

Returning to radical roots

Sarah Augustine, Executive Director of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery (USA)

Good morning, my relatives! It is a beautiful morning here in the Netherlands. I am Sarah Augustine, the Executive Director of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery. I come to you today as an Indigenous (Tewa) mother, activist, and theologian.

I am going to share my thoughts this morning about our Radical Roots as people of God. But before I do, I want to ask that we center ourselves by breathing together.

My elders have taught me that breathing, itself, is a holy act – the Spirit of the Creator animates us with breath – and to share breath, as we are doing now, breathing in this space together, is an act of praise. What a gift to be alive now, sharing breath with you.

Our conference asks the question, "What kind of radicalization do our times call for?" As we face 500 years since the emergence of Anabaptism, many of the tradition's most radical elements – such as rebaptism, which earned early adherents a martyr's death – seem relatively abstract in today's environment.¹ However, amidst a Protestant reformation in Europe that challenged the political and religious hegemony of the Holy Roman Empire, Anabaptism was a radical commitment to the Gospel of Jesus. So much so that according to the Christian History Institute, Anabaptism "was regarded as a dangerous movement — a program for violent destruction of Europe's religious and social institutions."² In light of the political and religious hegemony that presently grips our world, particularly as expressed in the United States through White Christian Nationalism, the question of whether Anabaptism is "radical enough" to offer a clear alternative in following Jesus couldn't be more timely.

The short answer is, if we as Anabaptists are not actively laying down our lives for the oppressed, then, "No," we are not radical enough. Certainly not as radical as Jesus, and likely not even as radical as the founders and early martyrs of Anabaptism. As Mennonite theologian David Augsburger proclaimed almost twenty years ago, "discipleship ... [is] recogniz[ing] Jesus not as the popular, the mystic, the devotional, or the civilly religious, but as the one who said, 'come and die.'"³

Come and die

How is that for a theology of discipleship? But, let's be honest, that is not the prevailing sentiment amongst popular Christianity. Most preachers and teachers render Jesus' most difficult teachings as metaphors to take the sting out. But, if we are honest with the text and ourselves, Jesus never spoke about his calls to discipleship in metaphor. To the contrary, Jesus' calls to discipleship were always in the imperative. The early founders of Anabaptism understood that

¹ <https://anabaptistworld.org/the-birth-of-anabaptism/>

² <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/anabaptist-beginnings>

³ Augsburger, David, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006, pg.24.

implicitly, as they gave their lives in standing with Jesus against the oppressive political and religious institutions of their time.

Let us be clear: Anabaptism was not a radical reformation of Christianity because it proclaimed that Jesus handled all the reconciliation work 2,000 years ago on a cross. Jesus never told a disciple who asked how to share in God's kingdom, "Don't worry about it. I got this. Just make sure you write hymns and prayers about me when I'm gone." Quite the contrary! Jesus actually tells the rich young (man, ruler, or lawyer, depending on the version), if you want to inherit the kingdom of God, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor ... And come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Lk 18:22 (CEB)).

Follow me

Not believe in me. Not worship me. Not wear a T-shirt with my name on it or post memes about me on the internet. Follow me. Or, as the Greek literally means here, "come after me" or "take my place." Jesus is perfectly clear. There is little room for ambiguity when he tells his friends what it means to come after him – to take his place. In, perhaps, Jesus' least quoted call to discipleship, he tells his friends, "If anyone would *come after* me, then "take up your cross" and *do as I have done* (Matt. 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk. 9:23 (CEB)). How is that for radical discipleship?

Do as Jesus did

Dissident discipleship is at the very core of who we are as "followers" of Jesus – those who come after, those called to take his place. *These* are the radical roots of Anabaptism.⁴ And, *this* is what dissident discipleship means – to do as Jesus did. Our Indigenous elders teach us that when we inhabit this ceremonial way of life – as Jesus did – the Holy One inhabits us.

