SPECIAL SUNDAY

SERMON STARTER

NATIVE AMERICAN MINISTRIES SUNDAY

A Road to Repentance, Conversion and Healing

This sermon starter is part of the Native American Ministries Sunday pastor and leader kit and connects with the theme "A Road to Repentance, Conversion and Healing." It can be adapted for your context and integrated into your worship service with the other material in the kit. **It is based on the lectionary readings for May 4, 2025: Acts 9:1-6 and Psalm 30.**

Today, as we gather in worship, we are reminded of the healing work of God in our lives, in our communities and in our nation. In the history of the United States, there are moments when the need for repentance and conversion are deeply felt—not only by individuals but also by entire nations. One such moment is the tragic history of the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864 when two prominent Methodists were largely responsible for the brutal murder of more than 230 members of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. To learn more, read this UMNews article. As a church, we are called to acknowledge these wrongs, seek repentance and open our hearts to the work of healing through Christ.

In Acts 9:1-6, we read about Saul's dramatic encounter with Jesus, which led to his repentance and conversion. Saul, a man who persecuted the early church, was blinded on the road to Damascus, only to be healed and transformed by the grace of Christ. Similarly, in Psalm 30, we hear a song of thanksgiving for God's deliverance from despair and death—reminding us that God is a God of restoration, even after deep pain.

As we reflect on these Scriptures, we are challenged to think about our own history and the role we play in God's mission of reconciliation, especially in light of the injustices faced by Native American communities. Let us explore how we, as a church, can take steps toward healing by acknowledging past wrongs and embracing God's call to repentance and conversion, just as Saul did on the road to Damascus.

Repentance begins with acknowledging past injustices. In Acts 9, we encounter Saul, a man whose heart was hardened against the followers of Christ. Saul thought he was doing God's work by persecuting the early Christians, but in an instant, God stopped him in his tracks. A flash of light from heaven blinded him, and a voice spoke, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul's blindness mirrored his spiritual condition, and his encounter with Jesus led to his repentance and conversion.

We, too, must recognize the ways in which we have perpetuated harm. In the history of the United States, Native American communities have faced genocide, forced relocation, and the stripping of their land and culture. The Sand Creek Massacre is just one such example. This horrific event, like many others, must not be forgotten. The United Methodist Church, recognizing the profound wrongs done to Native peoples, has taken steps toward repentance. In 1996, The United Methodist Church

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officially acknowledged the injustices and expressed sorrow and repentance for the pain caused. But repentance must go further—it involves not only acknowledging the past but actively working toward reconciliation and healing.

Psalm 30 speaks of a transformation, from mourning to joy, from death to life: "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy." This transformation echoes Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus—when God reached into the darkness and blindness of Saul's heart, bringing him into the light of grace. Saul's conversion was not merely a change of belief but a radical transformation of his purpose and mission. In the same way, conversion calls us to turn away from the harmful ways of the past and toward a future shaped by justice, peace and reconciliation.

After the Sand Creek Massacre and other atrocities, God's Spirit calls the Church to conversion. It's a call to not only speak out against injustice but to actively support the flourishing of Native American communities today.

In 2024, General Conference adopted a resolution "United Methodist Responses to The Sand Creek Massacre" which included a commitment to learning along with specific action steps to work toward true reconciliation, including:

- Starting negotiations with tribal representatives to produce a document establishing an "ongoing healing relationship" between the affected tribes and the denomination;
- Assisting with the creation of public memorials for the victims of the Sand Creek Massacre;
- Encouraging the return of Native American artifacts and remains related to the massacre; and
- Supporting acquisition of property and establishing tribal landholdings in ancestral lands.

Bishops, general agency staff members and Sand Creek representatives have formed a task force to address these action items throughout the 2024-2028 quadrennium.

As we reflect on the words of Acts 9:1-6 and Psalm 30, let us remember that the work of repentance, conversion, and healing is not a one-time event, but a continuous journey. Just as Saul was transformed by his encounter with Christ, so too can we be transformed by our willingness to confront past injustices and work toward reconciliation. The Sand Creek Massacre and similar atrocities in Native American history are not forgotten by God. God's justice calls us to repentance, but God's grace calls us to conversion—a conversion that leads to healing.

Native American Ministries Sunday offers a chance for us to contribute financially to the ministry and justice efforts of Native American communities. But this healing is not just about financial support; it's about building relationships, amplifying Native voices, and walking alongside those who have been marginalized for centuries. It is about creating space for the voices of Native peoples to be heard, respected and embraced by the broader church.

Let us take this moment, as individuals and as a church, to acknowledge the pain and suffering caused by the historical injustices against Native American communities. May we, as followers of Christ, be a part of God's work in bringing about healing, justice and reconciliation. May our hearts be transformed as we seek God's grace and strive to be agents of peace in a broken world. Amen.