

Indigenous Peoples' Day: A Brief Reflection

October 9, 2023

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"In 1492, Columbus sailed the Ocean blue." This was the poetic statement I was taught as a child to incline me to celebrate the "discovery" of America. Accompanying that, I have a vague memory of learning a song about the voyage with a refrain of "the Pinta, the Nina, and the Santa Maria."

Christopher Columbus was exalted in name and deed as the one who opened a path to the Americas and staked a claim of land that became known as Hispaniola in the New World. Columbus Day was established as a national holiday to celebrate Italian American immigrants in the wake of a mass murder of Italian Americans. Through the years, the day has been reinterpreted to understand American history using the Doctrine of Discovery. It valorizes the spirit of exploration and the door of colonization. Since the early 20th century, celebrating this holiday has been interpreted as celebrating the Atlantic World narrative of colonial expansion and colonial revolution while ignoring the blood soaked soil that cries out from the 90 million Indigenous Peoples who were genocide by disease and countless untold massacres in the name of spreading the Christian message, the lust for gold, and the conquest of new lands. I am proud that Iliff is a theological institution that passionately critiques the Doctrine of Discovery and educates Iliffians to declare a new understanding of the histories of these lands.

Prior to 2016, I had no idea about the final resting place of Columbus' body. Actually, I had no curiosity nor did the thought of his grave ever cross my mind. While on a family tour of Spain, Morocco, and Portugal, I visited Seville Cathedral in Spain where Columbus is entombed in a sarcophagus. Entering the Cathedral, I had no idea there would be a shrine inside dedicated to his memory. My research that reflects on the formation of the Atlantic World has repositioned Columbus out of the heroic realm. I was assaulted by the massive sarcophagus, which is held in the air by four larger than life male figure statues who could be soldiers or priests. The commissioned artist employed a hermeneutic of triumphalism with Columbus' remains lifted up high above the earth presenting him as an international hero.

Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean and laid claim to a land that was inhabited by peoples for centuries. Countless artist renderings speak to this fact of Columbus being met by people as the Spanish ship landed on New World shores. Yet, no one today would be permitted to enter a community not previously known to them, see a house occupied by another for the first time, invalidate the residents, and claim that house for their own. That is the nature of the Doctrine of Discovery! Looking at the underside (or as others have noted, the backside of the Doctrine of Discovery), we see the ways people will revise history to satisfy their own lusts for power. Contrary to the myth, the Americas were not untouched, uninhabited lands that were free for the taking. These land masses, including the islands off the coasts and in-between the land masses, were the sacred homes of peoples with history and spiritual traditions who embraced the sacredness of all life. Although there is an inclination to say "to the victors go the spoils," as people of faith committed to remembering the least, the lonely, the lost, and the forgotten, we must be about the work of truth-telling.

Changing Columbus Day to a celebration of Indigenous Peoples' Day is an important first step for revising a history of these lands. Unfortunately, simply changing the name of the day can also be experienced as a "white washing" of events. Not only do we want to tell the truth about the destruction

of indigenous lives that came in the wake of Columbus' expeditions, we also want to tell the stories of the lives that preceded genocide and massacre. We want to commemorate the depths of spirit that lived in harmony with the land before it was claimed as property by invaders. May our commemoration of Indigenous Peoples' Day recall and honor the spirit of resistance that clings to life in the presence of death, that overcomes evil by celebrating kinship, that dream dreams and see visions of past lives and future generations.