

Matter Matters

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There is a new state park in Manhattan-Riverbank State Park-aptly named, for it sprawls along the banks of the Hudson River on the edge of Harlem. Yet, the park isn't exactly on the banks of the river rather up above the river-but not on a hill. This new park is not really on the ground. Strange, but true. This park-complete with trees, ice skating rink, running track, concession stands, fields of grass, walkways-is not on the ground: It is on the sewage treatment plant. One of the largest public works projects in this country, the expansive gray building with a park on top treats waste water on its way to the Hudson River. While kids skate, the water flows. Beneath the bikes and trikes of summer, the water flows. Under the slam dunks, under the park bench where lovers kiss, under the playground laughter-the water flows and the Hudson River begins to come back to life.

Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.

Oh, Ezekiel, you were ahead of your time! But you weren't thinking about the Hudson River water treatment facility, were you? The water in your vision is flowing from the temple, from the throne of God. The sacred river, the river shared by many cultures, the river later flowing in the visions of Revelation.

Shall we gather at the river,

The beautiful, the beautiful river?

Shall we gather at the river that flows by the throne of God?

We can try. But it's hard to gather on the shore of a metaphor.

This river is a metaphor, isn't it? Purifying waters, cleansing the people of Judah. This vision comes from God-and from what you have seen, Ezekiel. Waters stagnant as the Dead Sea, the memory of an oasis in a barren place, rivers teeming with fish. But Ezekiel, you didn't expect us to take this picture literally. This is no river flowing under the temple door (there isn't even a temple, let alone a temple door!) This is the stuff of visions: promises in the midst of mourning,, hope springing up from despair like your other vision-dry bones rattling to their feet, bone to bone, sinew to sinew, skeletons breathed back to life again. But not literally. And this vision, not literal either. God will purify and renew the people, not the river.

Ezekiel, after all, was not writing a social statement on the environment.

But what if Ezekiel's vision was larger than he could see-even with his ecstatic wisdom? (Did God offer visions deeper than the prophets could fully understand? Is God waiting for others to

fill them in? Bring new meaning? Is there a river here after all?) I have not come to psychoanalyze Ezekiel-but I am intrigued and delighted by his mention of the marshes:

But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt.

An early plea on behalf of the wetlands? Surely Ezekiel didn't know what Lutheran pastor Sharon Betcher knows-that wetlands "which include marshes, bogs, sloughs, flood plains and swamps, are the richest ecosystems on earth. 75% of American bird species depend on roosting in wetlands; 90% of oceanic life begins in estuaries." Don't mess with the marsh! Or is the marsh a metaphor?

A metaphor always points somewhere, moving us from the familiar to the strange, connecting words/images/ideas to expand the way we see. Scripture is filled with metaphors from the created world-water flowing in the desert, flowers springing up in the wilderness, vineyards planted and ruined, mustard seeds and rising dough, a shoot growing from a stump clean cut off. But usually we remove the metaphors too quickly from their earthly roots. Ezekiel's river isn't really a river. The metaphors go only one way-up, up, up to a spiritual world freed of matter. And they never come down to earth again.

Dr. Joseph Sittler, whose name we remember in particular ways during this convocation, spent a lifetime trying to bring us back to earth. He spoke the word ecology before it was in the newspapers or college catalogues; he connected the words ecology and faith. He wanted us not only to see the world, but to behold the world and be changed, saying "With our minds we look at things, but in the spirit of our minds we behold things. To behold a thing means to regard it in its particularity-its infinite preciousness, irreplaceability, and beauty."

Dr. Sittler would ask us to behold the river. Wade in the water, children! For Sittler, theology was not a stagnant pool; it was always moving somewhere:

By theology we mean not only a having but a doing-not only an accumulated tradition, but a present task which must be done on the playing field of each generation in actual life. One has a theology, to a greater or lesser extent, on order to do theology.

Dr. Sittler invited pastors and teachers to do what we're doing during these days-to bring new conversation partners into the metaphors of faith. "People will stand fishing from En-ge-di to En-eglaim"-maybe even someday in the Hudson River! Can Ezekiel's vision move back to earth as well as away? A new conversation is desperately needed: Hebrew scholars and theologians, urban rangers and fishery experts, environmentalists and parish pastors, lovers of wetlands and seminary professors. All in the same circle.

