

JESUS, THE EARTHCARE MODEL

Rev. Ron Moe-Lobeda

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52; Romans 8:26-39

Last Wednesday evening, I attended a panel presentation and discussion at the Burke Museum on “A Faithful Response to Wildlife in a Warming World.” Four faith traditions—Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Evangelical—were represented on this panel. Following each panelist’s opening statement, the panel responded to questions from the audience, most of who were from the Christian faith tradition. At the end of this almost 2-hour presentation and exchange, I was struck by the fact that during this time, as far as I could recall, none of the panelists ever mentioned the name of Jesus, and no one in the entire room of about 150 people ever made reference to the testimony and witness of Jesus as a model for how we are to take care of and survive on this planet Earth. There were many references throughout the evening to God, the Creator, and the Spirit of God was identified as the source of creativity that could help us figure out how to get out of this environmental mess that in which we find ourselves. However, throughout this whole 2-hour conversation, there was no mention of Jesus.

By the time that I arrived home on Wednesday evening, I was so wound up inside about this disconnect between Jesus and our warming world that I made a decision to preach this Sunday on the relevance and importance of Jesus in the current environmental crisis that we all face, especially as Jesus proclaims the good news of the reign of God that offers the way of salvation for our global community. As I look back on the other evening, I am well aware that much of my consternation was triggered within me when a man in the audience asked a question about the connection of our materialism, our consumptive way of life, our dependency on fossil fuels, and our militarism as the 4 major contributors to global warming. In that moment, I was reminded about how Jesus presents us with a model to counter all 4 of these obsessions and addictions of our contemporary life.

More and more I am convinced that Jesus understood that his primary mission in this life was to bring the kingdom of heaven, otherwise known as the reign of God, to earth, rather than give people on earth a way to get into heaven. As a testimony and witness to this reign of God, Jesus lived a life of voluntary simplicity, not voluntary poverty as the Catholics would advocate, but rather a life of voluntary simplicity. He also taught a 3-year course on Sabbath economics, and demonstrated a way of non-violent love that was evident throughout his life until his last dying breath.

If every disciple of Jesus Christ today would embody these 3 dimensions of God's reign on earth that Jesus exemplified for all humanity, we would not be facing the environmental crisis that we do today. For some reason, however, we have chosen to resist what the Apostle Paul calls today "conformity to this image of Jesus." We are happy to talk about our faith in Jesus Christ being our insurance policy for a heavenly afterlife, but when it comes to considering this image of Jesus being the model for our earthly life, we get a little bit uneasy. Modeling our lives after the life of Jesus and living in the reign of God that he offers to every human being on the face of this earth requires repentance, a change of heart and mind, and a transformation of our way of life, including most, if not all of our relationships with God, with each other, and with all of creation.

If we don't bring Jesus into our conversation about how to care for this planet Earth, then we miss out on the inspiration and motivation by one of the best environmental stewards ever to walk the face of this earth. He devoted his life to this mission by proclaiming the good news of God's reign on earth. He lived a life of voluntary simplicity, and instructed his disciples to do the same. He taught everyone to practice an economy of the Sabbath in which people would take time to rest every week, the land would be given a rest every 7 years, slaves would be set free, debts of those who were impoverished would be cancelled, and every 50 years, land that was acquired or accumulated by those who could afford to do so would be returned to original owners. Jesus also resisted the temptation to take up arms in order to kill his opponents or defeat his enemies. The closest that Jesus ever came to a show of force in his lifetime was the homemade whip that he used to chase the moneychangers out of the temple because they were stealing from those who were poor. Otherwise, the primary weapons in Jesus' life were his love, compassion, and forgiveness—even and especially for his enemies.

According to God's purpose as presented by the Apostle Paul in our second lesson for today, God has predetermined that we are to be conformed to this image of Jesus. In other words, when we talk about being called and chosen as God's elect, we are being chosen or elected by God to conform to the way of Jesus in this life, not necessarily to ensure our salvation in an afterlife. According to Paul, when we accept this chosen calling, we can anticipate that we will encounter hardships, distress, persecution, peril, or sword just as Jesus did. Like Jesus, we could feel like sheep being led to the slaughter, but if we do, we do so voluntarily, knowing full well that fighting is not the way that Jesus wants us to conduct ourselves in this kingdom of heaven here and now.

