitution. He wanted to make it right.

We wanted to do the same. We wanted to make it right.

We have no idea how our state will resolve this issue, but the vast majority of Maine's diocesan delegates decided that it was important to do what we felt was truest to our vows to respect the dignity of every human being, and to seek justice for people everywhere.

Sovereignty is a broken promise to the tribes, and members of Diocesan convention resolved to stand behind our Wabanaki brothers and sisters as the Episcopal Church in Maine to support their sovereignty to fulfill a promise. We also promised to denounce any treatment of our indigenous people that portrays them as anything less than humans made in the image of God. Because it's the right thing to do. And because we are true sons and daughters of Jesus.

Amen.