

Holladay United Church of Christ

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“A Prayer from the Earth”

Psalm 8, Luke 12

In 1992 Bill McKibben, a prolific writer and environmental activist, went out and found the largest cable television system in the whole world, which at the time was in Fairfax, Virginia and had 100 channels. He had different people in Fairfax tape all 100 channels during a 24 hour period and then went home with the tapes and watched roughly 2000 hours of programming. Distilled down to the essence of what he heard the message was this, “You’re the most important thing on earth. You’re the center of the planet.”

It’s a message we’ve been listening to for a long, long time. Far too long. The results of this message are all around us: Melting ice caps, mass extinctions, dying forests, rising oceans, we have forgotten who we are. We have forgotten where we stand in relation to everything else. We’ve accepted comfort and excess in exchange for balance and responsibility. When I think about what we’ve become I often think of the seagulls in Finding Nemo where they just say over and over “Mine, mine, mine, mine, mine, mine, mine... our culture has become so accustomed to having that it defines itself by stuff and by possessions –according to all those messages that make us out to be the most important thing on the planet – it is our cars, and our choice of beer, and our vacation homes that are going to make us happy, this is the essence, the message says, of what it means to be human, to have, to acquire, to own.

If we go back to the Hebrew language we hear a different message: the word for man is Adam, and the word for earth is Adamah – they are of the same root – they bare the intimate connection between humanity and the earth. We are more likely to here truth about who we are from an ancient language that we are when we turn on the TV. We are not the center of the earth we are of the earth – we are part of the earth.

It would be easy to take a scripture like Psalm 8 that reads:

what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas and use it as justification and proof that God has put humans above all other creatures

But when it is distilled down to its essence the writer of Psalm 8 is baffled that God would entrust God's most amazing creation to the likes of us? What are we that you would count on us to take care of the creatures of the earth? It is an awesome responsibility to have the power destroy, to create, to progress, to choose – and for the past few hundred years the industrialized nations of this world have chosen to abuse that power – we've believed ourselves to be more important and thereby more valuable than any other species on this planet. This, McKibben says, Is a crime against the rest of creation, against all the other interesting corners of God's brain.”

We need to hear and share a different message. Not just an admonition to care for the earth but a call to relationship with the earth. Perhaps one of the most important contributions we can make as a community of faith in the effort to combat global warming is around this question of identity. We are one of the only institutions left in society that still conceives of something other than accumulation as reason for existence on this planet. I think that is why I love the story of Old Turtle –Rather than the most important thing – or the most central thing – it imagines us as a prayerful thing – a message of love between the earth and God...

It is a simple story with profound possibilities. It asks us to see ourselves within the order of creation – to remember that we are a part of this creation, that we come from this creation, that we are a prayer of this creation.

When I was in Berkeley in January at the Earl Lectures I attended a workshop on worship and creation – and we broke up into different groups to work on creating a liturgy with an ecological and earth centered focus...when we came back together and shared our ideas, I remember one young man had offered up the suggestion that everyone in the congregation gather up their trash during the week and bring it to church on Sunday and then during the offering everyone could bring up their bag or bags of trash as an offering to the earth – it would be offensive in this place – this is sacred space– and yet isn't that what we say about the earth? that the land is sacred...the more I thought about it rather than offering maybe it would be our prayer of confession – our admittance that we are out of balance, that we have made ourselves and all our stuff the more valuable than any other species on this planet.

And then his idea got me to thinking as well, what if we were to think of all the practices we have come to recognize as “green” as a way of praying?

Recycling as prayer
Composting as a prayer
Riding your bike as a prayer
Buying used clothes as a prayer
Growing a garden as a prayer
Changing a light bulb as a prayer
Using alternative energy as a prayer
Riding the bus as a prayer
Learning about where our purchases come from as a prayer
Planting a tree as a prayer
conservation as prayer

Perhaps we will begin to think of these things not as obligations, or as fads, or as annoying necessities of the 21st century but as reminders of who we are – dependents of this most amazing planet.

In the celtic Tradition it is said that they are followers of two books. The little book and the big book. The little book they say is the scripture. The Big Book is Creation.

How does one become a prayer from the earth?
We listen to the earth. We stop long enough to hear the wisdom that comes from all the thousands and millions of living beings with which we share this planet.

The Place I want to Get Back To - Mary Oliver

Is where in the pinewoods in the moments between the darkness
And first light two deer came walking down the hill and when they saw me
They said to each other, okay, this one is okay, let's see who she is and why she is sitting
On the ground, like that, so quiet, as if asleep, or in a dream, but anyway, harmless;
And so they came on their slender legs and gazed upon me not unlike the way
I go out to the dunes and look and look and look into the faces of the flowers;
And then one of them leaned forward and nuzzled my hand
And what can my life bring to me that could exceed that brief moment?

For twenty years I have gone every day to the same woods,
Not waiting, exactly, just lingering.
Such gifts, bestowed, can't be repeated.
If you want to talk about this
Come to visit. I live in the house near the corner, which I have named Gratitude.

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