

The Blue Miracle

Genesis 1:26-31; Luke 6:12; 17-19
Integrity of Creation Sunday

This day in our United Church of Christ Calendar is designated *Integrity of Creation Sunday*. The words were puzzling. “What does Integrity of Creation mean,” my husband asked me. “I don’t know.” I answered. “It comes from the UCC Calendar.”

“Can’t they just say Earth Day,” my husband responded. “Well, I said, “This is the UCC, after all. We’re descended from Yale graduates. They’re trained to use a lot of big words.”

What, indeed, does Integrity of Creation mean? I googled the phrase and discovered two things. Integrity of Creation is a specifically Christian term. A number of religious groups have developed a theological understanding of creation that describes all of the created order including humanity as a whole. In this context, the word integrity is meant as a totality, a wholeness where nothing is wanting. All creation is sacred. Therefore, on this Sunday during the budding, flowering season of Spring, we are invited to celebrate the beauty and completeness of creation.

During the Lenten series, Alan Betts used a slide that was particularly moving to me. Taken from space, the slide showed a portion of the earth with a clear picture of the Ozone Layer, that amazing envelope that keeps creation alive. How fragile and how beautiful it looked from that space picture. We look up and can’t see any sign of this wonder yet there it is, filtering sunlight, keeping oxygen within and protecting all of us, all living matter – sustaining life.

This day is both a celebration of the glorious miracle that is earth and a reminder to us not to take what we have for granted. We are slow learners but we do learn. Many of us here lived through the era of smoke stacks belching out dirty air. Smog was a fact of life in most cities. Those cities smelled of fumes coming from cars, trucks and buses as well as that of the coal furnaces that heated our homes. Each Fall, neighborhoods all over the middle and northern part of the country participated in the annual rite of burning leaves. The leaves would be piled up, and we kids would gleefully jump in the piles. When there was no wind, the piles would be lit and smolder down to ash as the smoke from the fires wafted through the neighborhood. That smell, I confess, I miss. Just as the colors of the leaves began the season, the smell of the burning piles was a sign of the end. We have come a long way, haven’t we, when even things we cherish need to be let go.

We humans have always had a struggle to place ourselves in the context of the integrity of creation. The Bible has not always been helpful in guiding us to our place. In Genesis as God creates human beings, they are given the guardianship of the created order, just as a royal governor would be given dominion over the territory assigned to him. The humans are to fill the earth and subdue it; to have dominion over all other life. Yet, even in that passage, they are given no charge to hunt or fish. They are given seeds to grow and bear fruit. And in that perfect world, animals are given green plants to eat. In that perfect world, all life is sacred.

Psalm 104 is another telling of the creation story. The author lists all the miracles of creation and places all life in their assigned place, including humans. At night humans go into their homes and dangerous animals hunt for food. At daybreak, as the animals go back to their dens, humans go out to till, to plant and to reap their food. There is a place for all and when all recognize their place, balance is maintained. And God saw that it was very good.

Psalm 8 is also a reminder of that blessing but with a slightly different twist. The author exclaims, *“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established: what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet, you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beast of the field; the birds of the air and the fish of the sea.”*

That blessing has, at times, been dangerous as humans have arrogantly placed themselves on a par with God.

The integrity of creation is, I believe, a call for humans to find their place within, not above, the created order. We share life with ants and butterflies and bees. We are cousins to gorillas, whales and dolphins. We are sisters and brothers to all the other members of the human family and we, all of us, are protected by that invisible layer of ozone. To have dominion over all created life is to be responsible for the lives of animals, plants and one another. We have come a long way, but we have a much longer way to go.

The scientist-theologian Teilhard deChardin wrote:

To understand the world
Knowledge is not enough.
You must see it, touch it,
Live in its presence and drink
The vital heat of existence

in the very heart of reality.¹

I know there is a hierarchy in Vermont. Those at the top have been here for many generations. Beneath them, there are those who have 2 or 3 generations to claim. And then there are the rest of us. That's okay, we don't mind being at the bottom. We don't mind loss of bars on our cell phones or learning new pronunciations of town names like Berlin or St. Albans. And, we certainly didn't come because of the cost of living in Vermont. We came because of Vermont's beauty; the mountains, the lakes, the independent minded people. We came to see, touch and learn from the wisdom that is all around us.

Perhaps our responsibility to the creation of which we are a part is not to take it for granted. Mary Oliver, another New Englander is a poet who celebrates the beauty of nature. One of her poems captures our need to appreciate all that is around us. She names the poem *Invitation* and writes:

Oh, do you have time to linger for just a little while
out of your busy and very important day
for the goldfinches who have gathered in a field of thistles
for a musical banter, to see who can sing the highest note,
or the lowest,
of the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks drink the air
as they strive melodiously not for your sake
and not for mine and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude.
Believe us, they say, it is a serious thing
just to be alive on this fresh morning
in this broken world.
I beg of you, do not walk by without pausing
to attend to this rather ridiculous performance.
It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
*You must change your life.*²

¹ Blanch Gallagher, *Meditations with Teilhard de Chardin*. 1988., p. 20

² *Redbird: Poems by Mary Oliver*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2008. p. 18.

I chose a very brief reading from Luke's Gospel that describes Jesus going out to the mountain to pray. In all the Gospels Jesus, at times, withdraws from the crowds and even from his followers to go off by himself. In those quiet moments as Jesus finds peace and soul refreshment, does he look around and see the stark beauty of the wilderness? Does he note the green vibrancy of the area around the Jordan River? Does he view the majesty of the Lake of Galilee or look up at the immensity of the night sky filled with the lights of stars and planets? In the quiet beauty of those mountain places Jesus finds the love, peace and guidance of God. During those moments, Jesus becomes one with creation because God is in all creation.

When those moments are concluded, Jesus emerges refreshed and energized. In this Luke passage, Jesus returns filled with the spirit and names the 12 disciples. They move further down the mountain to a plain where he imparts the wisdom gathered during his night of prayer: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh.

Many folks here love to hike up mountains. In those undertakings, they find themselves walking through the miraculuous scent of clean air filtered through trees. Others love to garden. As vegetables and flowers come up from the rich earth, spirits are nourished at the miracle of growth. Many others set out bird feeders and watch with joy at the variety of birds that stop and eat. We see wild turkeys in fields, we watch deer run across roads, we hear the peepers, listen to the howls of coyotes and occasionally spot a moose. At each twist and turn, we encounter the miracle of creation. But we have to recognize the miracle, not take it for granted.

Rev. Carlos Bernie wrote a piece that precedes the Benediction we will shortly say together. He writes: "Perhaps too often our thoughts hinder our 'ecological

outreach.' When we stop to realize that God's hand is in every blade of grass, every cloud, every tree, maybe we will do better at cherishing the gift we've been given."

We are all enfolded in the Integrity of Creation. We are a part of the wholeness. Let us walk gently on the earth in gratitude for the miracle of life itself. Amen.