

November 6, 2016 All Saints Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Ephesians 1:15-19
Luke 6:20-31

Grace and peace to you, O Beloved Saints of God.

I traveled this week to Cannon Ball North Dakota, the corner of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. You go west on Interstate 94 out of Minneapolis, passed St. Cloud and Alexandria and Fergus Falls. Passed Moorhead and across the Red River, through Fargo and Valley City and Jamestown, to Bismarck and Mandan near the center of the state.

Most of the time you'd finally turn south on Highway 1806, but not right now, not when there are blockades and militarized vehicles stopping the way, turning people around in their tracks.

Better to heed the wisdom and go the long way, and then cut back east toward the mighty Missouri River where it widens out forming Lake Oahe, where the little town of Cannon Ball rests, where the brown hills spread out under the autumn sun and cattle and horses, even buffalo, graze, where the Water Protectors, keep peaceful vigil, praying, praying, 'round the sacred council fire, in the place where they've camped for centuries, where names we've heard in history, like Sitting Bull and Custer, battled, where ancestors lived and died and are buried, where the pipeline they call the "black snake" runs close, too close, to this sacred land, this vital water.

I went because a week ago Thursday a call went out for clergy to come to Standing Rock in solidarity. They'd expected, maybe, 100 religious leaders, it was a last minute call, it was a long way from nowhere. In the end, more than 524 clergy showed up, representing some 20 traditions, the mainline denominations of the Christian family, Orthodox Christians, Unitarian Universalists, leaders in the Jewish community, and plenty of others, from across the country, all in our colorful garb.

I went with mixed emotions: On the one hand I was glad to be there, to represent the church, to witness what we've heard about (and not heard about) in these last months.

On the other hand, I struggled, as a white person, as a leader in the church, because of the ways we as the church, we as white settler culture, over the decades, have legitimized oppression, domination:

Think the Doctrine of Discovery that claimed the land in the first place. Think missionary boarding schools.

Think a brand of Christianity that so often left no space for Native American spiritual practice or culture.

That's the tension I held, we hold, and all I could do was go and witness this painful and beautiful reality.

Simultaneously saints and sinners, all of us, saints and sinners.

We are used to hearing Matthew's version of the Beatitudes: Blessed, blessed, blessed, it reads.

Today Luke throws most of us for a twist. Blessed it begins, but then it turns to woe: woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full now, or laughing, and then those hard sayings like love your enemies.

I love All Saints Sunday, the smell of the candles, the cadence of naming our saints who've died this year.

I love the toll of the bell and the way my mind fills with memories at certain names.

I love the way past and present and future run close as we circle 'round the Communion Table.

I love that honest, vulnerable, humble truth that we are simultaneously saints and sinners, bearers of blessing and woe, beautiful and broken, held by grace for grace, at our best, for good.

So, I love that our saints are real, complex, at once faithful and often crusty, sometimes surely—because that somehow gives us space to figure out how we can be saints, too, saints and sinners.

I was distinctly aware of this saint and sinner complexity on Thursday morning at Standing Rock.

We gathered around the sacred fire to repudiate, to say No, to the Doctrine of Discovery.

Since literally before Christopher Columbus (bear with me), this doctrine has allowed lands belonging to indigenous people to be possessed, claimed as our own by Christians, and, later, by US law.

In recent years, our church, the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and a number of other traditions voted finally to repudiate this crazy Doctrine that's led to so much harm, so much grief.

As the sun rose on Thursday, representatives of our traditions stood before the elders, read the resolution, and then burned a copy of the Doctrine—No more, we confessed, no more.

Saints and sinners, all of us saints and sinners, rich and poor, beautiful and broken.

So often we want neat categories (especially election week): These are the saints, those are the sinners.

I find an honesty in what happened 'round that sacred fire at Standing Rock—the reality that the sins of our past are real, in need of confession, and at once, the hope that we can live toward a more humble sense of Christianity, a more true solidarity, standing with, not over, those who are oppressed.

The promise of All Saints Sunday, **is the power and love of our Creator, our Redeemer to hold us**—all of us—in this tension, without neat categories, at our best, all of us, saints and sinners, beloved.

I invite you to come forward, to light candles, to remember those who have died and those still living.

“If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord.

So then whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's.” Amen.