

Finding Our Place

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We've just heard in Matthew that God expects us to care for those who, for whatever reason, are powerless to care for themselves. We are called to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those who are imprisoned. This passage makes it very clear that we are expected to care for the "least" of those who are members of God's family. I am going to begin today by speaking about one of the least members of God's family: worms.

Now, most of us probably don't think too much about worms (except for when it rains and dead worm bodies are strewn about the sidewalk). I, however, have had reason to think quite a bit about worms this year, as they are of central importance to one of my field sites. I'll share more about that a little later, but for now I want to share some about these very important creatures.

Although they serve other important functions, worms also help with the process of decomposition. Alongside other organisms, they turn dead matter into life-giving soil. After eating organic waste, the matter passes through the worm's digestive tract, coming out the other end as worm castings. I'll spare you the details, but the worm's digestive process (which involves a host of other organisms) filters out harmful substances and adds and retains nutrients that are important for healthy plant life. The worm castings are an important component of healthy soil.

Learning about the relationship between worm droppings and healthy soil has led me to reflect on our spiritual and physical relationship to worms. What, you may ask, does worm poop have to do with who we are as humans? Let's look back to the Genesis passage. The second creation story in Genesis 2:7 tells us that "the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." The Hebrew makes this relationship between the soil and the man even more clear. The word for "man" is *adamah* (or Adam), and the word for ground is *adamah*; *adam* is formed from *adamah*. Here, in the NRSV, *adamah* is translated as "ground"; but as Ted Hiebert points out, it is better understood as "arable soil," or soil that is good for farming. Thus we come back to the worms. Now, I know that the wild animals and birds were not created until a few verses later, but I wonder if the worms weren't already around, helping create some of that good soil that the first human was made of. In any case, the ongoing, cyclic relationship between humans and worms is evident in Gen. 3:19, when God tells Adam that he will return to the soil, for "you are dust, and to dust you shall return." When humans die, their bodies feed the worms, and worms help decompose the bodies to create soil that is food for plants. In turn, the plants do their photosynthesis thing, turning energy from the sun into food energy that the rest of the food chain can use. All of these plants and creatures die in turn, and are decomposed into the soil, renewing the connection between death and life.

We humans do not always like to be reminded of our own inevitable mortality and of our inclusion in the rhythm and ongoing cycle of nature. Nowadays in the United States, we don't even allow the worms and other decomposers to get at our bodies and do their job. We humans tend to set ourselves outside of, and over and above nature. We want to control it to our own purposes. We use and abuse and destroy. Not all cultures have had this antagonistic attitude towards nature. Many indigenous peoples have recognized the interrelationship of everything in creation. These cultures respect the intrinsic value of all creatures; and while they use what is necessary to their survival, they use nature in more sustainable ways, hoping to maintain a future for seven or more generations ahead. In general, however, Christianity has not had such a respectable track record. In fact, we have somehow taken God's authorization for human dominion (found in the first creation story) to mean that we can abuse and annihilate anything for which we see no use or purpose.

Even the most basic cycle that we have looked at today shows that our lives are interconnected with a myriad of other beings — most of whom we don't give a single, let alone a second thought. These are some of the "least" of God's family; the powerless and voiceless who cry out for justice and a right to life. We humans are covering over land, chopping down forests, and poisoning and destroying the homes and habitats of countless species. We are polluting rivers and lakes and oceans, destroying the source of drinking water for many species, as well as the habitat for others. We are imprisoning wild animals in smaller and smaller areas that can no longer sustain them. More and more species become extinct every day. And with every species that becomes extinct, we cut off the food supply to other species, as well as destroy whatever functions that creature served within its ecosystem. Natural systems are so complex and interconnected, that the loss of one species can seriously affect a whole ecosystem. We all need this natural complexity and biodiversity in order to maintain a healthy, living system. But in our desire to manage and control and grow beyond our means, we destroy complex ecosystems, replacing them with simple monocultures and artificial systems that seriously damage any chances for healthy, sustainable ways of living.

