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Sermon for Fifth Sunday of Creation Season

As many of you know, Jeff and I took a day trip out to Monhegan Island on Wednesday of this past week. It was just the most beautiful day—sunny with barely a cloud in the sky. On the boat ride out, our captain pointed out the birds diving not too far from us. As we got closer, we could see that there were porpoises swimming, chasing a school of fish and forcing them into the shallow water where they were easier prey for the birds. It was such a cool sight.

As we approached Monhegan, our captain in sharing the history of the island, told us that there was archaeological evidence of human activity on the island at least as far back as 200 BCE and likely even earlier than that. Archaeologists have discovered that the Wabanaki people used the island to hunt swordfish and would live on the island during the hunt. Monhegan comes from the Wabanaki word meaning island or great island. It was likely not occupied by year-long inhabitants until English settlers came in the 1600's. It was in 1605 that explorer George Weymouth claimed the island for King James I of England and named it St. George.

While hearing of the swordfish hunts that had gone on for thousands of years, and seeing the beautiful village that exists today, I couldn't help but wonder what happened to those Wabanaki peoples who used the coast of the island as hunting ground for the swordfish. They may not have lived on the island, using it only part of the year for the swordfish hunt, but what happened when English settlers arrived? Was there a time when both settlers and the Wabanaki shared the island? Was there conflict and violence over access to the shores and the swordfish hunt? Or was it a peaceful co-habitation?

This story shared about the swordfish hunt on Monhegan is for me part of the larger story of what has happened over the past four hundred years to the indigenous populations that once moved across these lands with the seasons, planting corn along the rivers in the spring, harvesting fish on the coast and gathering berries in the summer, and hunting game in the woods in the winters. The settling of Monhegan speaks to the disruption to the tribal lifestyle caused by the English and other European settlers in this land we now call Maine.

We know that the Wabanaki people, meaning “the people of the Dawnland”—the Maliseets, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and Micmac have not disappeared, they are still here,—but European colonialization of these lands over time, made impossible their itinerant lifestyle, and largely forced them onto reservations, often by violent means. This is an uncomfortable truth about our national history, and it is an uncomfortable truth about our Christian history. We don't have to do a lot of research to find evidence that European Christians coming to these lands used the excuse of civilizing the native peoples that they labeled infidels and savages and bringing them to Christ as reason to take their lands and visit other atrocities on their communities.

When we look back on our history, we can see all the ways that colonialism brought devastation to so many parts of the world, not just to people, but to the entire ecosystems.

And for all of the talk about European nations wanting to bring Christian values to the Americas, it seems that the Indigenous people may have had a better understanding of the Gospel message than they did and maybe better than we do today.

Take our Gospel reading for this morning. This is always a hard one to preach. A young man who has been inspired by the words and deeds of Jesus comes to him asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, to enter into the kingdom of God. And Jesus answers that he must do more than even following the commandments, he must sell what he owns, give the money to the poor and follow Jesus. This was not what the man hoped to hear, and he leaves Jesus in shock and grief.

Jesus then goes on to make that famous statement, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

And it is tempting for us to believe that Jesus wasn't talking about us when he talked about the rich. That surely he meant people of the world like Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg. Those are the rich, right? Those are the ones with the big possessions, Jesus couldn't mean us and our possessions, could he?

But if we're honest, we must ask-how are we attached to our possessions in the very same way as the man in our Gospel reading? Rather than using our possessions for the good of others, how do we let them control us?

We and the man in the Gospel likely have something to learn from cultures and people who don't see their value and the value of others in what they have been able to acquire and possess. It is a long part of our European and Christian history to see the world around us as something to control. And the more things we can possess and call our own, the more value we think we have. That desire for possession, particularly of land and the wealth that it generates, was the foundation of the struggle between Europeans and Indigenous peoples in this country.

When settlers arrived here, they thought of land as something you could survey, mark its boundaries and own. But that didn't make much sense to the people who were already here. What I discovered when I read some of the communication and treaty making between the early settlers and Wabanaki, was that the English wanted land ownership and finite boundaries, whereas the Wabanaki were offering a hospitality that was welcoming, but asked the question of what the local resources could handle. What would such an influx of people do to the land? To the delicate balance of nature that they preserved by moving from place to place with the seasons so as not to deplete any one resource, like the soil, the fish, or the wild game. The Wabanaki wondered how they would live together in peace if the new settlers cared little about those social and

ecological networks that had served them well for thousands of years. (thanks to the Maine Historical Society for access to those documents.)

Sadly, we know that the concerns of the Wabanaki in those historic communications were justified. There would be no peace, no finding a way to live together for the good of all and the health of the natural world around them. The story of the encounter of European Christians and the Wabanaki in this region would end in tragedy.

Tomorrow, we celebrate the world's Indigenous People, and it is our work as the Church to listen and amplify their voices, to share their stories, and when possible, to stand with them. It would also be to our benefit to ask what we might learn from them. What might we learn from a culture that places more value on care for and relationship with the land than with possession of it? How might we see in the story of Jesus that even as we look at our history and think we know who the winners and losers are in this world, Jesus claimed time and again that when it comes to the Kingdom of God, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Jesus promises his disciples that they can have abundant life, but they won't find it in wealth and possessions. Instead, they will find it in sharing in God's dream for the world—in seeking justice and healing for all people. May it be so. Amen.