Put differently, the invitation to "follow" Jesus is *not* an invitation to imitation. It is an invitation to incarnation – to surrender our flesh to the Spirit of God, that Jesus might be re-presented to the world in us. As we take Jesus as our example, imitating him with his life as a model for our own, his self-sacrificial love begins to inhabit our very flesh. And Jesus is born anew in us.

Indigenous cosmology recalls to us the ancient belief that the true nature of humanity is to be *theotokos* – God-bearers. This wisdom of the elders reanimates the teachings of the Church ancestors, of Paul, and, yes, even of Jesus. Through Indigenous voices, we hear the words of this 1st Century Indigenous holy man with fresh ears.

Approaching our radical Anabaptist roots from the perspective of Indigenous communities, we find at the heart of Anabaptism is the decolonizing impulse – a commitment to profess the call of Jesus unvarnished and uncorrupted. A call that challenges the powers and principalities of this world, it does not justify them. A call for those of us who "come after" Jesus to *do as he did*. To stand at the margins of institutional power with those who are oppressed — the least, the last, and the lost. To join our bodies to theirs. Recognizing that our salvation is bound up together. And, when we take that radical step of discipleship – to come after Jesus, to stand in his place, to

⁴ Anabaptist theologian-martyr Hans Denck described it plainly: "One who claims to belong to Christ must follow the path taken by Christ." Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship*, pg. 27 (internal citations omitted).

do as he did – the Christ is with us. Indeed, the Christ is *in us* — resurrected in our very flesh — for the liberation and the healing of the world.

In *Dissident Discipleship*, Augsburg invites us to consider how radical discipleship is rooted in Jesus, referring to "radical attachment to Jesus as the original pathway to Christian spirituality."⁵ For Augsburg, "Only when one encounters Jesus as Jesus will one feel a rush of surprise. 'You're not Jesus Christ. You're JESUS *THE CHRIST*.'"⁶ But "Which Jesus are [we] quoting?"⁷ Augsburg is clear; we have many caricatures of Jesus of Nazareth. From a meek and mild teacher and preacher in the backwaters of the Roman Empire to a divine superhero with impressive party tricks handing out golden tickets to a great Castle in the sky in the sweet by and by, our caricatures of Jesus reduce *the Christ* to a memory.

The caricatures of Jesus were not always the result of fanciful thinking but distortions of the oral and recorded histories to further ulterior motives. How else might we explain the portrayal of a 1st Century Palestinian Jewish carpenter, turned vagabond teacher, preacher, and healer as a blond-haired, blue-eyed Adonis mounted on a throne of clouds and light in the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC? We cannot ignore how the Christian Church has co-opted the words and image of Jesus to justify institutions of power and privilege that Jesus called his friends and followers to resist – institutions of the very power and privilege that, in Jesus' own day, had him executed.

Our caricatures of Jesus actually imprison *the Christ* in the words and images imagined by well-educated White men to justify 2,000 years of empire in the name of Christ. *The Christ* is actually an ongoing event that transforms the nature of every human being, indeed all of creation, to become the site of the encounter and revelation of God. The implications of which are drastic, most especially for those peoples and lands on the margins of the power and privilege of empire.

I long for us to step outside our caricatures of Jesus and reconnect with the Jesus who was and is and ever shall be – the eternal word made flesh, or as John 1:14 could be translated, "The Word [that] became flesh and made his dwelling place *within* us." As Augsburg describes it, "sharing the divine nature *is* the definition of Christian existence."⁸ This ultimately requires us to share in the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus in our own lives, in our own corporal existence. This concept has a fancy theological term: *theosis* or deification⁹ – meaning participation in the divine nature.

The idea that humanity is made to be a dwelling place for the divine is a common theme in scripture. The prophet Jeremiah tells the people of Israel that God will "plant seeds" of new life and a new covenant in the people and the land and that God will sow within them the divine "way," writing it on their hearts.

⁵ Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship*, pg. 25.

⁶ Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship*, pg. 24-25.