Maybe there's a river here after all. And, if a river, maybe a table, too. (Careful, don't mix your metaphors.)

Is Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man a metaphor? Is it a parable pointing to heavenly promises beyond earth's miseries? Are all those banquets in Luke metaphors for an abundant spiritual life? Or did Jesus really mean that the blind and the lame, the poor and the maimed would eat at the table? Is there any table here? Is there a rich man feasting sumptuously, never seeing (let alone beholding) Lazarus?

Sallie McFague, in her book *The Body of God* wants us to see the table, and the people:

Jesus' eating stories and practices suggest that physical needs are basic and must be met-food is not a metaphor here but should be taken literally.

A bit later in the same chapter she insists: "The body of God must be fed." In the Church we have spent centuries focusing on the real presence of Christ at the communion table-but what about the real presence of food on the table for all of the world's people? Is that only a matter of politics-or is that, too, a matter of doing theology?

What sort of theology is McFague doing? No doubt there are many Lutheran theologians who are uncomfortable with the central image of her book-the world as the body of God. It moves to close to pantheism for some. It is too bodily, too feminist, too Native American, too New Age. But what do we mean when we speak of "the body of Christ"? Is this a spiritual image? Is there any flesh on this metaphor?

What happens when we begin to talk about the colors of this body of Christ? Can we fully see the body of Christ reflected in only one color? What happens when we struggle with what it means to move our Lutheran church toward greater diversity? Is this a theological commitment, a longing to be more fully the body of Christ-or is it solely, as some charge, a political agenda? "Let's get back to the Gospel!" we hear over and over. But what Gospel is it that has no body?

The recent uproar over the Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis (November, 1993) bears witness to our fear of bringing bodily metaphors down to earth (and into worship!) Critics have raged over the words of the closing liturgy-words that celebrated women's bodies. No doubt some who spoke and heard those words at the conference were embarrassed or at least surprised. (Dare I say it here? There were some who were also delighted, even ecstatic!) But those who have protested the loudest have been disgusted and outraged, calling the liturgy pornographic, self-indulgent, hedonistic. Perhaps we wouldn't choose the same body-affirming litany for use in worship Sunday after Sunday. But since November, I have asked myself the question: when do we ever hear words that affirm the body in liturgy? Do we ever thank and praise God for our physical, bodily selves? for arms that embrace, for muscle and bone? for our senses? for sexual pleasure? Is the body too disgusting? Must we transform bodies into metaphors?

Bodies matter to God. Matter matters. Until we can proclaim that wondrous truth, ecology will be a sidelight to our pastoring and preaching,, our theologies and liturgies-as in the phrase, "Oh, I'm not into ecology." (Perhaps that's why this conference itself almost had to be canceled!) But the Gospel to which we return again and again is a Word embodied . This Word is not a

metaphor. Incarnation calls us into the heart of God, but the Word made flesh also blesses this earth as holy ground. Matter matters-wetlands and rivers, wheat fields and dough rising, people dancing in the aisles and people sleeping in the streets of our cities.

Matter matters to God. It is this strong biblical affirmation that we bring into the conversation circle. Most of us in this auditorium are not experts on ecosystems or global warming. But we believe the metaphors of faith are deeply rooted in this earth-God does not disdain matter in favor of a spiritual realm. Bodies matter to God.

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold (Ezekiel 47:1a).

Water flowing down over the baptismal font, splashing the acolyte holding the green book, soaking the carpet all the way to the front door-then out into the streets and on into Lake Michigan, soaking into the water table, flowing , flowing even into the Hudson River. Nearby, the children of Harlem play in the park on top of the water treatment plant. Later they will run home to eat-food on the table and a roof over their heads. And Lazarus, who had been lying on the stoop, comes in to sit beside us at the table of God.

"Pass the bread, please," he says.

The body of Christ given for you, Lazarus.

He takes and he eats. And he knows it is more than a metaphor