

# Caring for the Earth Rests in the Heart of God

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Before the first crushed Schlitz beer can was recovered in a ditch near Obit Idim, Nigeria, the care of the earth was a Christological question. Necessity often drives us before Christ moves us, also in matters environmental. The need to recycle beer cans in Nigeria or in Vladivostok is great. Our human mad garbage, expensive garbage but garbage still, now rests also on the moon and dances with the stars. The necessity to recycle is great. The necessity of Christ, "through whom all things were created" is prior and greater still.

Before we ask how we shall care for the earth, we need to ask if there is an earth to care for, and for how long. Neither vodka nor prayer can adulterate the sense of urgency. Remember the earnestness urged by none other than Albert Einstein, "Since Hiroshima, everything has changed except our thinking."

While our care for the earth improves, we may only be "arranging deck chairs on the Titanic," as the cliché has it. "Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" asks T.S. Eliot. Are we giving answers to questions not being asked?

We cannot assume that we or the congregations are automatically clear on the purpose of all creation. "Care of the earth" questions had best go that deep, lest they and we become victims of one more "accent week," like "telephone operators week." When purpose is lost, we diddle with the cosmetic: a shampoo, a hair restyling, "doing our nails," hoping Chanel No. 5 will cover the leprosy.

"When the stranger asks, 'What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle close together because you love each other?' What will you answer? 'We all dwell together to make money from each other?' or 'This is a community?'" asks T.S. Eliot. "The business of democracy is business," said a former president, not given to poetry.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," is not just a cereal shout. We act on it or we die. "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty, Heaven and earth are full of your glory," is not just the perpetual winner of the annual gospel "sing down" trophy. The cosmos, the earth is the arena in which God reveals who God is and how God works.

From the beginning God has done combat with formlessness and void. Having created ex nihilo, God put people in charge and watched in horror as Adam and Eve preferred void and chaos. "Chaos is better for business." People, even the people of God, still today, often regard God's creation as an enemy. Rivers, oceans, lakes, mountains, deserts are to be subdued and enslaved. The mother who births us and nourishes us is a monster we are to subdue.

After God's first plans disintegrated, God moved to restoration and re-creation. "Perhaps they will listen to my Son," God mused. They didn't listen, of course, not many, not often, then seldom with clarity and understanding. But God does not give up easily. In a daring move God now involves us in the work of reconciling all things through Christ.

". . . the astounding fact is that God becomes the Economist in the sense of housekeeper, homemaker, the steward, the diakonos, or the household slave. The epitome of this claim is found in Jesus who 'though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a [household slave, doulos] . . .' (Phil. 2, 6-7)

"God overcomes human mastery by becoming a slave. God overcomes the scarcity of what it takes to live by becoming the Household Slave, by seeking to distribute to all what it takes to live and live abundantly. God opens up the household which has been closed to the homeless by becoming the Economist.

"God in Jesus performs the lowest and dirtiest work conceivable by taking upon Godself the sin and evil of all human beings . . . . God overcomes death by taking death into the divine communal life. Thus the center of God's economy is found in the cross of Christ (I Cor. 5:14-15) . . . . The proclamation, ministry, and death of Jesus show that God's economy is the gifting of righteousness through God's own self-giving. In Jesus Christ God is seeking to call into being and sustain an oikos in which all of God's creatures will have access to life."

Sounds good. Sound usual. Sounds easy. Until the poet Neruda calls for "the simply justice of eating."

Hunger is a cold fire-  
let us sit down to eat  
with all those who haven't eaten  
Let us spread great tablecloths  
put salt in the lakes of the world  
set up planetary bakeries  
tables with strawberries in snow  
and a plate like the moon itself  
from which we all can eat-  
for now I ask no more  
than the justice of eating.

*-Pablo Neruda*

How many will go to bed tonight not only hungry but starving? Will Campbell tells of a retreat where silence was a salient feature.

From ten at night to noon the next day, no one would speak. As we sat at breakfast, enjoying the finest Colombian coffee, English muffins, Canadian bacon, grapefruit already sectioned, pointing

at platters and making ridiculous gestures, something took hold in me. "To hell with this bullshit!" I screamed, slamming my fist against the table. The startled group looked on with silent disapproval. Finally one said, "You broke the silence. Why did you break the silence?"

The words which followed were not my own. I had some brief understanding of glossolalia as I explained without even thinking of word or form. "I broke the silence because more than half the people in the world can't enjoy the luxury of worship. If this be worship. How can a mother or father maintain silence while pushing and scrounging and screaming for possession of half a cup of rice to feed their starving babies. I broke the silence because the wine and the wafer which will slide down our pious gullets at the alleged altar tomorrow morning will contain more calories than that half of that the world will get all day."

In the judgment day scene our Lord speaks of the simply justice of eating.

Our creation is of earth. Jesus became part of the earth he had made. Our baptism is of earth-water. The Lord's supper, our nurturance, is of earth-bread and wine. In death "we are, all, to return to earth."

"When we eat and drink the Lord's Supper," writes Robert McAfee Brown, "that unites us with all others who eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. And it unites us with all others who simply eat and drink. And it unites us with all others who would eat if they only had something to eat and who would drink if they only had something to drink."

We co-inhere in one another. "In Adam we have all be one." (Hymn 372, LBW) "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female. We are all one in Christ." "We live from whomever. We even live from our enemies," says Charles Williams.

"The towel is a chief symbol of God's new creation of persons within the household of God." In Jesus' taking up the towel, God's power for life is disclosed as servanthood. The household is constituted by diakonia, by the mutual self-giving of the persons of the household in service to each other. Diakonia is not simply church members serving each other. Rather it is the praxis by which Christian disciples learn how to engage in the economic work of God in the world."

The Thanksgiving and Christmas turkey are not history. Recycling crushed beer cans is not history. Neither is preaching that engineers metanoia. Nor is preaching of the cross of Christ that emboldens us "to dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that God has made."

"We must love one another or die."

All that I have is a voice  
to undo the folded lie,  
The Romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual man-in-the-street  
and the lie of Authority  
Whose buildings grope the sky:

There is no such a thing as the State  
And no one exists alone;  
Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police;  
WE MUST LOVE ONE ANOTHER OR DIE.  
Defenseless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet dotted everywhere  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and dust,  
Beleaguered by negation and despair

*-W. H. Auden, from "September 1, 1939"*