

Enmegabowh: a biographical sketch

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Slide 1 What surprised me most in reading the new biography of today's hero is that he, too, was an immigrant. Enmegabowh was an Odawa, from north of Toronto. Like James Lloyd Breck and Henry Whipple, the great missionaries of Minnesota Territory, Enmegabowh was raised Christian. The Odawa made a life by trading widely in the great forests north of the St. Lawrence and west around the Great Lakes. They lived in rectangular houses made of lumber or logs, not the rounded-top wigwams or the cone-shaped tipis.

Enmegabowh was a missionary unlike Columbus, backed by violence and aided by infectious diseases. He was more like Columba, the Irish saint who took Celtic Christianity to Scotland in the 500's: a man from this continent who already spoke an Anishinabe language, and who loved the story of Jesus more than anything.

Slide 2 Enmegabowh is on the calendar of the Episcopal Church because he was the first native priest, because he was nonviolent even when he was mad as hell. Because he brought so many Ojibwe and some Dakota people into the church even though he persuaded very few to take up the settled agricultural life that Whipple, Breck, and pretty much all white settlers expected Indians to adopt. In the icon on the wall just outside that door, his namesake priest Johnson Loud painted him with a ceremonial pipe in one hand and a tongue of fire in the other.

Slide 3 Let's look at that painting more closely. It's customary to have an orb behind the head of a saint, but this one has the four colors of native religion.

- The black symbolizes the west, where day ends and night begins, from where the Thunderbird brings storms full of welcome rain.

- The white is the north, from which hard challenges come. The white hair of elders, the cold, and the snowy time when stories can be told.
- The red is east, for the sun, for childbirth and the blood which gives life.
- And the yellow is south, from which hot winds blow bringing summer heat.

The background of our painting shows sunrise on a northern lake, in springtime before the leaves have appeared. Enmegabowh's face is serious, as always, and he gazes a bit to his left, perhaps to the northwest, from where the giwaydin wind blows that we Minnesotans love: fair, fresh, clear weather. In his right hand is a flame, which reminds me of the tongues of fire symbolizing the confidence the first Christians felt when filled with God's energy. In his left hand is a carved pipestone pipe for smoking kinnickinnick, native tobacco without all the nasty additives.

Our hero wears western-style vestments with native flowers embroidered on his stole. His hair is cut short, where Ojibwe who followed the traditional ways kept it long and braided, only to be cut off in mourning for a relative or companion.

This is not one of those icons where you look into his eyes and see deep into your own soul, into the mind of God. I have been taught that it is rude among Ojibwe to look at someone else so directly. Instead, we're invited to see a man whose name means Stands Before His People, and who, at the age of 12, set off with a Methodist missionary to go to school on the Keweenaw peninsula of Michigan. He had already learned the traditional spiritual teachings of the Grand Medicine Lodge from his grandfather. All his life, the mi-dew mysteries as well as the mysteries of the trinity, the incarnation, and the eucharist were his guideposts.

Slide 4 The great crisis of his life came during the Civil War, when the Dakota War also broke out. Up and down the Minnesota river, out on the prairie, Dakota and settlers killed each other in escalating fury. Further north, where Enmegabowh was leading a church at White Earth, a relative of his wife Biwabiko-geshik-eguay gathered Ojibwe

fighters from all over the north woods to attack the white settlement at Fort Ripley. Enmegabowh stoutly opposed the move. His wife's relative told him to stay in his house or be killed. Enmegabowh wouldn't take up a weapon, but his wife was no clergy person and cradled her rifle in case anyone tried anything. During the night, the family slipped away and warned the whites. Many non-Episcopalian Ojibwe consider Enmegabowh a traitor, an Uncle Tom, a sell-out. I don't.

Slide 5 First of all, nobody needed an Ojibwe war: the Dakota war was ruinous for their people and just about all Dakota were ethnically cleansed and exiled far to the west. Second of all, to Enmegabowh, the whites were his brothers and sisters as much as anyone else were, though many of them wished all the native people would hurry up and die or move away. There was lumber in those forests. But his dear friends Whipple and Breck had walked and paddled thousands of miles with him, and their "medicine," the Christian way of life, was *love of neighbor, of God, and of self*.

I wanted the new Enmegabowh biography to have more stories about him. He wrote letters full of Biblical references, not clever ones like I make in the pulpit, but real-life parallels: for example, once he gave up missionary work and headed east in a big canoe.

Slide 6 Not far out to sea on Gitchee Gumi, Lake Superior, a fierce wind and rainstorm kept pushing them back. As a Midew, he totally believed that winds and waves were spiritual beings and that Gitchee Manitou, the Great Spirit, could send such signs which any intelligent person would pay attention to. When he wrote about it to white people, he used the Jonah reference: the storm was a sign from God that he was a quitter and a shirker like Jonah, and would have deserved to be thrown overboard like that reluctant prophet. I think we call it code-switching nowadays. Cultural competence.

Slide 7 As an old man, he was crabby. His wife and every one of their children preceded him in death, all from tuberculosis, the slow killer then called consumption that consumed them all in their teens, twenties, thirties, and forties. He was surely

heartbroken about that, and angry that white men could raise money on their own and do what they wanted with it, but he was repeatedly disciplined for trying to do the same, writing to people he had met on his several trips out east, including to Washington, DC, where people found him “well-spoken.” He had his salary, and an unreliable annual payment from the Indian agent, and that was it. But by every measure, the St. Columba Mission church he founded with Breck and then moved west to the reservation was a success because of his tending of the Ojibwe flock, not Breck’s.

Slide 8 The members of St. John’s used an old gym, and then built this place more than a hundred years ago, among the Lindens, up here on a hill above Bde Unma down there and Bde Maka Ska over there. This used to be Dakota country, not Ojibwe. The white settlers who farmed, and the city people who later had cottages out here in the country, probably didn’t know any Dakota. They were long gone by then, cleared out, evicted.

Slide 9 I’m not sure what to make of this man, who died on June 12, 1902. He was zealous and humble. A traveler and a settler. A Midew and a Christian. An Odawa and an American. He was a translator and a teacher. He was never much of a farmer, though he tried. It is tempting to regard his life as sad and his mission as part of a slow but relentless cultural genocide.

Slide 10 But as my Indian friends remind us, “we are still here.” The revival of the Ojibwe language may yet succeed, which I know would make our hero happy.

Slide 11 The work of young Indian lawyers to repurchase land on the White Earth Reservation that ought to have belonged to Indians all along would have delighted him. So would the idea of youth groups of Episcopalians from the cities tending Ojibwe graves, including his own, around St. Columba’s mission’s historic building.

Slide 12 (pause) A new generation of Ojibwe young people are joining the

Slide 13 Midewewin lodges in Canada and the US, and learning the sacraments of old. Some are also Episcopalian, and our church honors both spiritual paths.

Finally, instead of a prayer-book kind of prayer, how about I close with a meditation. I invite you to sit a little taller, with your feet on the floor, breathing in a column of air from way, way down in your body and breathing out, a bit slower and deeper each time.

Slide 14 Close your eyes if you wish, and imagine yourself in the north woods with that fresh, cool *giwaydin* northwest breeze. The trees and the birds spirits call out, the sky and earth stand guard, and your version of a flame or pipe appears in your hand, a symbol or tool of some kind. And you hear a voice in that breeze. You turn to face the voice, and unlike our serious saint, you cannot help but smile.