

Who Owns the Land?

Our family has always lived inside city limits. After retirement, my wife and I moved to the countryside and for the first time, we have a spacious yard with an acre or so of woods adjacent to it. Our home also is surrounded by a seemingly endless forest.

We tend a garden. Bean and pea plants are heavy with fruit. Tomatoes are ripening beneath verdant canopies of green. Squash vines have twisted themselves around and all the way over the eight-foot fence. This year, the apple trees planted only recently will yield a small harvest. We're trying to restock cleared spaces in our woods with native trees and bushes.

It is a joy to own this land. Still, whose land is it really? After all, we will live here only a short time and ownership of the land will be passed along to someone else. The land has been here for millennia: we will live on it for just a few years.

As a child, I learned this Scripture verse (Psalm 24:1, the old King James Version): "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Which is to say: the land belongs not to us, but to God, who created it. We are stewards of creation, charged with its care and keeping during our time on earth, so that succeeding generations can rejoice in its beauty and steward its resources.

For Native Americans, who lived on the Upper Peninsula before any Europeans arrived, ownership of the land was a foreign concept. The land, along with its plants and animals were sacred gifts of the Great Spirit.

When Europeans arrived here, they came with national flags and ambitions to control the land as their own. In a papal bull issued in 1493, Pope Alexander VI gave Spanish explorers the right to claim the lands of "the New World" and to convert, displace and subjugate the native peoples who lived here. Later, this "Doctrine of Discovery" was introduced into US law through an 1823 Supreme Court decision. Lands previously "conquered" by the colonial powers would belong, not to the American Indian tribes who had lived on them, but to settlers moving west.

Over time, Indian nations were pushed further and further west. Diseases for which they had no immunity decimated their populations. Attempts were made to eradicate their culture, language, and religion. They were taken as slaves, sent to boarding schools, and finally resettled in the few patches of less attractive land we now call "reservations." Surely, the displacement, subjugation and decimation of native peoples is one of America's "original sins."

What now? There is no way to un-do history. But we can acknowledge the evils of the past. We can listen anew to the Ojibwa people who live on the land we share with them. We can begin to make amends for what has been done.

We can affirm the basic truth all of us share: the land does not belong to anyone but its Creator.

--Pr. David Van Kley, for Marquette **Mining Journal** "Trail Markers" column, September, 2020