

Sermon by Paula Palmer
Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi MD
November 4, 2018

Good morning, Friends. It's an honor to be invited to speak to you this morning. Thank you for your warm welcome.

One thing I've learned from living and working with Native peoples is to be attentive to place – to the earth beneath our feet, to all the living beings that surround us, and to the humans whose stories are embedded in the land. That's why we began today's service by acknowledging the Piscataway people – their history on this land and their continuing presence here today. Native peoples are asking churches and civic organizations around the country to open our services and meetings with acknowledgments like this. It's a way for us to recognize the Native peoples who live here today, and remember those whose ancestors lived and died here – right here. We can connect with them through the land.

I travel around the country as a Quaker minister, offering workshops like the one I facilitated here a few years ago. I ask people to think about our country's history of genocide and colonization – which we don't think about very much, and our schools don't teach very much, and our government never acknowledges. I ask people to think about what happened here, and then think about the Native people in our own communities today, and consider what we might do to develop relationships now, based on truth and respect and justice and our shared humanity. So many people say, but I don't know any Native Americans. This might be true, or it might not be – Native people are not always recognizable in stereotypic ways. But what is true is that many of us don't feel any connection with Indigenous peoples. So it's kind of hard for us to imagine what it would mean to work toward “right relationship” with them.

I think the land is our connective tissue. Most of us are connected to land somewhere – the land where we live today, the land of our ancestors, the land where we were born, the land where we vacation, the land we love for whatever reason. On this continent, all the land we know and love was known and loved first by Indigenous peoples. And Indigenous people say the land remembers.

If the land we love could tell us what it remembers, what would it say?

When I asked myself this question, I started by thinking about the land where my German ancestors settled in the 1840s. They bought land in Michigan Territory and founded a German Lutheran town they called Frankenmuth – the courage of the Franconians. The fertile land of Central Michigan had supported a very large Native population until it was wrested from them by the Treaty of Saginaw, a couple decades before my ancestors arrived. The territorial governor, Lewis Cass, promised the Chippewas that they could remain on smaller tracts of land in Michigan “forever.” But then Cass became Secretary of War under President Andrew Jackson, and he was put in charge of enforcing the 1830 Indian Removal Act. He broke his promise to the Chippewas and forced most of them to move west. Some of their land became my family’s farm. It lies along the Cass River, which was named for Lewis Cass, the primary agent of Indian Removal. This is the land where I played with my cousins during summer vacations, and where my cousins still live today.

My parents and my cousins didn’t learn this history in the Frankenmuth schools. My 98-year old father and I learned it together a few months ago by searching the internet for a couple of hours. What does this history mean for my family? What does it mean to the Chippewas, expelled from Michigan and spread out now across the Dakotas? I don’t have clear answers to these questions, but I know that the land

remembers, and I know that somehow the Chippewa people and my family are bound together in the story of this land.

My parents moved to Valparaiso, Indiana, and that's where I was born. The federal government purchased the land that became Valparaiso – Paradise Valley – from the Potawatomi leader, Chiqua. In 1838, a mounted militia drove Chiqua and 860 Potawatomi people out of northern Indiana across the Mississippi River to Kansas. The Potawatomi remember this as the Trail of Death. My family doesn't remember it at all; we didn't learn it in Valparaiso schools. I returned to Valparaiso as a college student to study at Valparaiso University; I didn't learn this history in my college courses either. But the land remembers, and now I know that I am bound together with the Potawatomi people in the story of this land.

I live in Colorado now, just outside the city of Boulder on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains. The Boulder Valley is the homeland of the Arapaho people. This is recognized in the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie. But in 1859, when miners discovered gold in the Boulder foothills, the Arapaho were forced out of their camps in the Boulder Valley. Their peace chief, Nawath, was told to camp on the eastern plains at Sand Creek, and that's where the US Cavalry attacked them at dawn one November morning. 180 people, most of them women, children, and elders, were slaughtered in what became known as the Sand Creek Massacre. Reflecting on this history, the Pawnee attorney Walter Echo-Hawk wrote, *"The land can speak to those who listen.... There is a bluff ... overlooking Sand Creek where you can hear women and children crying in the wind."*

Boulder was one of the training sites for volunteer Cavalrymen, and more than 50 Boulder men helped carry out the Sand Creek Massacre. The Arapaho survivors were forced out of Colorado to

reservations in Wyoming and Oklahoma, and that's where most Arapaho people live today.

I wasn't alone in learning this history of the place I call home. About a year and a half ago, a group of Native and non-Native people in Boulder started meeting to learn about the area's Indigenous history. We sought out the only Arapaho person we knew of who lives in Boulder today. Her name is Ava Hamilton. We told Ava we thought we'd like to invite some Arapaho people to come to Boulder to meet with us. Ava said, *well, that wouldn't be the way to start. You need to go and meet with them where they live now – in Oklahoma and Wyoming.*

So we raised some money to make the trips, and Ava helped us set up meetings with elders and government leaders in both communities, and she came with us. When we asked the Arapaho people how they remembered Boulder, every single person said, *Boulder? Boulder is home. Boulder is our home.* Most of these people had never been to Boulder, but they remembered. *Our ancestors lived in Boulder, they said, and they died in Boulder. Boulder is sacred ground to us – our homeland.* When we asked how they would like to relate to the land and the people who live in Boulder now, they said they would like to have land in Boulder, a private place, a reverent place, where they can pray, where they can honor their ancestors, where they can give their children a sense of what their lives were like before -- when the Arapaho people were free. They also told us they would like to educate the people of Boulder about their lives today, how they are struggling to maintain their language and celebrate their culture, the challenges their young people face, the knowledge and stories of their elders. They want us to know they're still here.