⁷ Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship*, pg. 25.

⁸ Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship*, pg. 34-35 (emphasis added).

⁹ Where there is justification for one fancy word for a theological concept, there surely is enough justification for two.

Paul describes this participation in the divine life as the indwelling of Christ – "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me"– being "clothed in Christ," the "new self, created according to the likeness of God." Indeed, as Jesus himself tells his friends, "The kingdom of God is within you."

The Prophets, the Apostles, and Jesus himself tell us that the incarnation is the very nature of God, and Christ becomes more than simply God's attempt to reconcile Godself to humankind. Christ becomes God's reconciliation of Godself to *all* creation. Christ is not a proper noun; it is not even a title. Christ is not the last name of a 1st Century Indigenous teacher and healer. Christ is a verb, *an action word*.

Christ is God's encounter with creation, God's movement of Godself to God's creation. Christ is the revelation of Godself by, in, and through creation in an outpouring of the divine life that draws all of creation up into the divine life. Christ, then, *is* reconciliation, so that, in Christ, the binaries between Creator and creature, sacred and profane, spiritual and material fall away.

As it is so beautifully described in the letter to the Colossians, in Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through [Christ] and for [Christ]. [Christ] ... is before all things, and in [Christ] all things hold together." Christ is the action word that signifies the encounter and revelation of the Creator in the creaturely. Christ is the process by which – through ongoing, incarnational encounter and revelation – God and all creation are reunited. Christ is the very nature of God. Christ is also the promise and purpose of humankind and the world.

So, let's talk about what that means – Christ is the promise and the purpose of humankind and the world. I am going to submit to you that this is not a metaphor. Are you familiar with the word cosmology? It is the study of the cosmos. Where Western thought is shaped by the dualism favored by the Enlightenment, Indigenous understandings rely upon integration of all things – understanding that we are all connected in a web of life. In Western thought, empiricism, or the scientific method, explains that what is "true" can be verified by our five senses and can be replicated. Theology, or the study of the divine – literally, "God talk" – is not subjected to empiricism. In the Western worldview, these are two distinct disciplines that hold different logics.

Indigenous cosmology is the exploration of the cosmos – everything in creation – and combines the natural world with spirituality. I have learned from my elders that on Earth, we live in a closed system of mutual dependence. In Indigenous cosmology, it makes sense that Christ is the promise and the purpose of humankind and the world because humanity is not separate from creation. We are part of it, and it is part of us. If Christ is the promise and purpose of humankind, so must Christ be the promise and purpose of the world. In Colossians, Chapter 1, Paul says this: "Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him ... he reconciled all things to himself through him — whether things on earth or in the heavens." Christ is the promise and the purpose of the world.

YET, So much of our Christian theology has been defined by an individualist sensibility, and we accept this as factual. But if we are to survive and thrive, we must behave as though all of those around us are relatives – our fundamental identity as part of creation must be collective. This is the transversal worldview: understanding that we are all relations.

When Christians behave as though we can own creation or that we hold dominion over it, we are breaking a compact with the ecosystems that support all life. So many of us are taught from a young age that Genesis 1:26-28 gives humans "dominion" – also understood as *domination* – over creation, to use as we see fit, to extract from the earth all that we desire, to convert the land to its "highest and best use." But what if we have misunderstood the meaning of the word "dominion"?

Some of the earliest Hebrew texts actually translate the Hebrew word for *dominion* in Genesis 1:26-28 as "to represent," rather than "to rule over." Even Latin – the first language of empire – communicates this understanding more clearly than English – *domine*, meaning "the Lord," and *ion*, meaning "a state of being." To have "dominion, then, is to serve as beings of the Creator, bearing God's image into the world, cultivating all creation on behalf of the Creator that it might bear fruit.¹⁰ Or as Cree theologian Ray Aldred contends, "Dominion ... is taking responsibility under God for reciprocal care and the perfection of all of creation, including humans as part of the whole."¹¹ This responsibility for creation – as ambassadors of the Creator – includes water, soils, air, what I have been taught to call the "Standing Green Nation" of plants and trees, and other-than-human animals. We are not separate from these things.

