

Week Five

March 25

RECONCILIATION: What is the "matrix of grace" and where are we in it?

Texts: Col 1:15-20 [21-23]; Is 65:17-25; Ps 104:1-5, 10-30; 2 Cor 5:17-19

Introduction – Restoring right relationship in a grace-filled web of connection

(may be read aloud or printed in bulletin or displayed on a screen)

He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. [Col 1:15-17, 19-20]

Here is grace: that Christ freely died for us and reconciled us (and all things) to God.

That reconciliation marked the onset of the restoration of *relationship* for humanity and all of creation, with God and potentially with one another, and all “held together” in Christ. Even in the traditional pastoral greeting, we find this grace and inter-relationship: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Ecologically, we know that all things *are* inter-connected; and theologically, we have this wonderful phrase from Colossians 1 that in Christ “all things hold together.” Interconnections come to mind in the image of a “matrix,” which is the term used by the late Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, in his prophetic 1954 essay *A Theology for Earth*. Reflecting on one of his favorite psalms, Psalm 104, Sittler noted and praised the balance, interconnections, and providence of God in creation, describing it as a “matrix of grace in which all things derive significance from their origin, and all things find fulfillment in praise.”

The “hymn of all creation” expresses that fulfillment and praise. As humanity, we have a special place and role in that “hymn.” We dwell within that “matrix of grace” through the saving love of Christ; and we are called by Christ and gifted by the Spirit, to continue that reconciliation of all things, in the restoration of right relationship among peoples and with all of creation.
God’s Work, Our Hands.

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Greeting

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom all things hold together;
The love of God our Creator; and
The enlivening breath and communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all!
(Response) **And also with you.**

Opening Litany of Prayer

(Read responsively)

Let us pray:
Ever-living God, you created the Earth and all that is in it and found it very good.

Forgive us all that we have done to harm the Earth and one another.

God of life and love, you created all that exists to sustain life on the Earth, human life and all forms of life, and the landscapes and ecological systems that underlie all life.

Forgive us for squandering the incredible natural riches of this Earth, using your creation as if it were merely a collection of objects for our use alone.

God of grace, you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile all things, making peace by the blood of his cross, and making us ambassadors of his will for restored relationships.

Forgive us for not truly understanding what it means to live abundantly in the richness of relationships built on justice, peace, compassion, and sustainable inter-relationship with all of your creation.

God of mercy and hope, forgive us for our apathy and arrogance, short-sightedness and greed, that contribute greatly to the suffering of others and the harming of your creation. Bless our time of gathering here, and speak to us in this time of worship and in the days to come, that in our hearts we may hear and understand what you call us to do to help heal your world.

Give us the wisdom, compassion, and courage to do all that we can to restore, preserve, and protect your creation. All praise and glory are yours, now and forever, Amen.

- Adapted from the prayer litany in
Awakening to God's Call to Earthkeeping,
by Kim Winchell (ELCA, 2006), p. 26.

Gathering Song*

Hearing God's Word

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Is 65:17-25
Ps 104:1-5, 10-30
Col 1:15-20 [21-23]
2 Cor 5:17-19

Sermon

Hymn*

Prayers of Intercession

(Examples)

Let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need...

We pray for this congregation and for the wider church, that as God's people, we will come to more faithfully tend God's good and precious creation. Lord, in your mercy (Hear our prayer).

We pray for those places in the world, where creatures and landscapes are suffering: [name].

Lord, in your mercy (Hear our prayer).

Lord, we ask for wisdom, to address these problems; courage, to make the changes that may be needed; prophetic persistence, to speak truth to power and to keep striving toward healing for all of your creation. Lord, in your mercy (Hear our prayer).

We pray for all those human populations who may be suffering due to ecological degradations: those who lack clean water; those in the path of extreme weather, losing their lives, homes, or livelihoods; those suffering from increased pollution, disease, or famine; and any others we name at this time [name]. Lord, in your mercy (Hear our prayer).

- By Kim Winchell, in *Awakening to God's Call to Earthkeeping* (ELCA, 2006), page 37

Peace

(Offering)

Prayer

(sample)

Let us pray...

Loving God,

We thank you for the wonderful gift of life.

We know that all we are, and all we have, are your loving gifts.

We thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus Christ,

who shows us the way to love, and

who calls us to work together to build

a community of peace, justice and care for the Earth.

We desire to be good stewards of all your gifts, nurturing them with reverence and care.

It is our fervent hope and prayer that you who have begun this good work in us,

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will bring it to fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever. Amen.

