

Voices: Native Americans at Thanksgiving: Understanding the whole

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Thanksgiving Day. It brings cheer, laughter, love and, if you are a true Baptist, a lot of good food.

As Christians, we easily slide into the spiritual focus on gratefulness and acknowledging what God is doing in our lives. It is a day of joy for the majority, but for many, just beneath the smiles and laughter, is trauma from past experiences or, in my case, historical racial trauma.

Range of emotions about Thanksgiving

As a citizen of the Mvskoke (Creek) Nation and as an American and a Christian, Thanksgiving brings a myriad of emotions.

Do I observe Thanksgiving as a Native American? Yes, I do. I recognize the significance of the opportunity to show gratitude, and I too look forward to the moments around the table with family and friends. Yet, I am acutely aware of the ever-present tension that swirls just below the surface.

Historical trauma can play a continual game of hide and seek. I never know when it will show its oppressive head and pull me down into the oxygen-deprived reality.

Though our visibility as Native Americans is high during this season, we continue to remain invisible as a people. Schools dress children up like “Indians” to “honor” Thanksgiving, and our beautiful culture is quickly emulated with a value pack of construction paper, crayons and glue sticks.

History books hold tight to the story of the coming together of two groups of people in order to share a meal. We see the imagery of the pilgrim and the indigenous finding common ground through their differences with peace as the outcome.

So, what happened to that image of peace and unity? What has caused historical trauma for Native Americans?

An example is the “Indian Boarding School.” This is a forgotten part of United States history.

History influences Thanksgiving

With the motto of “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man”—attributed to U.S. Cavalry Capt. Richard Henry Pratt, founder of Carlisle—the Christian-based boarding school may have the most traumatic impact on the living generations of Native Americans.

Most of us are only a couple of generations removed. Think about that for a moment. We are the children and grandchildren of the little faces you see in photos. We have witnessed the effect of boarding schools on our loved one’s lives.

Carlisle is one of the most recognized of the boarding schools. Created to assimilate Native children into Euro-American Christian culture, more than 10,000 Native American children were brought to Carlisle from 1879 to 1918. Carlisle went on to be the model for 26 industrial schools and was an influence on hundreds of boarding schools focused on the slow cultural genocide of the Native American child.

To fulfill “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man,” children’s hair was cut short, and their native clothing was exchanged for uniforms. They faced emotional, physical and sexual abuse. They were made to do hard labor,

forced to be alone in order to reduce the speaking of their native tongue and, oftentimes, their names were changed to be more fitting to the majority culture.

Many never returned home because of disease, work accidents or violence, only to be buried in unmarked graves. Boarding school graves, individual and mass, still are being discovered today.

The history of the boarding school is horrific, but during the era of the boarding school, boys across America were dressing up and acting like “Indians” for entertainment while actual Native American boys and girls were being removed from their homes and completely transformed from the outside inward.

Our society, in general, has accepted the idea to pretend—for entertainment purposes—to be another culture, race or ethnicity. At the same time, our majority society reacts negatively to cultures, races and ethnicities living out fully who they are.

Know us, and not just at Thanksgiving

Christianity has played a significant role in our American history. We have the opportunity to heal the historical trauma of our brothers and sisters in Christ. What can the church do to reconcile with Native American Christians?

- **See** us. We are still here, and we are breathing the same air. We are in your congregations and in your workplace.
- **Learn** about our culture, and ask us how Nativeness plays a role in the church.
- **Recognize** us as equal in our Creator’s eyes. Value our input and how we

view God revealed in our world.

- **Love** us as Christ loves us and commands us to love one another.

It is a beautiful time for racial reconciliation to happen within our churches. We have the perfect tool—the words and actions of Christ.

We are *Imago Dei*. As a Native American and follower of Christ, I know who created me and whom I reflect.

When I look at my reflection, I rest in knowing I am perfectly made. I rest in knowing the historical trauma is not unseen by the One who took great care in molding me. I rest in knowing my pain, my ancestors' pain and our restoration is near, even if just out of sight.

Until that day, I will continue to speak on racial education in order to reach reconciliation within the American Church.

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