A Nez Perce sister taught me to pray, "Thank you for this land, *our body*." Not our bounty. Not our gift. Our very body – we are it, and it is us. This is a logic that includes all of life, including humans, of every variety. The idea that huge groups of humans can forget our relatedness in pursuit of financial security, comfort, or wealth is very unsettling, but not uncommon.

Scholar and elder Umeek (E. Richard Atleo) describes how his people, the Nu-chah-nulth of British Columbia, engage in a ceremony of remembrance, affirming that we are part of an integrated whole. He explains that, "periodically, publicly, and reverently (we must) acknowledge that humans are characterized by short-term memory. Humans have a tendency to forget; they are easily distracted."¹² He calls on us to remember reality. To remember who we are, to attend to our collective memory. That is perhaps some of what we are doing here, in this gathering – reviewing our collective memory. And I draw here on Indigenous cosmology, as well, to illuminate the call of Jesus, a call that is radical and defining.

Paul calls the collective of believers "the body of Christ" (Rom. 12:4-5). This concept does not hinge on personal purity or the good works of any one member. It acknowledges believers as a

¹⁰ See, e.g., Eugene Petersen's rendering of this passage: "'Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be *responsible* for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.' God created human beings; he created them godlike, *reflecting God's nature*" (Gen 1:26-28, MSG, emphasis added).

¹¹ Aldred, Raymond, *An Alternative Starting Place for Indigenous Theology*. Unpublished Dissertation submitted to Wycliffe College and the University of Toronto (2020).

¹² Atleo, E. Richard, *Principles of Tsawalk: An Indigenous Approach to Global Crisis*. Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2011, pg. 164.

collective. It names our collective identity. What if this is not a metaphor? What if it is our collective that bears God into the world?

Choctaw theologian Seven Charleston suggests that once we understand that "creation is an integrated, interdependent, infused reality ... [in which] all living beings, human and otherwise, are the children of God," then Paul's description of the "Body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5) ... extend[s] to incorporate other sentient beings in the interdependent scheme of life."¹³ Stated differently, all creation is the Body of Christ. It is from this Indigenous perspective of all creation as the Body of Christ that Charleston proposes that "the teachings of Christ were not imported to North America; they were rediscovered here."¹⁴

The truth of this observation raises legitimate questions about how Christianity ought to understand its place among all God's people when all creation is sacred. All are God's chosen in a world in which all creation bears the image of the Creator and is the site of divine revelation. In this view, Jesus is not only the "mediator of the new covenant" as described in Hebrews chapter 9; he is also the embodiment of an *ever-renewing* covenant between God and all God's people, as well as between God and all God's creation. Given the parallels between the teachings of Jesus and Indigenous ways of knowing, a vision for a renewal of Christian theology emerges. "a vision for what Christian community can be when it finds expression in the values and visions of Native America," as Charleston describes it.¹⁵

How might we, as the body of Christ, experience transformation if we actually believed all that surrounds us are our relatives? How might we experience transformation if we accepted the kinship offered to us by the worldview of Indigenous Peoples? Indigenous theologian Tink Tinker argues that "Creator's promise to each of our tribes, invested in our traditional stories and traditional ceremonies, are still valid and still a source of life and liberation for Indigenous Peoples ... our traditional perspectives of and experiences of the Sacred are just as valid as the perspective of the colonial Christianity imposed."¹⁶

Tinker goes on to suggest that the message of Jesus has been difficult for Indigenous Peoples, because they were taught by missionaries that "God's love (in the Jesus event) was denied to Indian people until God, in God's graciousness, sent White people to kill us, lie to us, steal our land, and proclaim the saving gospel to us."¹⁷ I would characterize this specific type of mission he has identified – and which so many Indigenous peoples have historically experienced and some still experience – as not merely wrong-headed, but apostate. It seeks to recast what has always been known to Indigenous Peoples: we are one – with each other, with all of creation, and with the Creator of us all.