It is becoming increasingly clear that our current way of living on this earth is not sustainable. Due to human use and abuse, the amount of farmable land, safe drinking water, and energy resources are being depleted. For instance, at our current level of usage, it is estimated that within the next 50 years, 80% of the world's oil reserves will be gone. And at the same time that our usable resources are being depleted, the world's population is growing beyond the carrying capacity of the earth. One hundred years ago there were 1.5 billion people on the earth; today we have reached 6 billion people; within the next one hundred years — even by moderate estimates — we could reach 10-12 billion. Our current course will most likely take us to catastrophic levels within the lifetime of a child born today. We are not considering the needs of our future generations. To make the situation even more ominous sounding, (and despite what our current president believes), global warming is occurring even more rapidly than scientists estimated. While there are a million different scenarios for what the ramifications of global warming might be, none of them are optimistic.

The enormity and immediacy of our ecological problems has recently hit me full force. I mourn the loss of amazing and wonderful species and ecosystems. I mourn the loss of our spiritual

connection to nature. I mourn the possible death of life-as-we-know-it on this earth. I especially mourn for my 8-year-old niece, Zoe, who is the closest thing I have to my own daughter. Yet, while I mourn for Zoe because she is the one I most want to protect, I realize that she will not be the first person to be affected by all of these terrible changes. The first to be affected will always be the poor and powerless, within our country, but especially in other countries. Poor and powerless peoples have been and continue to be the victims of environmental racism and ecological injustices. They too are the "least" whom Jesus tells us to care for. Yet we degrade and violate the powerless and destroy their means for living in order to meet the unquenchable desires of the rich and powerful.

This is where I bring the sermon back down to us and where we are. We are the rich and powerful of the world. While many people within the US are just trying to survive, most of us live a lifestyle that is much more comfortable, convenient, consumptive and wasteful than that of the majority of the rest of the world. Our current lifestyles are not globally sustainable. If everyone in the world were to have the typical US lifestyle, we would need four planets to meet our usage. While we make up only 5% of the earth's population, we consume 30% of the earth's resources. And our thoughtless over consumption of energy is a major contributor to the carbon dioxide emissions that play a large part in the rapidly advancing onset of global warming. Can we honestly justify our comfortable lifestyles that deny life to humans and other beings? Unlike so much of the earth's population, we are in the position to make choices about how we live. But by failing to recognize the choices we are making, we harm and kill others. By not choosing to cut back on our personal energy use, we are choosing to emit dangerous amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. By not choosing to cut back on our meat consumption, we are choosing to tie up land that could much more efficiently serve basic food needs of millions of people. By not choosing to buy organically grown food, we are choosing to poison soils and waters and countless beings (including ourselves) who depend on healthy soil and water. We need to be much more intentional about the life choices we are making.

We must make dramatic changes in the way that we live and think. But we must also understand the enormity of the task before us. It is almost too big. If we really try to grasp the full import of our ecological situation of the present and not-so-distant future, we may despair, or try to hide or run away because we do not know what is to be done. This is where faith communities come into place. The task of challenging the status quo in order to live more sustainably calls us to look beyond our own immediate needs and desires, to look to the very real life needs of the stranger — both human and non-human — sharing the earth with us today and in the future. Faith communities can and do call us to care for others, as is apparent in our reading in Matthew. They can do so because they believe in a higher good. They also believe in the possibility of transformation, of turning around from the path we have been following. Equally as important, in the Christian faith tradition, is hope. Even though we might not be optimistic about the chances for social or ecological justice, we believe that gracious God is with us, and we hope for the fulfillment of God's rule on this earth. But in order to begin moving people in a way of living that is more loving and sustainable for all of earth's creatures, we need to create new paradigms — new ways of thinking about how the world really works, and how we are called to live in this place called earth.

We, as present and future leaders within faith communities, need to help develop creation-friendly theologies, spiritualities, ethics, and liturgies. We — especially in the Christian tradition — need to challenge our own destructive traditions while building on life-friendly possibilities within our tradition. I want to offer two possible models which come out of our readings for today.

First, let us revisit the Genesis passage. God formed the first human and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. The Hebrew word for "keep" is *shamar*. It has the meaning of to watch over or preserve, as in "May the Lord bless you and keep you." The word for "till" is *abad*. When used in connection with the land or soil, it carries this meaning of tilling or working the ground. But the more common meaning of *abad* is to labor or do work, or to serve as a servant or slave. Let's think of *abad* as meaning "to serve." What might it mean if the first person's function within God's creation was not only to farm and care for the garden, but also to serve and protect the soil from which he was formed? What might it mean for us to serve and protect and preserve this wonderful creation that has given us being?

