

Native American Ministries Sunday Sermon Starter: Venturing to “the other side”

Begin by inviting the congregation to think of a time when they felt left out. Perhaps someone told them not to sit at the “cool” lunch table at school. Maybe they didn’t get into a coveted fraternity or sorority. Or perhaps they didn’t get a job promotion they thought they deserved. How did they feel?

Recall the story of Jesus calming the seas, found in Mark 4:35-41. Jesus steps into a rough, but finely crafted, boat. The disciples watch Jesus as he stands in the stern facing the shore, telling the people about living lives consistent with God’s kingdom. Jesus teaches a long time. He needs a break. He instructs the disciples to pull up the sail, put the oars in the locks and head the 23-footer to the other side, a six-mile sail. The exhausted Jesus falls asleep as the disciples point the bow toward the other side of the lake.

Talk about “the other side.” “The other side” is Mark’s image of the unclean, the unknown – a place of discomfort. The people who live there are different from us. Boundaries keep us from going there. The boundary is the sea. The boundary is fear. Jesus crosses boundaries. He heals a Roman Centurion’s slave, asks for a drink of water from a Samaritan woman, travels in dangerous territory and extends mercy despite laws that would preclude him from doing so.

Ask: Where is “the other side” in your life? Is it the homeless man, pleading for money and mercy on a sultry summer day or a frigid winter night? Is it your new neighbor, whose language and clothing differ from yours? Is it a new computer program that everyone in your company must adopt, even though the one you’ve used for years seems perfectly OK to you?

The Rev. Duane M. Harris, pastor of Auburn United Methodist Church in Michigan, told about his first trip out west. “I was anxious to see the land of the Plains Indians,” he said. He remembered the stories and “the deep spirituality of the Native Americans, who understand themselves to be part of the circle of life. The earth is their mother, giving birth to them and all of life.”

Never before had Harris “seen such a vast ocean of grass. Rolling hills with no power lines, no telephone poles and no fences – just open plains as far as the eye could see.” He began to understand Lame Deer, a Sioux medicine man, who described the agony Native Americans felt as Caucasians occupied the western plains. For generations, Native Americans had enjoyed “freedom to roam and hunt. No boundaries. All that changed when property lines began to carve up the land.”

Connect the theme of “the other side” to today’s special offering. Today is Native American Ministries Sunday. God calls us to venture to the other side, break down boundaries and discover the richness that awaits us. As Native Americans understand that no one owns the land, water, air and earth, neither can one people own God’s kingdom. Jesus doesn’t think the way his disciples do, nor does he share their fear of “the other side.” His net is cast far wider, his influence poured way beyond the confines of one boat. As Jesus sleeps, dark clouds accumulate. The wind picks up. Waves grow pound the boat. The disciples struggle against the powerful wind and angry waves. They cannot keep up. Fear and panic take hold.

Acknowledge that throughout life, we encounter many unfriendly seas. The sea does not care if an aggressive cancer voids your carefully made retirement plans. The sea does not care if divorce leaves you in deep depression or if slow economy eliminates your job. The sea may throw you into the ropes of addiction or toss you under the authority of an oppressive boss. The sea is the enemy, all that threatens human life. All of us have known its callousness in some form.

Jesus sleeps peacefully through the threat of the sea. The disciples are another matter. They panic, afraid for their lives. Intent on self-preservation, they cry, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re drowning?” They cannot

turn from relying on themselves to trusting in God's sovereign power. Fear dominates their thoughts as they face the chaos of the sea. They cannot overcome that one boundary to peace.

Jesus awakens. Standing in the stern of the boat, he commands, "Silence! Be still!" Mark writes, "The wind settled down and there was a great calm." Jesus asks his disciples, "Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet?"

Remind the congregation that even in the midst of storms, God provides "aha moments." When we recognize and deeply trust God's ultimate authority and power, peace comes. With peace comes the realization that along with being in control, God also encourages us to get involved in social justice – doing more than handing a dollar to a homeless person. God urges us to do more than wave "hello" to our new neighbors. God expects us to learn about – and learn from – people who aren't exactly like we are. And when our spirits and patience sag, God gives us the grace to accept change and to move on, despite disappointment and fear.

Draw attention to Native American Ministries Sunday. Native American Ministries Sunday is an opportunity for all of us to honor the gifts and contributions made by Native Americans to our society. It is also a time for us to share through a special offering that supports Native American outreach within annual conferences and across the U.S. and to provide seminary scholarships to United Methodist Native Americans. Invite the congregation to give generously and to find tangible ways to become involved with this small, yet very significant, part of The United Methodist Church.

– Adapted from a sermon by Duane M. Harris (March 8, 2011)