

Everything is Holy Now

April 23, 2023

To Take or To Give

There's a subtle nuance in the UCC Book of Worship that I always lift up when I'm discussing a wedding ceremony with a couple. The most common traditional wedding vows of our era include the phrase, "I take you to be my lawfully wedded husband/wife/spouse." I point out that the UCC liturgy changes that ever so slightly, instead saying, "I give myself to you..." It's a tiny change, but couples get it right away.

The concept of giving oneself as a gift, rather than taking the other is so much richer, and I encourage that attitude and behavior. This concept of giving of oneself, rather than approaching life as something to be taken, came to mind as I read an Earth Day piece written by Kaitlin Curtice in Sojourner's Magazine recently. Curtice is an enrolled member of the Potawatomi Citizen Band who now lives in the shadow of Stone Mountain, Georgia, a large, granite peak in a state park that has, among other things, been taken over by a confederate carving. She writes about how, when she was younger and she would go hiking with family, she would always keep her eyes peeled for a memento, a small little something to take home to mark the experience that she had seen and experienced God – a pebble, a flower, a pinecone. She says that she would wonder, "if those rocks had been there for generations, or how many people that dirt felt walk on her dusty skin over the years." She writes that she now understands that, while this was a meaningful thing to do, it was the wrong thing.

"It's selfish, to enter the home of the land and the creatures there, and expect something from them, something that will give me pleasure, fill my cup. It is about taking, not giving; it is about demanding, not receiving."

Scriptures

This dynamic of giving of ourselves rather than taking for ourselves is what has been rattling around in my prayers as we celebrate Earth Day this year. There are innumerable scriptures that back up this spiritual approach to our Earthly home, and in much of my remarks today I am indebted to my colleagues at the Salt Project for stringing them together. Let's start with both creation stories from Genesis. Daniel read a portion of the first creation story for us today in which humans are given dominion over creation. Dominion is alternately translated as "custody," or "responsibility," or "rule," all of which have nuances, but if we look to God as our model for how to do all of these things – have dominion over, have custody of, have responsibility for – we see a nurturing, respectful way of manifesting those behaviors, not a blatant disregard for the long-term wellbeing of that gift.

Similarly, in the second creation story, humans are given the earth to till and keep, and one of the consequences of human sin is our loss of this original role. Salvation, then, is a return to tilling and keeping the land. (As an aside, I'd point out just how many people find gardening to be a healing, restorative experience as evidence of this.)

If we look to the story of Noah for our Earth Day spirituality, we see a story of a do-over of creation. God is upset that the world has become filled with violence and does something about it (Genesis 6:11).

“the human role in the drama is a decisive return to our original calling: to serve and protect God’s creatures, building an ark to house them, gathering food to feed them, and thus preserving the world’s biodiversity — in short, “to keep them alive... so that they may abound on the earth” (Gen 6:19; 8:17).

In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the commandments to keep the sabbath apply not only to humans but also to the animals and to the earth. In the Psalms, there are numerous passages that lift up that the earth and all of the creatures belong to God, and that God delights in all of creation. In the New Testament, Jesus lifts up that even things as seemingly insignificant as wildflowers and sparrows are important to God. And, in what I know to be a favorite passage from the Gospels for many of you, Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that whenever we feed or quench the thirst of the least among us, whenever we clothe them, welcome foreigners, care for the sick, or visit the imprisoned, he is the actual recipient of our mercy.

You might think this is an off-topic reference for Earth Day, but as the climate crisis worsens, so will the need for all of these works of mercy: Access to food and safe drinking water will become more of a challenge. Floods, droughts, and other natural and unnatural disasters will necessitate heightened migration, thus creating a heightened need for clothing those in need, attending to the sick, and welcoming foreigners.

And, sadly, the desperation caused by all of these things will intensify authoritarian politics, incarceration rates, and the likelihood of conflict. And yet, even with the alarm bells ringing in our ears, I also remind you of the end of the Bible, of Revelation, where the prophet has a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. What’s interesting here for our purposes today is that the vision isn’t out there in some far off heaven or cosmos. The prophet tells us that God’s vision is that the new heaven will come to earth, that this magnificent planet will be restored. THAT is God’s vision.

Conclusion

Kaitlin Curtice, the Potawatomi theologian who I mentioned at the beginning of my message today, said that she used to look for a memento on her hikes to take home with her, to remind her of God’s presence. She says that now, she sits by the water, gently touches the grass and the trees, and instead of taking something, she greets them, thanks them, and asks them permission.

She writes:

I realized that I was not there to demand and take whatever I wanted. If a gift came to me (in words or as inspiration), I would receive it with gratitude. I simply wanted the trees, the ants, the dirt, the water, and the wind to know that I was grateful to be among them, grateful that they might want a relationship with me.

We’ve been trained to think on an individualistic level in the United States. When European peoples colonized Turtle Island, they replaced our Indigenous ideas of communal living and identity with individualism, with every man/woman for themselves ideas that eventually became the rallying cry of the United States, a land that prides itself on the American Dream. If you work hard enough, you’ll succeed. Don’t show weakness. Masculinity is the key, and patriarchy is the rule of the land.

As we continue to enter deeper into the crisis of climate change, into the reality of human rights abuses and eruptions of violence happening not just here but all over the world, perhaps we need to take a different approach in our relationship to one another and our creature-relatives all over the earth.

Perhaps we need to remember that being a recipient of a gift is different than demanding a gift be given to us in the first place.

Perhaps being aware of the sacredness of the Earth as she is, is more important than worrying only about how we will be affected as humans when she is hurting and reacting to our mistakes.

Perhaps if we returned to loving the land, waters, and all beings that live and breathe around us, we might learn how to love our human relatives again. We are, after all, dust to dust. No one can escape that reality. We can no longer be people who take.

We must return to being people who ask, who greet, who extend gratitude, who, when we receive, pass that gift on to the next who are in need, practicing reciprocity in this world.

<https://sojo.net/articles/sacredness-earth-she>

Curtice's reflection is how my prayer led me to read the Gospel passage that I did today: Jesus told us to give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to give unto God that which is God's. In our experience of climate change, it is well past time that we re-orient ourselves to a spirituality that all of creation is a magnificent, breathtaking gift from God which we are to lovingly and passionately care for. To quote one of my favorite songs, we need to behave as if everything is holy now.

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