

Loving the World Enough to Save It

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For God so loved the world, God gave the only son, so that people would believe him and not perish, but have life forever. God did not send the son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world could be saved through him.

- John 3: 16-17

Today I'd like to explore with you these verses, John 3: 16-17, so familiar they show up in poster form in the backdrop of nearly every ball game. Like most familiar verses of scripture we need to come to them fresh and new every time, if we want them to retain their power to change our lives.

Today is Earth Sunday, and it's an opportunity for us to read these two verses in the fullness intended by the author of the Gospel According to John. And if we take that opportunity we can share in the hope that the Christian faith will play a significant role in that renewal of creation that is spoken of throughout scripture, from Genesis to the Psalms, from Romans through Revelation.

Historically, Christianity has not always been thought of as an earth-friendly faith. I think this understanding hit a low point in 1967 when Lynn White argued in a famous essay, "The Theological Roots of the Environmental Crisis" that our ecological crisis had been caused in part by the Christian interpretation of the verse from the creation story of Genesis 1 where God says that we are to have dominion over the things of creation. White wasn't completely right, but he wasn't all wrong. Thinking about our dominion as dominance rather than responsibility is an interpretation of scripture that has led to carelessness and abuse. And that's not the whole story.

The author of John writes, "For God so loved the *Kosmos*" as it says in Greek: the cosmos, the earth, the world, the universe, the created order; "God loved the cosmos this much: that God gave the cosmos the son, the unique one, and did it so that everyone would believe him and not perish, but have life. God did not send the son into the cosmos to judge it or condemn it, but God sent him so that the world would be saved.

We often understand these verses spiritually and personally, and we should. If Jesus is good for anything, he's good for saving us from ourselves. But if we only understand them spiritually and personally we misunderstand scripture and we misunderstand Jesus.

There has been a lot of writing lately on the question, "Was Jesus an environmentalist?" That's given rise to the bumper-sticker adage, "WWJD: What Would Jesus Drive?" displayed on the rear of every fifth Toyota Prius. That's fine. I just think it's laying a lot on Jesus. As far as we know from scripture, until the last week of his life the guy didn't even drive a donkey.

Still, throughout the Gospels, we see a Jesus at work in creation. Jesus expresses his care for creation most often and most completely through his care for those human creatures thrown to the margins of the social world by poverty, illness, ostracism or isolation. Again and again and again, Jesus seeks out the most vulnerable and reaches out to them in astonishing compassion.

In the old days, we pretended there was a separation between issues like: the environment and poverty, climate change and hunger, pollution and racism. If we know anything now, we know better. These issues are inseparably linked. And at the root cause of so much of all this is a theory of careless competition, so much a part of our psychology and our culture it is hard to recognize it. So deeply entwined in who we are and how we think and what we do it is hard to separate it out and deal with it.

In the early days of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, the defining characteristic of successful survival was understood to be competition, and competitive advantage: what has become known in shorthand as the survival of the fittest. These days scientists are quicker to look to the critical role played by cooperation. As one biologist expressed it recently, "Life is fundamentally a cooperative project." There is not an organism on the planet able to survive on its own.

God's way is the way of harmony, community, compassion, cooperation. That way is imprinted upon us physically, in how we survive, and not just spiritually.

To pretend that God only cares about the spiritual side of creation, without understanding the deep love that is displayed by God throughout the Bible for the beauty and harmony of the created order in all its earthiness, is to miss half the story.

So what I'd like to do today is fill in the other half. I'd like to answer three little questions:

1. Why does God love the earth?
2. How does God love the earth?
3. How can we be like God?

1. Why does God love the earth?

I've hinted at the answer to this already. God loves the earth, first and foremost, because God made it. It's the work of God's hands, as the Psalms tell us again and again. And, you know, God could not be prouder.