The second model for our place in God's creation comes from the passage in Job. The book of Job has a very high view of nature. This is especially apparent in God's long-winded response to Job's complaints. God answers Job's questions by questioning Job's understanding of the workings of God's creation. In particular, God lifts up the amazing and unique lives and habitats of wild animals who do not mix in any way with humans. This is not a picture of animals and elements that can be harnessed for use by humans; this is a picture of the beauty and intrinsic worth of everything within God's creation.

Our reading in Job 12 advises us to learn from the animals, the birds of the air, the plants of the earth, and the fish of the sea; they know that God is the source of every living being. They worship God by being what God created them to be. I think that the animals and plants have something else to teach us: limits. Within their natural ecosystems, plants and animals play certain roles within their eco-community. They are in a balanced relationship with every other strand of the intricate web of creation, and they do not overstep the bounds of their place in the natural system. While this is a very simplistic picture, in a healthy, dynamic ecosystem, each species is continually being brought into a healthy balance. The problem arises when a foreign species is transferred to an ecosystem where it does not know its place. One foreign species can come to dominate, greatly altering and damaging an ecosystem.

We humans are like a foreign species; we generally do not know our place within the natural systems. We want to alter and control nature for our own purposes without placing limitations upon ourselves. Especially within the US, we worship personal freedom over against healthy communities, national interests over against global interests, and human interests over against the interests of the vast majority of God's creation. We don't like limitations. Neither did Adam and Eve. But we, as people of faith, need to find wise uses for our freedom, which involves placing wise limitations on ourselves. This does not have to be a negative experience. The joy and beauty of it all is that we can find the Spirit of God in the faithful changes we make in our lives. Finding an intentionally simpler, more sustainable way of living can lead to a slower, more focused and less frenetic way of life that allows more room for rest, relationships, connection to our local

communities, contemplation of natural beauty and relationships, and a deeper spiritual connection to this thing called life.

So where do we go from here? There isn't one answer to this question, but a million different answers. Certainly we need to act on every level from individual lifestyle to governmental policy. But it's important not to get stuck by this daunting undertaking. I want to challenge each one of us, including myself, to thoughtfully and seriously consider changes that we should be making in our own lives. But I also want to encourage us to consider ways that we can make our own congregations and communities more sustainable and life affirming.

Now, back to the worms. This year I have been working with the Interreligious Sustainability Project, basically doing community organizing around sustainability issues. The people within each community that we work with decide what issues they would like to address. The people in Humboldt Park (a predominantly Latino, lower income neighborhood) wanted to find a safe activity for their kids that would help keep them away from the danger of gangs. So they have become a project of the Heifer Project, with the intention of doing worm farming, fish farming, and community gardening. We'll focus on the worms. In order to provide a safe space, the worm boxes are placed at a number of sites, so the children do not have to cross gang boundaries. The children are responsible for feeding and caring for the worms. The worms produce castings that the children can sell as compost to gardening stores, or use to improve the health of their own gardens. Through this venture, the children learn more about responsibility, as well as dealing professionally with adults and managing money. Plus they will have a source of income. The children are also learning some of the wonderful ecological lessons that worms in particular can teach about the cycle of life. And although the initial reaction to meeting the worms is "yuck," the kids are really drawn to the worms and are excited about dealing with them.

This project is sustainable on a variety of levels. For one, it is turning kitchen scraps that would have been wasted — what we might consider garbage — into life-giving soil. This soil sustains not only plant life, but also for some of the economic needs of persons within Humboldt Park. The project teaches ecological sustainability, while also working towards social sustainability within the Humboldt Park community. Also, the Humboldt Park group has come into relationship with the other Heifer Project communities in Pilsen and at the Robert Taylor Homes. While this project may seem pretty small in the overall scheme of things, it is actually very exciting in all that it is doing, and it has given me a glimmer of hope. I find in the workings of these kids' worm farms the grace, and love, and humor of an awesome God. I get a glimpse of God's peaceable rule on earth.

We have reached a most crucial juncture in earth's history. The choices we make today will affect the viability of life for countless people and other species. We do well to fear this death; but we are also reminded, particularly in this Easter season, that death does not have the last word. We are also reminded by flowers and grasses that sprout from bare ground, by bright green leaves that bud from lifeless-looking branches, and by birds who sing and court and prepare to create new life, that the cycle of life continues. May we learn to love, and serve, and protect all of God's good creation. May we open our hearts, and minds, and lives to finding our true place within this community called earth.