

NEHOIDEN'S BARGAIN

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, October 10, 2010
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Reading

from "Little Gidding"

T.S. Eliot

The poet T.S. Eliot was raised a Unitarian in St. Louis, Missouri, where his grandfather had founded the Unitarian Church. But his whole family descended directly from John Eliot, the Puritan minister at First Church in Roxbury who in 1646 began a thirty year mission as the "Apostle to the Indians," translating the Bible into the language of the Massachusetts Indians, advocating for their education and human rights, converting over 1100 of them to the Gospel, and establishing towns where they could practice self-governance. One was in nearby Natick, where the Eliot Church of South Natick stands the site of Eliot's mission.

Our reading is taken from T.S. Eliot's, "Little Gidding," the last of *The Four Quartets*, written in Britain during the height of World War II:

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives—unflowering, between
The live and the dead nettle. This is the use of memory:
For liberation—not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past. Thus, love of a country
Begins as attachment to our own field of action
And comes to find that action of little importance
Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

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I think I now know why Americans are so very likely to suffer from historical amnesia. And we do, you know. Just try to have a discussion, as I did this week, of the Great Depression, with an average Joe. He proved what the polls suggest: the major economic lesson of that crisis – namely, that government action, including deficit spending, is the necessary to jump start any economic recovery – has been entirely forgotten by most people, if, indeed, it ever did sink in. This week we marked the ninth anniversary of our current war in Afghanistan. Even some apt comparisons to Vietnam are equally likely to draw blank looks. So why do we so easily forget?

The fact is that history can be embarrassing. It may challenge our American mythic ideals of individual self-reliance, or of not relying on any imperial ambitions - among other illusions.

I'm reminded of an aunt in my own family who became terribly interested in family genealogy – until she discovered documentary evidence that her own birth, shall we say, had come rather *sooner* after her parents' wedding date than met own rather puritanical standards. She then dropped her study of family history even before she came across the family horse thief. It took a more courageous family historian to document that rascal!

This is a phenomenon that is found even in church and local history. Two years ago I was involved in some early planning for the celebration of the 300th anniversary of this old parish and of the town it then created. Someone gave me the official program from the 250th anniversary, from 1960. During the Cold War Needham had a Nike missile base. The anniversary slogan read “From Redskins to Rockets.”

You cringe. But lest you think that I'm just a humorless advocate of political correctness, I want you to know that I quickly told a pal, “Oh, great! Now maybe our 300th slogan can be, “From Puritans to Pansies!” (In case you forget, that's our town flower!) Oy!

Later I discovered that, to this day, the official seal of the Town of Needham shows two Puritans “purchasing” the land on this side of the Charles River, then called” North Dedham,” from a single Native American. The intent is pretty clear: to try to legitimize how our forebears derived legal title this area, to the territory we now call Needham, Wellesley, and South Natick.

In other words, like story of the Dutchman Peter Minuit purchasing the island of Manhattan from its native inhabitants for \$24 dollars worth of beads, *et cetera*, we made a bargain. Good for us!

Here's the fuller story. Parts of it you probably know. But as Samuel Johnson once told a young preacher, "the people require rather more often to be reminded than just to be informed."

So let me now remind you that that even before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth in 1620, or the Puritans at Boston and Salem, a decade later, the Native American population of New England had been decimated by contact with Europeans. Diseases brought by fisherman who stopped along the coast to trade, without even settling, had killed tens of thousands from influenza, small pox, and other plagues to which Native Americans had no immunity. Survivors like Massasoit had helped the English settlers survive themselves, teaching them indigenous methods of agriculture, and pointing them to buried winter stores of corn. But the first settlers at Plymouth simply took over what had been the site of a native village, where everyone had died. On the Shawmut peninsula, now Boston, Governor Winthrop and his Puritans found only one human being – the Rev. John Braxton, a fellow Puritan who had preceded them, and who was upset to find his hermitage invaded.

The natives spoke a dialect of the broad language group known as Algonquin. The inland survivors referred to themselves with the word "Massachusetts," meaning "great hill," from the Blue Hills marking the edge of the Boston basin. These are the people that the Rev. John Eliot began to convert. His first convert was named Waban, and lived in that section of what was then called Nonatum, now Newton. "Praying Indians," as they were known, at the height of Eliot's ministry and influence, became self-governing in fourteen towns, in an arc from Punkapoag in the south (now Canton), through Hopkinton (Mukunkokoag), Grafton, Mendon, Marlborough, Littleton (called Nashoba), to Wamesit in what is now Lowell. Natick was the hub. These Native settlements constituted something of a defensive ring or buffer zone for the white settlers of Massachusetts Bay.

