

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 16, September 16, 2007, dedicated to the Oglala Sioux Nation, especially those living on the Pineridge Reservation, to the memory of SuAnne Big Crow and always to the Glory of God!

“The Pipe and the Cross”

I Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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This past June, eleven amazing young women and five adults from our church spent one week serving, learning and growing in faith and wisdom at the place called Re-Member. Along with other mission partners and our Lakota sisters and brothers on the Pineridge Reservation, every one of us was changed on the plains of South Dakota.

The wind, the prairies, the starkness and clearness of the land and sky, the openness of people and territory were our guides and teachers. We listened to people’s stories. We heard the stories of hardship and poverty, of mystery and warfare and life together in this land in which they had settled thousands of years before anyone named Columbus dreamed of sailing west.

While the voices and faces of the Oglala Sioux are forever in our memory, the cemeteries of Pine Ridge have spoken to us as well. At the Wounded Knee Cemetery, we worshiped on Sunday morning and heard the story of the Wounded Knee Massacre on December 29, 1890. As we stood by the mass grave on the hillside, we looked to the valley below where more than 220 unarmed and completely defenseless Sioux men, women, children and infants were gunned

down by the US Army who rained bullets upon them with several Hotchkiss machine guns. Our soldiers massacred the innocents while the white flag of truce flew in the camp. Three days later, following a snowstorm in which all the dead and dying were left in the fields, the soldiers returned and cast the bodies in a mass grave just above the killing fields.

There we stood hearing this story. Their story reverberated in our souls, as we celebrated communion and remembered Jesus' words, "*Remember me in my body broken. Remember me in my blood shed for you.*" Many of us wept as communion was shared. All of us wept when we presented the stole of our beloved Dorinda White, one whom we will always remember . . .

On a hill not so far away, the Red Cloud School Cemetery overlooked a peaceful valley. There we saw markers for men and women who had served, died and were buried at Red Cloud. They were graves of children and youth, priests and sisters, all surrounding Red Cloud's grave. We were reminded through all of this that Pine Ridge has long been home to the Lakota Sioux people.

Across the road from Re-Member sits a little, plain cemetery named St. Anne's. St. Anne's is surrounded by a white picket fence. When passing cars and trucks move down the dirt road, St. Anne's becomes buried in summer dust. As with Wounded Knee and the Red Cloud School cemeteries, St. Anne's simple wooden crosses and marble tombstones, her plastic flowers and simple grave adornments call to your heart. St. Anne tells you tiny parts of the Lakota's life and death stories. You find yourself surprised and troubled by the dates on the stones, which indicate how many of these children of God died as babies, children or youth. There are too many pictures, too many symbols and too many names of brave souls dead long before their lives had been fully lived.

With unemployment is more than 85%, alcoholism rampant,

diabetes part of daily life, and many illnesses (coming from White civilization) striking hard at the native people - you can say you understand why, but you do not. Life expectancy is short, so death's specter walks through childhood and young adulthood like an ominous playmate. If you listen to the wind, she will sing her mourning cries for the Oglala Sioux people. She will sing for her babies taken through ages of suffering and death. She cries "*Why? Why?*" From the Black Hills through the Badlands, the mysterious presence of the fallen and often forsaken Lakota people were with us on the roads and some at the Sundance. Their spirits were alive in the eyes of the children we met.

One young heroine's story must be told. Her name is SuAnne Big Crow. I will always remember SuAnne. She is buried across from Re-Member in St. Anne's. Before her 16th Birthday, SuAnne captured the hearts and minds of her people in so many ways. Just days before her 18th birthday, she was killed when she fell asleep at the wheel of her car driving to receive the award of "Miss Basketball in South Dakota."

SuAnne Marie Big Crow was born March 15, 1974 at Pine Ridge Hospital, just up the hill from the four-way intersection in town. SuAnne's birth came at a dark time on the reservation. There was an ongoing battle between supporters and opponents of Dick Wilson's tribal government. Violence was so pervasive and unpredictable that many people were afraid to leave their homes. A nine-year boy was shot in White Clay while sitting in the back of his father's pick-up. Bombing, stompings, shootings, beatings until two FBI agents were killed in 1975. At that point violence ended because of the general exhaustion and the presence of hundreds of more FBI agents. Into this environment, SuAnne was sent by the Great Spirit to mend the wounds of her people.

She was the youngest of three, an active child. She sat up on her own as an infant, walked by nine months and declared at two

years old that she was going to school with her big sisters. Every morning she walked to the school bus with Pigeon and Cee-Cee. As Pigeon says now, *“she was everywhere in our footsteps from the earliest age.”* She always played with the older children and early on was the fastest and strongest among them. They played badminton in the yard and did Tae Kwon Do. They had a version of kickball under the sprinkler that allowed them to slide for miles. In a basketball league for kids 7-11, SuAnne started playing at five. She stepped into to play one game when they were short of players. As she recalled later, *“I knew how to play defense so I kept stealing the ball from the other team and my own teammates, too!”* Although a great cross country runner and cheerleader, it was in Basketball that SuAnne would shine brightest.