2. How does God love the earth?

God loves the earth a lot, enough to save it, and God loves it in several different ways. As we read together in Psalm 104, God renews the face of the earth through the ongoing

work of creation. God is continually in the act of restoring and re-creating the planet, the cosmos, the universe, through acts as huge as the explosion of stars and as small as the blooming of a single tree blossom or the division of a single cell.

The Psalm speaks of God's spirit being involved in all the processes of life, in every breath, in every puff of wind, in every molecule of rainwater. And the Gospels tell us that the gift of Jesus is not disconnected from the renewal of creation. The act of giving the son is not an action that can be separated from the restoration of the things and beings God has created.

I've been reading Alan Weisman's new book, *The World Without Us*, based on his article in Discover magazine, "Earth Without People." Weisman imagines what would happen if the human species just disappeared from the planet. How long would it take the rest of creation not only to restore the planet, but to wipe away most traces of our having been here? The answer is, not really very long.

For example, Weisman looks at our dear city of New York. Within days of our departure, natural springs would flood the subway system and begin to rust away the metal underpinnings of the foundations of skyscrapers. At the same time, seeds carried around the city from Central Park and other green places would begin to sprout in cracks and crevices of the concrete and asphalt.

During the first unheated winter, the cockroaches would die off; they're a tropical species, who knew? A few Novembers and Marches of constant freezing and thawing would cause buildings to begin to crumble; more plants would invade, and after a century or two, it would be hard to find much of a trace of our city.

Suffice it to say, that is not the kind of renewal of creation imagined in scripture. Creation without us isn't anything God is interested in. Creation without humanity is nothing Jesus would be interested in. It's not something you or I would be interested in. And it's finally not something Alan Weisman is interested in, either. His is a cautionary tale, and not a blueprint.

I think the most moving vision of how the restoration of the world might happen comes in the pages of Paul's Letter to the Romans. In chapter 8, verse 19 Paul says,

For the creation waits with eager longing for the awakening of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the renewal of our bodies.

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

The creation waits with eager longing for *us*, the children of God. Which brings us to my last point.

3. How can we be like God?

It says in scripture that we have been made in the image and likeness of God. There is an initial family resemblance, says Genesis, that is hard to miss. But when it comes to caring for, loving and renewing creation, the apple falls very far from the family tree.

How could we be more like God? There is a lot we could say, but I won't say it all now.

One thing is clear. To be more like God in our relationship to the planet requires some radical changes on our part.

We have this sort of benign computer virus on our computer at home. When I try to close out of Microsoft Word, a template program kicks in, giving a message, "A change has occurred in the global template, "normal." Do you wish to change the existing "normal"?"

The only way to get out of the program is by saying no. Over and over until it goes away. No, I don't want to replace the existing 'normal'.

But when it comes to our relationship with creation, I'd like to suggest that the way to be like God is to replace the existing normal. To replace it thoroughly and completely.

We need to change the way we think.

The economist EF Schumacher used to say that we'll never change the way we treat the earth, until we learn a concept of 'enough'. Who in our culture every thinks they are rich enough, well-paid enough, smart enough, thin enough? Enough needs to be understood as good, and more than enough as evil. We need to change the way we think.

We need to change the way we behave.

Every thing we do needs to be evaluated and reevaluated. I can remember staying after B'nai Jeshurun services here once years ago, for kiddush, when Rabbi Marshall Meyer of blessed memory grabbed a Styrofoam cup that had the bad luck to appear there, and waved it in the air and yelled with his usual passion, "Styrofoam is not Kosher at this synagogue." Where better to begin to practice a new normal, than in our religious communities?

I would like to suggest that for the sake of our God and the sake of the planet God loves, we renew our efforts to live differently, here at SPSA and in our lives. I have no doubt that if we rethink how we use the earth's precious resources, we could cut our use of electricity in half in this building, without a lot of trouble, but with a great deal of change in the way we think and act.

One thing gives me hope.
One thing gives me promise.

It's this:
God is not done with creation.
And God is not done with us.