Such a commitment to the collective has the capacity to combat some of the most dangerous elements of contemporary Christianity, the likes of which we see so clearly in White Christian

¹³ Charleston, Steven, "Articulating a Native American Theological Theory," in Charleston, Steven and Elaine A. Robinson, eds. *Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 20.

¹⁴ Charleston, Steven, "Articulating," 26.

¹⁵ Charleston, Steven, "Articulating," 25.

¹⁶ Tinker, George E., *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008, pg. 139.

¹⁷ Tinker, *American Indian Liberation*, pg. 132.

Nationalism. So much of today's Christianity is focused on the individual. We hear all the time about the need for a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," as if there can be such a thing. We hear that such a personal relationship is the key to our "personal salvation" – that one-way ticket each of us is promised to the paradise in the sky, if only we can claim Jesus as our own. I submit to you that the contemporary Christian concept of individual salvation is a lie. There can be no salvation for me without salvation for you. Our salvation is all bound up together. By the same token, there can be no individual relationship with Jesus. We can only know Jesus in community. "For," as Jesus tells us in the book of Matthew, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them."

Not, "Where one of you prays the sinner's prayer and accepts me into your heart, I will grant you a Golden Ticket to your own personal salvation." *What a lonely vision that is!*

An individualist rendering of the teachings of Jesus is rooted in a certain narcissism that is at the heart of Western Christianity. It is a perspective that holds European Christians as the "people of the New Covenant," imbued with the providence of God to spread over the whole earth to "civilize and Christianize" all lands and peoples. This Christian Narcissism is at the very root of the Doctrine of Discovery, a system of laws and policies by which European Christians conquered Indigenous lands and peoples in the name of Christ and Capitalism, leaving in their wake the death and destruction of their extractive policies.

Christian Narcissism is embedded in what Willie James Jennings calls "a diseased social imagination," which itself grew out of a time when the "Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance."¹⁸ For Jennings, this theological "disease" that continues to plague all of Western Christianity is itself rooted in this malformed theology of chosenness: "in the age of discovery and conquest supersessionist thinking burrowed deeply inside the logic of evangelism and emerged joined to whiteness in a new, more sophisticated, concealed form."¹⁹

Aboriginal scholar Tyson Yunkaporta explains that narcissism, or the assertion that one is right without listening to the views of others, can only be counteracted in the collective. Engaging with narcissists who refuse to listen to the views of others is futile alone. To engage narcissism alone is fundamentally narcissistic! As Yunkaporta explains, harmony is built by reciprocity. "The basic protocol of Aboriginal societies, like most societies, includes respecting and hearing all points of view."²⁰ Or, as Dine holy man Steve Darden teaches, any problem must be considered by, at a minimum, twelve perspectives, ruling out the possibility that any one individual can claim "rightness" without the perspective of the collective.

In this view, "the good news" of the gospel is shared between people groups. Christian Narcissism, then, cannot be confronted without the wisdom and teachings of Indigenous elders. In fact, Indigenous cosmology suggests that *both* Western thinkers and Indigenous thinkers have something to contribute to the conversation about cosmic reconciliation. Indeed, the Gospel of

¹⁸ Jennings, Willie J. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6, 8.

¹⁹ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, at 36.

²⁰ Yunkaporta, Tyson, *Sand Talk*. San Francisco: Harper One, 2020, pg. 27-28.

Jesus is made known and made new in the space between Indigenous teachings and Christian teachings.