- By Sr. Ellen C. Rinke, IHM (2008);
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Blessing

(sample)

May the blessing of God, Creator of heaven and Earth,
rest upon you and upon all that God has made;

May the Risen Christ Jesus transform your life and your vision,
so that you may live in reconciliation with all things; and

May the power of God's Holy Spirit move over this whole Earth,
like the breath of Spring,
to renew the Earth and all its people, so that all creation may join
together in praise to
God's holy name!

Almighty God, + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless you now and
forever. Amen.

Sending Song*

Dismissal

Go in peace! Take the love of Christ to all creation!

Thanks be to God!

*Hymn suggestions

When Pain of the World Surrounds Us [ELW 704]

O Day of Peace [ELW 711; WOV 762]

Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness [ELW 396; WOV 684]

Earth and All Stars [ELW 731; LBW 558]

Text notes

Col 1:15-20

The essence of the key eco-theological aspects of this passage is conveyed within the Introductory comments for this Wednesday, above. Another interesting text comes just after these verses, however, in Col 1:23 – in the “hope promised by the gospel” being also “proclaimed to every creature under heaven.” If “all things” are held together in and by Christ, it seems logical to include every creature and all of creation in the hope of the gospel and thus loved and redeemed by Christ, along with us human creatures.

Is 65:17-25

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The classic vision of *shalom*: a “new heaven and a new earth” where all is in harmony, where all is in mutual relationship and where God’s presence is so very near (“Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking, I will hear.” v 24).

“The wolf and the lamb shall feed together” (v 25a) - It is probably up for grabs, theologically, whether the key implication here is that the ecological and biological principles of predator/prey relationships will be dissolved in the realization of God’s promised vision of the “peaceable kingdom.” There is a magnificent creativity and wisdom apparent in the balance, the “integrity,” of creation and the ways that creatures are fed, and feed upon on another.

Still, the vision invites us to imagine a world where people thrive and where creation is at peace, too. This vision embodies what eco-justice is about: enough for all on a thriving planet.

Ps 104:1-5, 10-30

This psalm presents another vision of a balance inherent in nature – a tapestry, woven together, as it were, by God’s love and grace and providence. In the words of the late Lutheran theologian and ethicist Joseph Sittler, the psalm evokes “a holy naturalism, *a matrix of grace* in which all things derive significance from their origin, and all things find fulfillment in praise” (in Sittler’s 1954 essay, *A Theology for Earth*).

This is also another psalm to prompt our awe before God: “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (v 24), including the “Leviathan” that God made for the sheer delight of it (v 26). And, in verse 30, it is important to note that God’s spirit has the power to bring these wonders forth and to “renew the face of the ground” – a helpful text to speak of the Holy Spirit blowing also through us, to help renew the face of the ground ... to help renew the vitality of the Earth, itself. We nurture that renewed vitality in the natural world, through restoring and healing relationships.

2 Cor 5:17-19

Here are our marching orders, our commission: we have been given “the ministry of reconciliation,” we have been charged with – entrusted with – “the message of reconciliation.”

This text is another opportunity to connect “reconciliation” with the restoration of right relationship and to talk about what that might mean, in terms of relationships built on justice, peace, and sustainability, for all members of creation. In our interconnected world reality, a health, hopeful future is dependent upon both healthy human and ecological communities.

It is also a hopeful, empowering text because through Christ, we are “made new”!

If we truly believe this, we can approach the world in all its brokenness, with fresh energy and with hope, because of the power of Christ to make all things new. This message, however, at this point in our Lenten journey, is more like a *seed* of that promise, which awaits its coming to full fruition on Easter Morning and the coming of Pentecost – just like for the disciples.

ACTION IDEAS

Where, and in what ways, can you begin to “restore right relationships” in an ecological or eco-justice sense? What steps can you personally take to live more gently on and with the land?

Could you refrain from using chemicals on your lawn or in your garden? Restoring a more healthy relationship with the land could mean planting your own organic garden, or possibly supporting (as an individual or congregation) a local “CSA” or Community Supported Agriculture farm.

See <http://www.localharvest.org/csa> to learn more and find one near you.

Earth Ministry, a wonderful organization based in Seattle, has lots of information on how you can be more creation friendly “On the Road, At the Table, In the Home, and By the Waters.”

Visit <http://www.earthministry.org/cfac.htm> [Series is titled “Caring for All Creation.”]

There are also some examples of what congregations have done at:

http://www.earthministry.org/cfac_measurables.htm