

Real Togetherness

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The Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
 Celebrating the Integrity of Creation
 July 12, 2009

Ecclesiastes 3:14-22; Romans 8:18-25; Matthew 6:25-34

Text: "For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity." -- Ecclesiastes 3:19

It always surprises me when I hear people describe the book of Ecclesiastes as a depressing book. I've never thought it was depressing; I always thought it was realistic.

Take the text for this morning's sermon, for example: "I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust and all turn to dust again."

Some people find this idea very depressing, but I don't, perhaps because I know that elsewhere in the same book, the writer of Ecclesiastes, whom we commonly call the Teacher, says that we are to remember our creator in the days of our youth, before "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (12:7).

What's depressing about that? Is there anything depressing in the idea of all of our remains – physical and spiritual – returning to the God who created the earth and animates all earthly bodies, human and animal alike, with that same spirit or wind or breath?

I think people who find that idea depressing are folks who have constructed from their imaginations a rather vivid view of heaven that is very much, I fear, a projection of life here on earth, at the center of which is their ego, their idea of their self. We cling to the self desperately, and hope and pray that it will continue in some form, because most of us can't imagine ourselves any other way.

I can. I can imagine – indeed look forward to – that day when I am completely reunited with the creator who brought me into this world, and I cannot do that as long as my ego, my clinging to my self, is in the way. I long for the day when the barrier of the self that separates me from the infinite love that is God is dissolved, and I am once again at peace with what Parker Palmer calls the Great Silence. "That is happiness," Willa Cather wrote in *My Antonia*, "to be dissolved into something complete and great."

Some people dread such a fate because their view of that which is complete and great is deficient. They regard the natural world as deficient and only the spiritual world

as great, but the Bible makes it very clear that there is no spiritual world except as it manifests itself in and through creation. To wrap oneself in a world apart from this one is to indulge in speculation. To imagine a heaven way off yonder, where God is waiting for us, along with Cousin Mae, is a view of heaven based more on our fears, hopes, and imaginings than anything that I can find in the Bible. The Bible is rather vague about the afterlife, except in one respect: that neither life nor death separates those who love God from that infinite, eternal love. That much we can count on, and much of the rest, I'm afraid, is largely speculation.

But what is not speculation is what Qoheleth says about humans and animals: we're all in this life together. As far as our physical existence is concerned, there is no difference between us and all other living creatures. We have the same needs for food, water, air and shelter that all other living creatures need. We don't necessarily need them in the same way, but need them we do. We do, and our friends the animals do. We're all in this business called life together.

And while some people may find that idea depressing, I find it comforting. I find it comforting to know that my physical existence, no less than my spiritual existence, is part of something over which I ultimately have no control. I did not bring myself into existence, and I do not keep myself in existence, although our culture has a huge fitness industry that gives us the illusion that we do. Eat this. Don't eat that. Exercise this way, this many times a week and at this intensity. And what? You'll reduce your chances of cardiovascular disease. You'll reduce your chances of getting cancer. And if you do have a heart attack or develop cancer, you simply didn't beat the odds. As far as everything we can do, it's all a game of trying to beat the odds.

What is not a game of chance, however, is our earthly reality, which we share with all living creatures on this planet. Creation is real togetherness. We humans are not exceptional in that regard; we are, as the American conservationist Aldo Leopold has said, "plain members and citizens" of the natural world. We are part of God's creation; we are not the exceptions to it.

Except. Except in one important respect. The same tradition that tells us that we share the fate of all of earth's creatures in our creatureliness says more. The same book of the Bible that tells us that we are forever arising from and returning to the dust tells us also that we, and we alone, are created in the image and likeness of God, that we are created resembling the creator in some way that no other creature does.

And in the context of the story in which we find that statement, the only thing we've seen the divine creator do is create – graciously create – and perhaps that comes closest to telling us what it means for us to be created in God's image: we, too, can be gracious creators. Not reproducers – we share that capacity with our living neighbors – but creatures capable of exercising grace by creating a world of beauty and abundance, security and wholeness, not only for themselves, but for other living things also.

Human beings bear the image of our divine creator, who created just such a world not out of necessity, but out of grace, out of love. There is no necessary reason for us to be here. For any of it to be here. We don't exist from necessity; we exist from grace. We and all created beings exist because God wills us into existence for our good. God created all living creatures from the earth, breathed into all of them the same breath of life, and gave to one of those creatures – us – the grace to live beyond instinct by caring for all the others.

We celebrated our love of our country last week. This week we celebrate our love of God's creation by recognizing its integrity. Integrity of Creation Sunday is set aside to remind us that creation has an integrity all its own, completely apart from our wants and desires and use. Creation has, in the words of Thomas Merton, "a hidden wholeness," and if we ignore that wholeness, that integrity, and tear at the fabric of creation for our enrichment or for our amusement or for our entertainment or to control others or just from plain mindlessness, we injure creation and we thereby injure ourselves.

For too long, we have lived with the myth, often unspoken, that what happens to creation doesn't happen to us, that we are somehow separate from creation; we know now that this is a destructive and self-destructive myth, and that when we abuse creation, we harm ourselves both physically and spiritually. We are beginning to realize, finally, that the more we tear ourselves from the web of life woven for us by God, the more we endanger our survival and the survival of many other creatures. We are beginning to realize, finally, that the more we live out of harmony with God's world – God's natural world no less than God's spiritual world of justice and righteousness and peace – the more we live out of harmony with God.

"Consider the lilies of the field," Jesus told us, "how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

Can there be any greater assertion of creation's integrity, creation's hidden wholeness, than in those words of Jesus? In seeing the true beauty of the lilies, the one who saves us from our sins of racism, sexism, violence and greed saves us also from the sin of exceptionalism – the sin of seeing ourselves apart from, rather than a part of, God's wondrous and glorious creation.

Our words about loving God and our neighbor ring hollow if we do not love them through creation; we have no other option. How we treat and share earth's resources, how we care for environments not our own, how we protect and honor the earth for those creatures, human and non-human, who share the earth with us and will come after us – these are the ways we show our love of God and love of one another.

I leave you with Jesus' words from elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew, about the end of time. I read them often at funerals to remind us of what Jesus considered of paramount importance. They are famous words that conclude, "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." We always think that Jesus meant we are to care for the sick, visit the imprisoned, and clothe the naked, and he did and we should.

But the least of those who are Jesus' family – the least of those who do the will of his heavenly father, which is how he described the members of his family – may be those whose voices are drowned out by our concern for human welfare and our relentless enveloping of ourselves in unnecessary manufactured sound. The least of Jesus' family may be the lilies of the field – and the salamanders in the ponds and the pine trees on the mountains. What we do to the least of them surely will reflect – and perhaps betray – our love for him. Let us pray.

Hear our humble prayer, O God, for our friends the animals, especially for animals who are suffering. . . . Make us, ourselves, to be true friends to animals, and so to share the blessings of the merciful. Amen. (Albert Schweitzer)