

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – October 18, 2020
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 and Micah 6:6-8
God Has a Plan for Us

“When Britain went to war against the United States in 1812, many Choctaw warriors served in the American army of Andrew Jackson.”¹ Less than two decades later, when Jackson became president, that alliance amounted to little. In his first year in office, Jackson “persuaded Congress to pass the Indian Removal Act,” thereby legitimizing the transplantation “of numerous American Indian tribes, including the Choctaw, over the western frontier and appropriating their ancestral lands for settlement.”²

“That first migration of the Choctaw proved utterly devastating, coinciding with one of the coldest winters ever recorded. Endless blizzards, flash floods, pestilent swamps and iced-up rivers combined with a cholera epidemic and malnutrition to kill thousands of the hapless migrants.”³ While we do not know the exact numbers, it is believed that over 12,000 Choctaw embarked on the Trail of Tears between the years of 1830 and 1834. As many as 4,000 died along the way.⁴

¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/what-the-irish-did-for-and-to-the-choctaw-tribe-1.3423873>

² Irish Times.

³ Irish Times.

⁴ Irish Times.

Following on the heels of that tragedy, a European crisis emerged. The Irish Potato Famine, also known as the Great Hunger, began in 1845 when a fungus-like organism spread rapidly throughout Ireland. “The infestation ruined up to one-half of the potato crop that year, and about three-quarters of the crop over the next seven years.”⁵ In those days, Irish tenant farmers relied heavily on the potato as a source of food. And before the crisis had ended in 1852, the Potato Famine accounted for the deaths of roughly one million Irish from starvation and related causes, with at least another million forced to leave their homeland as refugees.⁶

In the United States, many citizens had Irish roots. Both of former President Andrew Jackson’s parents were born there. And as the famine took hold, collections were received across the country in support of the Irish victims. Still, few could have predicted a significant contribution from the Choctaw nation who, in 1847 “set aside its own impoverishment and suffering to make a \$170 donation,” or the equivalent of over \$5,300 today. Having suffered terribly during its forced relocation to Oklahoma, “the Indian nation empathized with Irish people enduring misery and starvation more than 4,000 miles away.”⁷ And they were

⁵ Irish Times.

⁶ Irish Times.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/09/irish-native-american-coronavirus-historic-bond>

moved to act, not out of a sense of obligation, but from a place of compassion and shared humanity.

Here I am reminded that some acts of self-giving are so amazing, so unexpected, and so full of grace that they are not easily forgotten. In subsequent years, the Irish honored the good will of the Choctaw nation through art and numerous commemorations.⁸ Then, earlier this year, as Covid-19 surged through Native American communities, Irish citizens remembered previous Choctaw generosity. And, in response, they too were moved to compassion, providing contributions in excess of \$500,000 in support of Native American people in their time of need.

Friends, what does it mean to be a person of faith? The Old Testament prophet Micah tells us. It is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Being a person of faith means seeing in others God's own image, being attuned to their suffering, and responding with compassion. Being a person of faith means recognizing how much we are truly capable of, not only as individuals, but also collectively, as we affirm the covenant to give of our time, and our talents, and our financial resources. For being a person of faith means

⁸ Guardian.

giving of ourselves, not out of habit or obligation, but as a grace-filled response to what God has already done for us.

Yes. Whether we set out to serve the needs of those who are close enough for us to see and touch, or whether we commit ourselves to meeting needs that are more than an ocean away, we do so with the intention of building up the one body of Christ. This means reorienting our lives around a shared purpose, and learning from the example of other people, like the Choctaw and the Irish, about what it means to love.

Psalm 139 reminds us that God knows each us completely, and yet still accepts us and calls us beloved. How fortunate we are to be known by a God like this, who sees beyond our weaknesses, and who honors the unique complexity of every human life. This God did not create us in one, fleeting breath before leaving us to our own devices. No. This God remains active and engaged, moving among us as mysteriously as the wind, constantly breathing new life into the depths of the human experience.

And there, where we might wish to remain hidden and yet are still fully known, God speaks. In words that are so personal, so affirming, and so challenging

that we can scarcely believe it, God speaks – articulating a plan for our lives. For my life. For your life. And for our shared life in Christ. Friends, God does not lead us out in the desert wilderness in order that we might die of thirst. No. God’s intentions for us are for hope and a future.

We will likely never know the full impact of our gestures. Could the Choctaw have ever imagined Irish generosity in the year 2020? Still, I am convinced that God honors every attempt to provide for the spiritual, and emotional, and physical needs of others. For in doing so, we demonstrate the love that is from God and the grace that makes us whole.

Today, as we begin a new stewardship season in the life of this community of faith, we acknowledge and honor the One who knows our greatest needs before a word ever passes from our lips. Even so, we bow our heads and petition God with prayers for ourselves and for our neighbors in need, just as we commit to serving them in every way that we are able. We reaffirm our call to share the good news, and to lift our voices in song. Today, we worship God with gladness. We teach our children the lessons of our faith. And we open ourselves up to the possibility of transformation, no matter what our age, through the amazing power of God’s love for us.

And through it all, we know what this moment desires most. That we do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Let us join our voices together in praise. Let us confess our faith, using the affirmation found in your bulletin.