For this reason, Paul writes to the disciples of Jesus Christ in Rome who are experiencing some of these trials and tribulations as a result of their faithful witness to Jesus, and he reassures them that nothing that they have experienced or will encounter in the future will ever be able to separate them from the love of God as revealed in Jesus. In fact, according to Paul, Jesus' love for all humanity is still being made evident to this very day as Jesus intercedes for us and asks God to forgive us whenever we fail to care for God's wonderful creation as we have been created and chosen to do.

Given our current environmental crisis, sometimes we fail to care for God's creation not out of any evil intention of our hearts, but rather as a result of feeling so powerless and hopeless in not knowing where to start in order to turn around this path of global warming that we are on. When we get to this point in our lives, Paul recognizes that in our moments of weakness, we may not know how to pray as we ought. Experiencing this void in our lives, we can be assured that the Spirit of God as revealed in Jesus also is interceding with God on our behalf with sighs too deep for words, so that we may be lifted out of our apathy and despair and be given a renewed spirit to conform to the image of Jesus and follow in his way of faithful stewardship in the care of God's creation.

However, Jesus is not the only one who reveals to us practical ways of taking care of the Earth. God, our Creator, has given us a similar image which we are to reflect, if only we would pay attention to the testimony and witness of the authors of Genesis 1. What I heard the other evening in reference to God, the Creator, was an emphasis on the sixth day of creation and how we human beings were created in the image of God to care for this creation. However, I never heard a word about the seventh day of creation, which for me is the whole point of this creation account written by the priests who had to explain to the people why their nation was destroyed by the Babylonians. According to these authors of Genesis 1, the people had forgotten to keep the seventh or Sabbath day holy.

Therefore, as soon as God told the first human beings to care for the earth, the very next thing that God did was rest on the seventh day in order to give the people a practical way of caring for God's creation. However, in the tradition of Judaism, the people knew that the seventh day involved more than a day of rest. The seventh or Sabbath day also included giving the land a rest every 7 years, canceling debts that would free people from poverty, liberating those who worked as slaves for others, and after 50 years, returning the property that a person had acquired and accumulated during this time to those who previously possessed the land. There was no better way for these authors to emphasize the importance of this seventh

day than to write the observance of this holy day into a story of creation and place it at the very beginning of their holy scriptures forevermore.

Similarly, the second creation account in the Bible was written to explain to the people following the destruction of their nation that when you have a king like Solomon who eats of the fruit of the tree of good and evil and thinks that he is a god over the people, all hell is going to break loose. According to our first lesson for today, Solomon is portrayed in a very positive light by the Jewish historians. However, according to the prophets who crafted this story of Eve and Adam, Solomon did not use his gift of being able to discern between good and evil very wisely. Under Solomon's rule, and most of the kings who followed him, more and more children died in their infancy, women increasingly were dominated by the men in their lives, and the people were forced to work as slaves for the king and the wealthy landowners who served the king rather than God Yahweh. The warning of this story of Eve and Adam has a lesson for every generation. If you choose to have a king who thinks that he has the authority and power like God to decide between good and evil both domestically and internationally, then the people of the nation can expect to suffer the consequences, and eventually lose the land that was so important to their delight and sustenance.

Finally, when the Spirit of God was brought into the conversation the other evening, the Spirit was evoked as a creative force that could give us some ideas and energy about how to get out from under this environmental mess. However, if we would listen to the testimony and witness of the first converts to the community of the resurrected Jesus, the Spirit already has given us one major idea that could save this planet Earth. This Spirit inspired and motivated the people to sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to anybody in their community who had a need. Had the followers of Jesus Christ maintained this one economic practice throughout the past 2000 years, we would not be facing the environmental crisis that we do today. Motivated by God's love as revealed in Jesus, we need to reclaim this spiritual corporate practice of equitably distributing what we own and possess, and hope that we are not too late. Until that day, may the peace of God which goes beyond all of our human understanding, keep our hearts and our minds faithful unto Jesus Christ, one of the best environmental stewards ever to walk the face of this earth. Amen.