

April 23, 2023

Creation Care Sunday

The Reverend Garrett Yates
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



It's unlikely the first followers of Jesus celebrated Earth Day. To the contrary, read lots of the New Testament and you get the sense they were eager to celebrate The End of the Earth Day. You know that many in that first generation of Jesus followers were waiting on tiptoe for the Second Coming, for Christ to come in glory, bringing an end to this world and ushering in the next. Its only natural to read the New Testament as a piece of theology, not as ecology. And so it comes as a surprise to hear, in the letter to the Colossians, words that seem to reflect what we would today call a "deep ecology" perspective. "Deep ecologists" are those who believe that the ecological crisis is not in the first instance a crisis in technology, but rather that the root cause lies in the human heart. In a word, deep ecologists believe that the ecological crisis stems from what Christians call "sin," above all the sin of isolating ourselves from the rest of the creatures, preferring the immediate advantage of the privileges of our species over the well being all creation. We've become alienated from the earth. Deep ecologists believe that human beings must reconnect with the rest of the creatures if this fragile earth is to be habitable for future generations.

That is what deep ecologists think. The surprising thing is that the apostle Paul seems to share this perspective on the need for humans to make a profound reconnection, or Paul's more preferred word, reconciliation with the rest of the creatures, if our world is to be healed. Listen to the promise of reconciliation Paul holds out to our alienated race: you can come before God "holy and blameless" – that in itself is a remarkable promise, considering how deep Paul knows human sin to be. Nevertheless, you can be holy and blameless before God provided – provided that you "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you hear, the gospel which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven." What a wild statement. Paul is suggesting here that the Good news of God's incarnation in Christ – the whole flow of his life, death, and resurrection on

our fragile planet - is not just intended for the human family, not just for every “family, language, people and nation,” but also for rock badgers and rocks, for fruit bats and giant sequoias – every creature under heaven. Non-human lives matter, St. Paul might say. Our theology must open out onto ecology.

What the letter to the Colossians is laying before us is a comprehensive ecological vision. Ecology is the study of the relational web of all living things and the earth, and the insight Colossians offers us is that everything in the world is related to everything else precisely in Christ Jesus. Listen again to Paul: “All things have been created through Christ and for Christ, and in him all things hold together. “All things” is repeated five times in the space of a few sentences – all things hold together in Christ. And what’s more, through Christ all things are being reconnected, reconciled to God. I don’t pretend to understand that. This is a mystical insight that exceeds my lowly grasp. But this I understand: it is for the sake of reconciliation that the gospel has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, so that everything created in Christ and for Christ – every person, every stick and stone and stallion and seahorse – everything can claim its place in the reconciling work of Christ Jesus.

Okay so what does all this high-flown theological ecology mean on the ground? What possibility does Colossians open up for us that would not otherwise be obvious? After all, we do not really need the Bible to tell us that every created thing is related to every other created thing on this small blue dot of a planet. The essential unity of all inhabitants and elements of the earth – this is now accepted as a given in scientific reports and in the news media. And frankly, it does not sound like good news. If the ship goes down, we all drown – a possibility we cannot discount, if you are reading the same reports I am. So what difference does the biblical witness make? What is the good news about the fundamental relatedness for all creatures that Paul says he is toiling and struggling with all his energy to convey to us?

This: what Colossians shows us, and the scientific reports do not, is the unity of the creatures under the universal lordship of Christ, which is to say, all things held together, not in bondage to a single ineradicable fate, but in Christ. Put simply, the difference the biblical witness makes is the difference between accepting a sober fact – our common peril – and accepting an invitation to a party. The Christian participates in the solidarity of the creatures as one who is responding to an invitation to a gala banquet. This is crucial to how we channel our ecological energies. It is how the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth describes what it means for the Christian to accept the fact that she is a creature, no more and no less, present in this world simply as an honored guest of the sovereign Lord of all the worlds. If we accept God’s invitation to the banquet of the creatures, then, Karl Barth says, we take our “place at the table, in the company of publicans, in the company of beasts and plants and stones, accepting solidarity with them, being present simply as they are, as a creature of God.”

I wonder if we’ve ever thought about our faith this way. What does it mean to be a Christian? It means accepting an invitation to a cosmic banquet gathered around and hosted by Christ; and reminding every living thing – from people to polar bears to plankton – that they are on the guest list.