Then in 1675 war began. It started to the south, in Rhode Island and Plymouth Colony, between settlers and the Narragansett and Wampanoag bands of Algonquins. The precipitant was an accusation by a "praying Indian" that Massasoit's son, Metacom, sachem of the Wampanoag, was planning revenge on the settlers for the unexpected death of his brother and predecessor, Wamsutta, who had died while visiting Governor Winslow of Plymouth. The accuser was killed, the settlers hung three Natives for that murder, and soon a war was on.

There were 80,000 settlers versus at most 20,000 natives in all New England. 800 colonists died, versus 3,000 Indians. But half of all white settlements were attacked. Even converted Indians were suspect, and were left without food to die on islands in Boston harbor.

At the end, there was only one Massachusetts native left in all of what the English called North Dedham. He had become a convert at Natick. His name was Nehoiden, or Nahaton, or Hahaton. There are varying transcriptions of his name. In 1671 John Eliot had sent him to try to lessen tensions with Metacom, or King Philip. Now in 1680 he was all alone. He was induced to “sell” the more than 25 square miles of what is now Needham, Wellesley, also South Natick for the sum of 10 pounds sterling, English silver; 2 pounds sterling, or 40 shillings worth of corn; and the life-time use of 40 acres along the Charles River, near what is now Echo Bridge.

Thirty years later, when forty citizens from the forty-five households who moved into North Dedham petitioned the Great and General Court of Massachusetts Bay to become a separate parish and town, they were offering a prospective minister 70 pounds sterling per year, plus land to farm and a settlement fee. It wasn't good enough. It took them ten years to get Jonathan Townsend, age 22, to come here as minister, for 80 pounds a year, plus inducements. Neihoiden died in 1717, after the parish and town began, but before Townsend arrived.

As the latter's successor, I want to raise a few moral questions; not as a Puritan, however. So . . . is any kind of public apology perhaps in order? anywhere in our local 300th celebrations? Or will this expression alone simply have to do? Is there any chance that the Town of Needham could even begin to ponder the true historical and moral meaning of its Town seal?

I think I have heard and seen the Great Spirit sighing and weeping. On Wednesday of this week, as I was writing this sermon, the heavens opened, in a deluge. I had to tell a bride, at whose quiet home wedding I officiated that afternoon, that the standard minister's response to all complaints about bad weather on celebratory occasions is simple: “I'm sorry; I'm in sales, m'am, not management!”

I don't even think the Great Spirit is always pleased with our outraged human expressions of righteous indignation. I'm reminded of the UUA General Assembly ten years ago, when I was completing my eight year sentence as denominational president. We were meeting in Cleveland, in June, between the home of the baseball club, “the Cleveland Indians” and the denominational headquarters of fellow descendents of Puritan Congregationalists, the United Church of Christ. The Cleveland Indians have a mascot, “Chief Wahoo.” To this day; they refuse to give it up.

So the UCC president and I were persuaded to lead a protest march around the stadium. There were well over a thousand of us: their multi-racial locals and our visiting UU delegates. We had no soon set out on our two mile route all around the ballpark at the start of a game when the heavens opened with rain. It came down in sheets. None of us had umbrellas. I ruined a fine suit, a lovely stole, and a good pair of shoes. UCC President John Thomas and I simply laughed.

For God maketh his sun to rise, like today, on both the evil and the good alike, and then sendeth rain on the just and the unjust alike. Or so it sayeth in the Gospel. See Matthew 5:45.

Do not expect rewards for raising moral questions; I try not to. But I also do not think that just because you and I have enjoyed some blessings and benefits in this life, it is because of your or mine own work and moral superiority. That's probably unwarranted. You and I and yours and mine have probably stolen more of our chances to get where we are today than we will ever adequately acknowledge, even if we decide today not to look back, but to "pay it forward."

And that's okay. I encourage you to emphasize doing the latter. May we spread that message – not one that says, "*You* have to be like me, or and I like my forebears." That's a false mission, especially in a rapidly changing world, one of interpenetrating cultures.

Find your own mission in that new, interesting multicultural world. Take your own place within it. I think Nehoiden might have understood. Our forebears here may have treated him rather badly indeed. But he left *us*, through them, a bargain, a promise, a covenant that is still to be made fully just, as it should be before the Great Spirit that made us all, and he be fulfilled.

May we yet prove worthy of the mixed legacy that is ours. Amen and amen.