

Costly Offerings

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Apparently, she had a hard time color-coordinating her wardrobe. Not that it was anything fancy: usually a T-shirt emblazoned with some statement about justice, worn over a simple skirt. She was diminutive, and soft spoken, the gray hair from her 73 years worn short, framing her face, so often full of joy. She was a spunky little woman who grew up in a large Catholic family in Dayton, Ohio. At 17, she joined the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, a religious order devoted to teaching the poor – especially young women and children. After some time in the States, she moved to Brazil, eventually, to the Amazon region, where for some 25 years, enough to make her a naturalized citizen of Brazil, she devoted herself to helping the peasants form fruit cooperatives and to lobbying the government tirelessly in support of a sustainable development model that would not destroy the rainforest. Her nephew said she was the most special person he had ever met, “the closest link to heaven on earth”. A niece remarked that her life was Christianity in the highest form, saying, “She loved the Earth, its people and God, fiercely”.

She would hold up a Bible in two hands and say to those who warned her about the death threats, that this was the only weapon she needed. As the two gunmen approached her she opened it. Some witnesses say she started reciting the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the peacemakers”. The gunmen shot her in the face three times. And then three times more as her body went down.

They were hired by a rancher to kill her – because she was in the way of the lucrative logging. She had defended the huge, magnificent trees and the small community of poor settlers who wanted to simply live sustainably and at peace with them. The rainforest and peasants – she laid down her life for them.

As you may have heard me say before, I do not like the concept of Earth Day because I think it greatly trivializes what are life and death struggles – not only for human martyrs to the cause, like Dorothy Stang, whose life and death I just described, but for thousands upon thousands of other people, other beings and other ecosystems whose existence is threatened or destroyed every day on the altar of individual and corporate greed. “Earth Day”. What if Earth decided it was going to have only one “People Day” a year? We just don't seem to get it yet: “The environment” is not just one among many other issues for a few politicians and some concerned citizens to rally around. The environment is not an “issue” at all. It is . . . simply . . . our reality. As such, it is not just about birds, recycling and wilderness preservation. In addition to the lilies of the field, it is about peace and about poverty and about the planet Earth.

So I remain mystified why many people talk about “the environment” only once a year, and I remain mystified why it was not a more important part of the last election, and I remain

mystified why many, though not all, communities of faith across the theological spectrum – from conservative to liberal – ignore the rather seminal point at the beginning of the Bible: that it is God’s creation, not ours, and that it is all good. Not just the parts we humans happen to need or like.

And I remain mystified why some 2000 years after the stoning of Stephen described in our text for today, we are still killing prophets. Those prophets that point out to us the relationship between peace, poverty and Planet Earth are in the same tradition as St. Stephen – they are still speaking truth to power, they just have some new things to say. After all, “God is still speaking” . . . as the wonderful new slogan of the United Church of Christ attests. And God’s prophets are still speaking, and we still kill them. We may not always shoot them in the face – as the gunmen did to Dorothy Stang – but we discredit, ridicule, dismiss, persecute and above all else – simply ignore – these prophets every day.

You see, we really don’t like their message. “Doom and gloom” – that’s often what the environmental prophets are accused of. Water, air, soil, trash, and now you want me to worry about the climate of the whole earth? Plu – leese. I’ve got lots of more immediate worries on my hands. Fergetaboutit. Go away. Maybe I’ll think about it tomorrow, or maybe next week.

“You stiff-necked people,” said St. Stephen to the law-abiding, but status-quo-preserving officials around him, “uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do.”

It’s tough to be a prophet, but it’s also tough to hear what a prophet has to say. .

So what exactly do we do, as people of faith, in response to the modern-day environmental prophets, to not oppose the Holy Spirit?

There is a phrase that is part of the daily office of the Iona Community that I think is very helpful here:

“We will not offer to God offerings that cost us nothing.”

I have thought about this phrase a lot. It has always made me a little uncomfortable, (which, of course, is exactly what it is meant to do).

At face value – it seems to say - if it doesn’t hurt, if it doesn’t “cost” me something, it is not worthy of being offered to God. How do I feel about that? Does it mean that God demands something painful from me, such as suffering unjustly, as described in the letter from Peter today? Does it mean that if I give only from my surplus, I get no brownie points in the ledger of God? Is this really about, (gasp), sacrifice?

Yah, I think that is what it is about.

But sacrifice is a really, really loaded word, especially among people of faith, and it has mountains of theological baggage surrounding it, so just for the moment, let's just stick with the concept of "cost".

"We will not offer to God offerings that cost us nothing."

We do things that "cost" us something every day. We make choices – some big ones – like selling a house – some little ones, like turning down this path rather than that one, on our walk with the dog in the morning. The "cost" is giving up the alternative. So this is essentially about choices. For you to figure out are what choices you make, where they are on the spectrum of "doing good by the rest of Creation" and how much pain it causes you.

But I'd like to suggest a guiding thought here: The simplest "cost" that you can offer to God with respect to peace, poverty and planet Earth is your need to be counted as an individual instead of as a member of the whole community of God. It is, in a sense, the sacrifice of "self", it is the "cost" of living among a community of other beings and ecosystems. It is not about you or me, it is about us. It is not about our needs as human beings, for oil, water, food, or even security from terrorists, it is about our collective needs as co-inhabitants of planet Earth. It is not about the health just of the particular ecosystems in which we live, it is about the whole climatic system. I believe that this is what seeking God's Dominion on Earth means: It means that for those of us with much, we "live simply, that others may simply live."

Our offering to God may not be of our life – as it was with Dorothy Stang - but when a choice is set before us, especially before those of us who have many, many, many, choices – when a choice is set before us – to recycle, to eat lower on the food chain, to conserve energy, to drive a more fuel efficient vehicle, we will not offer to God the easiest and simplest choice for us as an individual. As near as we can, we will offer to God what is best for the whole of God's community. In a sense, it is our contribution, our "cost", indeed, our share, in the ongoing process of creation.

Now – I have to add something here before I stop – so as not to get me into too much trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities. God does love us as individuals. God heals us and listens to us, weeps and laughs with us. God lures us and is with each of us. God shepherds us, leads us beside still waters and in and out of the sheepfolds of daily life. That is the nature of God. But we are sadly mistaken if we think that is ever at the expense of the community as a whole. Dorothy Stang was loved and shepherded by God as an individual, but because she offered to God offerings that in the end cost her her life, 20,000 square miles of Amazon rainforest land is under federal environmental protection and logging has been suspended in some hotly disputed areas. She died, but a part of the rainforest and the people within it, lives.

We will not offer to God offerings that cost us nothing, for by choosing "cost", we are absorbed into the very process of God's forever becoming something new.