But let’s be honest. This is a vision of the kingdom of God we do not easily accept. It sounds flaky, maybe a little woo-woo - partying with plants and stones, with tadpoles and tigers!?! Our imaginations do not readily stretch so far. We might wonder why it is so hard for us to claim this vision of solidarity with all creatures. Perhaps we are afraid? Afraid to sit down at the banqueting table and open a conversation with the nonhuman creatures? Afraid if we once open that conversation in the presence of God, the other creatures will find their voice and cry out against us? Afraid that the rivers we have dammed, drained, and poisoned will accuse us of culpable negligence? Afraid that the soil we have stripped of its hardwood forests, the seas we have drag-netted and depopulated will cry out against us for our greed? Afraid that

the mountains we are literally taking down to the ground, scraping out veins of low grade coal and leaving behind vast piles of infertile rubble – are we afraid the mountains of our land will testify against us?

That would be an intelligent fear, informed not only by the news media but also, and more importantly, by the Bible, which tells us that things we call inanimate do, in fact, have a voice in the presence of God. Remember those Psalms where the mountains and hills ring out for joy, the sea shouts, rivers clap their hands, when God comes to judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth (Ps. 98)? The nonhuman creatures clamor at the good news that their Lord is coming in power and justice to judge the world. They are ecstatic at the prospect of being delivered at last into God’s hands. If all the abused creatures we call dumb find their loud voices in the presence of God, then maybe that is we don’t envision ourselves sitting at God’s table with them. Who wants to be lambasted at dinner!?! Better to stay away, even if that means missing the meal that God has laid for all the creatures.

However, we may sit at the table without fear of humiliation if we will accept this one thing about the rules of this house: the wine served here is the blood of sacrifice. Christ’s blood poured out for the life of the world is the wine of fellowship that unites all the creatures. In stunning terms Paul sets forth the sole basis for reconciliation, after all the harm that we have done: “through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.” Making peace through the blood of his cross – these words confound our rationalism; yet, if we can hear them, they have the power to draw us deep into what Paul calls “the mystery hidden throughout the ages.... that has now been revealed to the saints.

This mystery: through the blood of the cross, Jesus Christ is healing a breach that dates back nearly to the beginning of world history. The first chapters of Genesis disclose

that humanity's dangerous self-isolation originated, not in twenty-first century technology, but rather in the fallout from the first human disobedience. As soon as human beings had begun to seek their own way in the world, apart from God, the peace of Eden was shattered, and we fell into total alienation on the planet. It's all in the third chapter of Genesis, but now Christ offers to make "peace through the blood of his cross". From the cross, the center point of all creation, Jesus Christ reaches out to embrace all things to reconnect, reconcile them to God. Christ the firstborn of all creation, the most privileged of God's children, arms outstretched on the cross to embrace God and all creation, dying to draw the rest of us back into God's embrace – that is an image that has power to heal us from our profound estrangement, if we can grasp just one thing: the invitation to the feast of reconciliation is an invitation to sacrifice.

Sacrifice – literally "making holy", sanctifying the world by accepting our lives as pure gift and offering back to God all of what God has given us. Strange and sad to say, it is easy to miss or misunderstand the power of Christ's sacrifice. It's easy to think that Christ did it so we don't have to; his sacrifice makes ours unnecessary. But the gospel teaching is the opposite. Christ's sacrifice makes possible our own. Christ bids us follow him without fear in the way of the cross. He teaches us the strange inverse economics of the kingdom of heaven, where wealth is measured by how much you can afford to do without, where comfort level is measured by your ease in giving up.

Friends, we are invited now to the feast of reconciliation. If we speak with integrity and eat to our salvation, we commit ourselves to an ethics of sacrifice. What can we do, what can we give or give up in order that our words and even more our lives may become a genuine proclamation of this mystery long hidden that has now been revealed, the mystical solidarity of all creatures, held together by the one who held nothing back, reconciled to God and one another through the blood of the cross? In our time may that mystical

solidarity be made manifest through us, may we more and more learn an ethic of sacrifice for the sake of the welfare of creation. Doing so not in fear, not in anxiety or despair, but because we've heard the joyful summons to the banquet of Christ prepared for every creature under heaven.