As a fourteen-year-old freshman, she was starting guard for the Pine Ridge Lady Thorpes. In Lead, SD, the team encountered the hatred too often seen by Native Americans when the fans booed them and screamed hateful words against them as they took the court. Listening to the jeers, SuAnne took the ball and led her team onto the center court. She stopped, passed the ball to Doni DeCory, took off her warm-up jacket, draped it over her shoulders and did the Lakota Shawl Dance in the midst of hate. Although she knew all the traditional dances, this one was a young woman’s dance - graceful, modest and show-offy all at the same time. Then she started to sing in Lakota. The crowd became completely silent. In the sudden silence, all you could hear was her Lakota singing. When the crowd was hers, she grabbed the ball back, dribbled around expertly and drove in for a lay-up. The fans stood and cheered loudly for this display of dancing and basketball skill. That year, SuAnne went on to lead this team to a 4th place finish in the states. Following this finish she told her coach they would win the title before she graduated.

The following year two things happened almost simultaneously. In late November, SuAnne was busy leading her team to the state

finals once again. At the same time, an NBC Nightly News crew visited the REZ and presented a multi-part story entitled, "Tragedy at Pine Ridge." Tom Brokaw intoned these words, "*This is Thanksgiving weeks, of course, but on the Pine ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, it's hard to find reason to give thanks when tragedy is never out of season.*" The report was depressing to watch - speaking only of alcoholism and bleakness. Not once was it mentioned that SuAnne had set state scoring records that year in basketball or that the team was headed to the championship.

SuAnne snorted for weeks with an angry focus - "*Let's show the world what a tragedy the Lady Thorps are!*" And she did! In the following weeks, at 15 years old, SuAnne Marie Big Crow led Pine Ridge to their first and only state title.

When the team arrived home from Sioux Falls, thousands of people came to the Pine Ridge's traffic light - right by Big Bats grocery. There was a spontaneous celebration that went on through the night - a celebration that united the town for the first time since the season of struggle into which she was born.

In the two years to come, SuAnne went on a basketball tour of Europe. Although she picked up a strange blood disease on her trip - common for Indians exposed to White culture - she was nevertheless sought by every big college team in Women's Basketball. The Lady Thorps didn't win again, although they continued to excel under her leadership. But by the close of her senior season, she had blown away all the state scoring records.

True tragedy hit Pine Ridge when SuAnne's car swerved off the road and crashed on the way to Huron, SD's awards banquet. It was Sunday, February 9, at 11:40 a.m. when she died. Her mother was with her and survived the crash. At her funeral, more people gathered than had come together for the championship two years

earlier. People from across the state and nation came to mourn this special young woman. People of many tribes and many nations came.

SuAnne once said, *“I dream of a place on this reservation where nobody would fight or be jealous, where it would be clean and safe for children . . . I would call it Happytown.”* From the ashes of her death, Chick Big Crow, SuAnne’s mother eventually opened Happytown Boys and Girls Club of America. To this day, Happytown is a safe place for children. Out of tragedy, Chick Big Crow, has formed a community of hope and love on the REZ in SuAnne’s memory.

SuAnne’s story is important to Re-Member for many reasons. First, it is through stories that the Lakota people live and move and have their being. Stories of Tatonka, Little People and Giants shape their wisdom and their character. Through the ages, their stories of dogs and bison, coyote and grass, wind and fire shape their life together. The Lakota Way is woven together in stories of humility, perseverance, respect, honor, love, sacrifice, truth, compassion, bravery, fortitude, generosity and wisdom. If they tell you a story, they trust you to care for it and share it with others. Second, SuAnne’s story tells us of heroes as well as hardships among the Oglala Sioux. There are generations of such stories. SuAnne’s is a recent story. Hers is a story that needs to be told. Third, SuAnne was the age of our teens when she succeeded and when she perished.

The Pipe and the Cross remind us of our common bonds to Native people. The pipe is the symbol of peace and unity. Around the pipe people come to listen to stories and share their own stories. The Pipe is good medicine as well. The wounds of the ages are healed in the pipe.

The cross is the symbol our unity in Christ. At the foot of the cross we come to hear stories of hope and healing. We come to the

cross to Remember the sacrifices of Jesus for us and for all humanity. It is the symbol of eternal life as well - pointing us always to the world beyond.

Today, the central meeting room in Re-Member has a glass case in it with pictures of Dorinda White and the green stole which we presented as a gift to them in her memory. She would wear it today were she here. It is a stole with fish and animals on it. It speaks of life and remains there as a call to others to live life well. It also remains there calling us back to the people and the land that changed us this summer. We will return and we will always Remember.

I close with this elegant and ancient Lakota prayer. It is offered to God, known as - Grandfather, Great Spirit. Let us pray:

*Grandfather, Great Spirit,
You have always been, and before you nothing has been.
There is no one to pray to but you.
The star nations all over the heavens are yours.
And yours are the grasses of the earth.
You are older than all need, older than all pain and prayer.*

*Grandfather, Great Spirit,
Fill us with light.
Give us strength to understand and eyes to see.
Teach us to walk the soft earth as relatives to all that live.
Help us, for without you we are nothing. Amen.*

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* The Story of SuAnne Marie Red Crow is drawn from *On the Rez* by Ian Frazier, Picador Books, New York, NY, 2000, pp. 199-276.