We told them Boulder has a celebration of Indigenous Peoples Day in October, and they said that would be a good time for them to come. They said they'd like their dancers to perform and their elders and

leaders to give presentations about all aspects of their lives – their governments, their games, their language, their arts, their daily lives. And they said they'd like to meet with City government officials to talk about land, and with school administrators to talk about curricula, and with faith communities to get to know some Boulder families face to face.

So we carried this message back to Boulder and got to work. We raised money to bring Arapaho delegations from Wyoming and Oklahoma to meet with us last June. During their two days with us in Boulder, City and County government officials took us out to see several large pieces of city and county Open Space land that they thought might be appropriate for private use by the Arapaho and other Native peoples. One piece of land is the site of the fort where Boulder's volunteer soldiers mustered to carry out the Sand Creek Massacre. Another has stone circles that date back to 500 years BC. Native people have lived in the Boulder Valley a very long time. Chief Elvin Kenrick sang memorial songs, gave offerings, and said prayers at these sites.

Later, we walked together along some creeks where the chokecherries were in bloom – the same chokecherries that Arapaho people had gathered here centuries ago. Then Boulder churches – UUs and Quakers and UCCs – provided a potluck dinner with elk stew, buffalo burgers, and chokecherry jam, as well as the typical Boulder vegan fare, and we relaxed in fellowship together over a shared meal.

In our first meetings with the Arapaho in Wyoming and Oklahoma, they had expressed some concerns about how they might be treated if they came to Boulder. Would their children be safe? Would their elders be respected? During their time with us in Boulder in June, the Arapaho delegates did feel safe and welcomed – so much so that when we asked them how many people they would like to bring with them when they came back to celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day in October, they said,

oh, maybe 200 or 250! This was way more people than we had imagined hosting, but it was wonderful to feel their enthusiasm. So we kicked our fund raising into high gear, and before we knew it, it was October.

It turned out that just over 100 Arapaho people came last month, and we were able to provide gas mileage, food, and lodging for them, as well as gifts and honoraria for their fabulous dancers and drummers. They organized the day's events, which started with a Christian worship service officiated by Chief Elvin Kenrick and two singers who led us in singing familiar hymns like Amazing Grace – in the Arapaho language. Some of our Boulder people were surprised that the Arapaho would want to offer a Christian church service, but this was a reminder that Native peoples have been colonized and Christianized for more than five centuries, and that many Native people find ways to honor their traditional ceremonies and be Christian at the same time.

After church, for the rest of the day, more than 600 Boulderites filled the high school gym. They cheered and applauded as local government leaders welcomed our Arapaho guests, and as Arapaho elders and government leaders spoke to us in a language that had resonated throughout the Colorado mountains and plains for many centuries before a word of Spanish or English was ever heard. Stephen FastHorse, a member of the Northern Arapaho Business Council told us:

“The Boulder area was the chosen place for the Arapaho people in a spiritual sense. Our ancestors had a spiritual quest to search for a certain place, and when they came here they knew they had found it. It was foretold to us by the higher being of life. The Creator has always led our people.

“Our hearts always yearn for our original homeland. We’ve never before been invited back to this area that we hold so dearly. It’s a

heartfelt emotion for us. We hope we will continue to be welcomed in this place that we belong to.”

For the rest of the day, we watched and participated in Arapaho dances; Boulder children learned Arapaho games and played them alongside Arapaho children; we listened to elders tell stories; we learned a few phrases in the Arapaho language; we purchased art from Arapaho vendors; and we listened as Arapaho elders responded to our questions during a final Q&A session.

The next day, our Arapaho visitors did it all over again by giving presentations in the Boulder public schools.

I've taken a lot of time telling you about this, partly because my heart is still so full from the experience, partly because each time I tell it my commitment is reinforced, and partly hoping that it will inspire or motivate you to consider taking steps toward right relationship with the Piscataway people of this area. In the “Two Rivers” documentary film we are going to watch here this afternoon, a Native man cautions against what he calls “platform reconciliation” – you can imagine what that means: a bunch of officials promise nice things and get applauded, and then nothing changes. We can't allow ourselves to fall into that trap.

The land of the Boulder Valley is bringing together all the people who love that place. It is helping us uncover hidden connections, calling us to know that we are bound together, related through the land. Now, when I walk along the creeks in my neighborhood or on trails in the foothills, I remember the people who walked those paths before me, and I know some of their descendants face to face. There is pain in our shared history. And there is hope.

This past week I loved walking with a friend and her dog on winding paths beneath the great oak, maple and tulip poplar trees of this area. Much of this landscape has changed, of course, since the Piscataway lived here as free people. But they knew the same rivers and trees and the great bay that gave them sustenance. And some of their descendants are still here, sharing this land with many generations of immigrants. We are related through the land. How can we begin to acknowledge this? To celebrate it? To work toward a relationship based on truth, respect, justice, and our shared humanity? What difference would it make – for the descendants of the people who first loved this place, and for the rest of us?

END

Meditation:

Think for a moment about places on this continent that are meaningful to you – because you or your ancestors lived there, because you vacation there, or for whatever reason. Let your mind travel to one of those places that you know and love. Close your eyes, picture it. // Now imagine that place as it might have been before you or your ancestors knew it, before colonists from other continents arrived. // What are the sights and smells and sounds of that place? // Who were the people there, living and moving along the same rivers and shorelines and hills and valleys that you see in your mind's eye? What were their names? Where did they go? What happened? Where are they now? If you don't know, how can you find out? What would it mean to share your love for this land? What difference would it make?