This kind of dialogue is not just good. *It is necessary!*

For Steven Charleston, dialogue between Christianity and Indigenous peoples is imperative because God was present and active amongst God's peoples on North America long before Christian missionaries arrived. For Charleston, Indigenous peoples of North America have "their own original covenant relationship with the Creator and their own original understanding of God prior to the birth of Christ."²¹ Comparing Indigenous nations to the tribes of Israel, he observes, "God was here, on this continent among this people, in covenant, in relationship, in life."²²

Indeed, the "Old Testament of Native America," as Charleston calls it, "tells of the active, living, revealing presence of God in relation to Native People through generations of Native life and experience ... It is the living memory, the living tradition of a people's special encounter with the Creator of life."²³ This divine encounter and revelation among Indigenous peoples of North America does not discount the encounters and revelations of God among any other peoples but enriches them.²⁴ The encounters and revelations of God represented in these lived traditions, or other "testaments," according to Charleston, enrich one another as they are in conversation with other traditions and testaments, discerning where and how God is present and at work in and through God's peoples, "broaden[ing] our *dialogue* about the connections between old testaments" and even broadening our appreciation of the reach of the life and work of God.²⁵

Charleston's understanding of an Indigenous covenant with the Creator is inherently and inextricably intertwined with the land through the people's relationship to the land and to the Creator through the land. The land becomes the site of divine revelation. *Revelation is not a one-time event*. Rather, God's revelation of Godself to humanity is not limited to the words and deeds recounted in the scriptures. God is revealed by, in, and through creation.²⁶ Such an account of revelation is consistent with the numerous scriptural references to God as "the living God."²⁷ As the author of the letter of Hebrews writes, "the word of God is living and active" – but not simply in the interpretations of scripture. Neither is the word of God only living and active in the historical reality of the Word Made Flesh, Jesus of Nazareth. God's Word, God's revelation, is living and active in and across the whole of God's creation.

²¹ Charleston, Steven. "The Old Testament of Native America," in Treat, James. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 73.

²² Charleston, "Old Testament of Native America," 74.

²³ Charleston, "Old Testament of Native America," 73-74.

²⁴ Rather than limiting God's chosenness to one people or another, or prioritizing one people's tradition and testament over another, Charleston recognizes that "Christians ... have to make some elbow room at the table for other 'old testaments.' Not only from Native America, but from Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well ... Christians must permit the same right for other peoples that they have claimed for themselves." Charleston, "Old Testament of Native America," 77-78.

²⁵ Charleston, "Old Testament of Native America," 78 (emphasis added).

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann describes this in his Gifford Lectures, *God in Creation* as a "trinitarian doctrine of creation" that "recogniz[es] ... the presence of God *in* the world and the presence of the world *in* God." Moltmann Jürgen. *Jürgen Moltmann: Collected Readings*. ed. Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014, 127 (emphasis original).

²⁷ Jos 3.10; Jer 10.10; Dan 6:26; Mat 16.16; Jn 6:57; Heb 4.12 (NRSV).

As Indigenous theologian Jace Weaver writes, "Sacred spaces [are] places of revelation but also the land [is] revelatory in and of itself. For Native Americans, revelation is direct and ongoing. It may come bidden or unbidden."²⁸ Citing Vine Deloria's work in *God Is Red*, Weaver recognizes that creation is full of "places ... where the veil between this terrestrial world and the other is thin, such that one feels that 'inherent sacredness.'"²⁹ Tinker agrees: "A Native American theology must argue out of Native American experience and praxis that *God reveals God's self in creation, in space or place, not in time.*"³⁰ When creation itself serves as the site of God's ongoing revelation, the entire creation is sacred: the land, the water, the air, all living things, and the Creator of us all, animated by the same Spirit of Life.

This sacredness is understood by my people to be inherent in the soil itself, the dwelling place of the Creator. Land and Water protectors – Indigenous Peoples standing with creation and its sacred waters -- understand this.

We understand that creation itself is under attack by an ongoing process of *un*creation. According to the logic of the powerful, land, water, the earth and her creatures, including human beings, and our labor, are objects: commodities to be exploited, bought, and sold for profit.

