Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 23, 2017

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THE WAITING CREATION Hosea 4:1–3

Psalm 8

Romans 8:18–25

As you may know, recently I spent a week in Vancouver, British Columbia, where I served as a tutor in the Native Ministries Consortium Summer School at the Vancouver School of Theology. The course for which I was a tutor was called “Ethics in Intercultural Context.” Terry LeBlanc, a member of the Mi’kmaq Tribe of Eastern Canada, taught the course. He lives in Prince Edward Island where my MacPherson forbears settled following their expulsion from Scotland in the 19th century. So, as you can imagine, we had lots to talk about.

During the course of the week, something that I had learned long ago was re-enforced and strengthened in my own thinking. Native and indigenous peoples who are Christian approach Christian ethics and theology very differently than those who have been nurtured in Western Christianity. Western Christianity for the most part starts with the story of The Fall (from grace) recorded in Genesis Chapter 3, you know, the story of Adam eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Was it really an apple? Paula shared a cartoon with me, which says that if Adam and Eve had been Chinese, we would still be in paradise because instead of the apple they would have surely eaten the snake, indeed all parts of it!

In Western Christianity, the story of The Fall set the stage for the great drama of sin, law, guilt, punishment, and forgiveness. The usual end of the story is that Jesus died for our sins. Native and indigenous Christians who take into account their cultural context, however, begin their exploration of ethics and theology in a very different place. They begin not with the story of The Fall but with the story of the creation in Genesis Chapter 1. God creates the earth, including human beings, as a harmonious whole. Five times in Genesis Chapter 1 the creation is pronounced to be “good,” and finally “very good.” Everything is in right relationship with everything else. In the language of the 8th Psalm, God creates human beings themselves a little lower than God and crowns them with glory and honor.

In native and indigenous peoples, the problem arises when human beings do things that break the divine given relatedness given in creation. In this sense, sin is separation. When our actions harm our relationships with God, neighbor, and the earth, we lose our relatedness and our honor as human beings and we feel ashamed. Our honor needs to be recovered. But for that to happen, we need to be restored to our rightful place in the life of the community and the whole of creation. Forgiveness leads to the restoration for which we long. The honor and shame culture of indigenous people is not unlike the honor and shame culture of Asian peoples, and it just may be that deep down many of you relate more closely to indigenous understandings of sin and separation than you do to the focus on law and guilt in Western Christianity. In Western Christianity, sin is doing something we should not have done. This leads to guilt and the need for forgiveness. The problem with a Western Christian understanding of sin is that I may receive the good news that I am forgiven but still feel lost and alone. Forgiveness does not always bring about the restoration of a right relationship with God, neighbor, and the whole of creation.

When it comes to the health of the creation itself, our scripture readings for this morning are revealing. They tell us that the health of the creation depends upon the spiritual health of human beings. In the reading from the prophet Hosea (Hosea 3:1–3), human beings are condemned for their faithlessness and lack of loyalty to God. Their wrongdoing is great. They are involved in swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery and violence. The honor that God bestowed upon them in creation has disappeared. They find themselves separated and alone. *Therefore*, all of creation suffers: the land mourns; people languish together with the wild animals and birds of the air. Even the fish of the sea perish.

It is the human being that needs restoration and wholeness. We cannot help but think of our own time and the threat of climate change to the health of the planet. Because human beings have given themselves over to consumerism, greed and the desire to have more than they need, the toll on the earth is palpable, obvious. As a nation, we desire a bigger and bigger GNP (President Trump would like to see a 4% increase annually), but with each increase in the GNP there is a mounting use of our natural resources. The protection of the environment is set aside in favor of more and more development. Environmental regulations are set aside in favor of an unlimited use of global warming fossil fuels. Profit rather than sustainability becomes the bottom line.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Church in Rome describes it in much the same way. He says that the creation has been groaning in labor pains, awaiting a new birth. When human beings in Christ are finally restored to their true honor and destiny, (which Paul calls “the redemption of our bodies”), nature will also share in this restoration. Nature will be restored to its original glory. It all depends on human beings being in a right relationship with God, neighbor, and the whole of creation. In the context of our own place and time, we might say that our continued bondage to materialism and greed is the cause of the earth’s suffering. Until we are restored to our honored place in creation, until we are set free from our bondage, the earth itself will continue to decay and we human beings may end up being the cause of our own extinction.

We need to be restored to our rightful place in the whole of creation. And just a reminder—when Genesis 1 and the 8th Psalm speak of the dominion human beings are to exercise in the earth, dominion does not mean “dominance.” “Dominion” is a word based upon the Latin word *domunus*, meaning Lord, or Lordship. In exercising dominion over the earth, human beings are to imitate God’s Lordship over the whole of creation, that is, God’s *loving care* for the whole of creation. This has led Douglas John Hall to say that dominion really means stewardship, the responsibility of human beings to care for and keep the earth.

I wish to thank you publicly for granting me the study leave. It was my time in Vancouver and the privilege and gift of being in the company of the native and indigenous Christians of North America and the Pacific Basin that led me understand something about myself. For a very long time now, I have been on a journey from a Western understanding of sin, guilt, and salvation to a Native Peoples’ understanding that sin is separation and salvation is right relatedness. Our Christian faith is not as much about sin and guilt as it is about being in a right relationship with God, neighbor, and the whole of creation. It is all about relatedness. So let us, sisters and brothers, do all that we can, by the grace of God, to nourish our relationship with God, with one another and with the earth itself. If we do not, we will soon find ourselves caught in the misery of separation. On the other hand, if we nourish our relatedness and do all we can, with the grace of God, to mend our relatedness when we lose it, we will find ourselves blessed and surely motivated to be a blessing to others in the wider community and a blessing to the earth itself. O God, may it be so. Amen.