



Each week I end our benediction with a wish for peace. Not just the peace that is the absence of war, but a true and deep shalom, the peace among nations and tribes, between earth and earth's conflicted creatures.

I often fall asleep on Sunday evenings feeling that sense of peace that we create together, if only for a morning. I feel such a sense of fulfillment bringing our community together once again to set our hearts on our highest values and aspirations and to remember the true goodness of humankind. Of course, temporary peace was shattered by the early Monday morning news that a gunman armed to the teeth acted alone in killing 58 innocent people attending a country music festival on Sunday night.

Many have called this mass shooting the deadliest massacre on United States soil, killing more people than the horrific Orlando shooting of June 2016 which targeted mostly LGBT people of color at the Pulse nightclub. But historians have cautioned reporters to qualify this shooting with one word which distinguishes the past from the present. The word is "modern."

Using the word modern sets this era of mass shootings apart from those of the past, many of which are already forgotten as the awful details of each new shooting eclipses those of past horrors. In an article in Time magazine this week, criminologist Grant Duwe, author of *Mass Murder in the United States*, made the important point that "*Mass shooting* is really a new name for a very old, familiar problem." Duwe points to dozens of violent events from history beyond the modern era that we may have forgotten. These killings were often fueled by racial hatred, specifically targeting indigenous peoples.

Here are just three examples:

The attack on a sleeping Cheyenne village at Sand Creek, Colorado in 1864, killing 128.

The massacre by white militia of 175 members of the Black Feet tribe at Marias River in Montana including 50 children.

On Dec. 29, 1890, U.S. Army soldiers killed 200 Lakota Native Americans with machine guns at South Dakota's Wounded Knee Creek.

Reading the brutal details of these mass killings reads more like a plot from Game of Thrones than the benign and benevolent colonial narratives I remember from my childhood history books.

According to indigenous scholars, our local Southern California versions of these atrocities happened 100 years before these three massacres, a long and brutal 60-year period of Spanish colonization. "Before contact," California was home to 63 different indigenous tribes with nearly 350,000 members. By 1900, through violent attacks, disease and starvation, the Native population had dwindled to just 16,000.

Here in Pasadena our lands were once occupied by the Hahamonga tribe, a part of the greater Tongva tribal confederation of the Los Angeles basin, renamed the Gabrielino by the Spaniards. The name Tongva means "people of the earth and ocean." Their villages, all independent, democratically governed communities, were settled along the Arroyo Seco, the canyons and Verdugo mountain foothills.

When the San Gabriel Mission, was established by Spanish priest Junipero Serra in 1771, many members of the Tongva tribes were converted to Catholicism, their labor used to build churches to convert others in their tribe. Catholic missionary boarding schools were established to educate Indian children where they were not allowed to speak their native language.

In the mid-1400s, the Catholic Church circulated a series of Papal bulls throughout Europe, governing the colonial efforts of Spain and other Catholic nations. The tenets would come to be called the Doctrine of Discovery, claiming European dominion over lands populated by Pagans and other non-Christians. This is how the narrative of Christopher Columbus “discovering” the Americas evolved, the story many of us learned growing up. Protestant immigrants coming from Britain, France and Germany adopted the principles of the doctrine of discovery in their settler colonial efforts. The United States government codified the Doctrine of Discovery into our Supreme Court law, claiming that the United States had inherited such dominion from our British forbears.

In California, most Indian tribes have been denied federal recognition and are the most land poor tribal people in the nation with few reservations and designated lands. Over time, the members of the Tongva tribe became largely invisible to one another. Even though the native population in California has grown to over 200,000, most are members of other tribes, relocated to Los Angeles from reservations around the country. Many found it easier to claim Mexican or other ethnic backgrounds.

Until recently, it was believed that the last native Tongva speaker died quietly in the mid 70s. I want to share the story of one Los Angeles man’s search for a Tongva heritage he thought had been completely erased. This story was featured on an episode of the PBS series Indian Country Diaries on the indigenous people of Los Angeles.

Mark Acuña had been raised unaware of his tribal heritage. He believed that the Tongva — or as they had been renamed by the Spanish, the Gabrielino — were extinct. He was light-skinned and had been raised by his father and grandparents as white. They wanted him to be able to get an education and assimilate into the American culture. He did. He studied ethnobotany and became a college professor.

It wasn't until he was around 50 years old that he went to hear a Tongva woman speak about medicinal plants that the tribe had used. He was ready to argue with her that the tribe was extinct. Then he recognized the plants she was talking about as the same plants his grandfather grew. He remembered someone saying his grandfather had been a Tongva medicine man. Then his father told him how the family decided to keep his ancestry from him so he could pass as white.

As Acuña recounts his father "pulled out the abalone shell, and I just looked at it. And it was filled with sage, and he lit it and blessed me. And I just, I just fell apart."

Mark became a student of a tribal heritage he never knew he had. When he realized the language was not being spoken anymore — he starting searching for accounts of the Tongva language in academic archives. Ironically, he found good accounts in the records of the same missionaries who had devastated the tribe in the 1700s.

We found pieces of vocabulary," Mark says. "We began to find fragments of songs. There is just something about greeting each other, and instead of saying, 'Hi, how are you?' to say the Tongva word, '*Nachochan.*' which means "My eyes see your eyes. My hands are open."

“My eyes see your eyes. My hands are open.”

From Wounded Knee to Las Vegas, a dangerous thread runs through America's mass violence of the past and the present. This simple Tongva phrase speaks volume to the difference in culture between the indigenous and European settlers. The Doctrine of Discovery gave European settlers permission not to "see" the humanity of the other with a claim to moral superiority and dominion over native lands and peoples. Spanish soldiers designed a caste system not to "see" -- they designated themselves as "gente de razon," people of reason, calling the tribal peoples "gente sin razon," people without reason. Treating the indigenous peoples like children, Spanish colonial soldiers and church missionaries used these attitudes to justify the systematic removal of indigenous peoples from their land, even their rape and murder.

Remembering this excruciating history, is it any wonder that mass violence today rests, as it always has, on a blindness to the true humanity of the other? Whatever distorted thoughts haunted the Vegas killer before he made his terrible rampage, we can imagine, simply by the way he chose to kill—in the dark, from a distance—that those people weren't fully human to him, but nameless, faceless victims.

No new discovered motive will change this is very old and entrenched problem, one that we did not create. As Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz writes in the *Indigenous Peoples History of the United States*, quoting native historian Jack Forbes, "while living persons are not responsible for what their ancestors did, they are responsible for the society they live in, which is a product of that past."

As people of faith, and Americans, our humanity is bound up in the pain of this past and how it continues to influence expressions of violence in our contemporary life.

Acknowledging how we too are impoverished and diminished by this violent history of colonization opens possibilities for a different future, one where we as a faith community might be true partners in sustaining the sacred lands, language and culture of indigenous peoples.

I close with the words of the Acoma poet Simon Ortiz:

*The future will not be mad with loss and waste  
Though the memory will be there  
Eyes will become kind and deep  
And the bones of this nation will mend.  
May our eyes rise to meet the other and truly see,  
may our hands be open not only to receive,  
but to give back what has been lost  
and may we discover ourselves found.*