Oak Flat

At Oak Flat, a breathtaking high desert environment that is a sacred place in the Arizona desert, has been identified as the site for the largest copper mine in US history. The San Carlos Apache lost their land, which is now a national park, by executive order. Even so, they have maintained relationship with Oak Flat by treaty, where they come to care for the land, pray, and conduct ceremony. If the copper mine is developed according to a plan affirmed by the Supreme Court of the United States just days ago, it will leave a crater two miles long and 1,000 feet deep and destroy a place the San Carlos Apache have stewarded for thousands of years. Wendsler Nosie Sr., a leader of the group Stronghold Apache, committed to protecting this sacred site, and its waters, from copper mining.

Thacker Pass

At Thacker Pass, in Nevada, The Canada-based Lithium Americas mine is set to develop the largest known deposit of lithium in the United States.³¹ According to the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, Native American tribes were not consulted in a permitting process fast-tracked by the Bureau of Land Management. The mining project will impact the lands and sacred waters of multiple Indigenous tribes. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals sided with the Bureau of Land Management and the Mine in November 2023.³²

²⁸ Weaver, Jace. "Revelation and Epistemology – We Know the Land, the Land Knows Us: Places of Revelation, Place as Revelation," in Charleston, Steven, and Elaine A. Robinson, eds. *Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015, 43.

²⁹ Weaver, "Places of Revelation, Place as Revelation," 38.

³⁰ George Tinker, "Spirituality, Native American Personhood, Sovereignty, and Solidarity," in Treat, James. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge, 1996, 119 (emphasis added).

³¹ <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2023/02/21/three-tribes-file-new-lawsuit-challenging-thacker-pass-lithium-mine/>

³² <https://www.courthousenews.com/lithium-mine-gets-green-light-after-ninth-circuit-ruling/>

In the dominant culture's drive to slow carbon emissions while maintaining a consumer-based economy, lithium is an important natural resource – it is used in rechargeable electric batteries. It is estimated that the United States' transition to electric vehicles may require three times the current demand for lithium in the entire global market – a rise in demand of over forty times by the year 2040³³. This level of extraction is devastating to aquifers in the ecosystems impacted by lithium mining.

Indigenous leaders are standing up as land and water protectors at Thacker Pass. They do this not just for themselves and their people but for all of us who need clean water and soil to survive and thrive on this earth. The Reno-Sparks Indian Colony states, "The only true solution to environmental crisis is to scale down – to dramatically reduce consumption and energy use, abandon growth, and live more localized lives. We cannot consume or drive our way out of a climate crisis!"³⁴

Shinnecock Bay

Shinnecock Bay, the source of food for the Shinnecock Nation for thousands of generations, can no longer support marine life because of nitrogen pollution caused by human sewage.

The community adjacent to the reservation does not have a central wastewater treatment facility. In fact, The New York Times reported that Suffolk County has more unsewered residents than any other typical suburb in the United States. Most homes in the wealthy community of Southampton depend on old septic systems that use cesspools to store human waste (75% of homes in Suffolk County, according to the New York Times).

The Shinnecock have lived on Shinnecock Bay since time immemorial. The bay has served as the source of food and economic security for my Shinnecock relatives, supplying fish, clams, mussels, quahogs, and seaweed. But today, 99% of these foods are annihilated due to solid waste generated by wealthy homes that depend on failing septic systems to store their waste. For fifty years, the wealthy neighboring community has failed to create a solid waste treatment facility.

Now, 99% of aquatic life in the bay is gone. It is an ecosystem destroyed by the sewage of one of the wealthiest communities on earth, which has refused for fifty years to establish a sewer system. The waste from these communities has nearly sterilized Shinnecock Bay. But Tela Troge and her women's collective are planting and harvesting sugar kelp there as a means to shift the balance toward life.

Each year, they plant sugar kelp seeds in a research station, asking these tiny plants to grow in hostile conditions. They pray for the small plants, they sing to the small plants, they talk to the tiny starting plants. "We know we are sending you into a hostile environment," Tela and the Shinnecock women tell them, "but we are asking you to grow, for the people. For the life of the people. You take our prayers with you. Please grow. Please succeed, even though it is hard. The lives of the people depend on it." And season after season, sugar kelp starts to grow big and strong. Slowly, over generations, Tela and the Shinnecock women hope against hope that the ecosystem is changing, coming back to life.

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/24/us-electric-vehicles-lithium-consequences-research>

³⁴ <https://www.rsic.org/protect-thacker-pass-protect-peehee-muhuh/>

Working together with the systems of colonization harms those oppressed by colonization. Many of us have retirement accounts invested in the mining industry and give little thought to those who might be impacted. Likewise, church institutions participate in financial systems rooted in extractive industry. As progressive societies strive to move toward a carbon-neutral economy, they are especially anxious to justify extraction at the expense of the vulnerable for resources like lithium and copper.

It is not illegal to participate in financial processes that harm the vulnerable, and in fact, it is considered wise by the standards of the dominant culture. Yet Jesus understood the plight of the vulnerable and voiced a mandate to bring good news to the poor, and freedom for the oppressed. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' mandate by seeking right relationship through repair.

Indigenous land and water protectors are practicing *incarnation*, bearing God into the Universe in our very bodies – *the Christ* manifest *in* us — resurrected in our very flesh — for the liberation and the healing of the world.

And where is the Church? Where is the radical reformation? Is it on the margins with us, laying down lives to stand at the margins of institutional power with those of us who are oppressed and with the earth itself? Or is it justifying its relevance in a market-driven empire?

I would like to ask you to join us in acknowledging Reality as it is. While we may believe in our twenty-first-century, post-industrial context that reality depends on perpetual growth in a market economy, the creation that we depend on holds a different Reality. This Reality dictates that we are mutually dependent in a finite world. We must acknowledge that actual Reality is not a matter of opinion. We must imagine together how we can live in this Reality. This is not a metaphor. I really mean it. If we aren't willing to imagine a world beyond the death machine driving our world toward destruction, our days are numbered.

As Indigenous peoples across the world rise to place our bodies in the way of the machines of uncreation, where is the Church?

Of course, once we return to the understanding that all creation – including each of us – is sacred, something more is demanded of us. God makes Godself known in the materiality of the created order – in the flesh, in the dirt, in the waters, in the life that springs forth from our world and which our earth sustains. This is not just a philosophical viewpoint; *it is an ethical one*. As Tinker notes, an "American Indian understanding of creation as sacred ... goes far beyond the notion of such Western counter-institutions as Sierra Club or Greenpeace ... It especially concerns itself with the way we all live together ... All in this world are relatives, and we will live together out of respect for each other, working towards the good of each other."³⁵

While such Indigenous readings of scripture may feel "radical," they are simply calling us back to the truth of the teachings of Jesus. They are calling us to the truth of Christian discipleship, the truth of Jesus' call to "follow me" – to come after him, to stand in his place, to do as he did. And, if we can do that *together*, the hymnbook of our Anabaptist martyrs reminds us, we will "celebrate Christ-unity; and in our midst, Jesus takes part, creating his community ... And as we

³⁵ Tinker, "Spirituality," 128.

meet Jesus appears and transforms our futility ... Together we rebreathe his breath."³⁶ we will make Christ known in ourselves and one another – in the very flesh of creation – as our promise and our purpose for the salvation of the world.

A radical vision, indeed

I want to end with my response to the Supreme Court's decision last Tuesday to reject the case to protect Oak Flat. Our coalition will stand with the Apache Stronghold as the land of Oak Flat will certainly be transferred to Resolution Copper. *We are calling on every person to "come along" with us, to join us in standing with Apache Stronghold.*

May we return to these radical roots of Anabaptism 500 years later, that we might help Christianity return to the radical discipleship Jesus demands of us. Our salvation – and the salvation of the world – depends on it!

³⁶ Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship*, 82-83.