

GLADNESS, HUNGER, POWER AND LIGHT

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
16 NOVEMBER 2008

Readings

from the New Zealand Anglican Prayerbook

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain Bearer, Life-Giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be
Father and Mother of us all.
Loving God, in whom is heaven;

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials to great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you live in the glory of the power that is love,
Now and forever. AMEN.

from theologian Frederick Buechner

“Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, “to call,” and means the work a person is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling to all kinds of different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of society, say, or the superego, or self-interest.

By and large a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need to do and (b) that the world needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you’ve presumably met requirement (a) but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are you’ve missed requirement (b). If, on the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you’re bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only surpassed (a), but probably aren’t helping your patients much either. Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

SERMON

I love nuns. I tell you this up front because this sermon is inspired by one. I met Sister Pat Nagle at a workshop on Green Building and renovation for Churches sponsored by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon’s Interfaith Power and Light program. Sr. Pat is a member of the order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary which has its Motherhouse in western Michigan, although her ministry for the earth has brought her to the Northwest. She has traveled around the world, most recently to a climate summit in Bali also attended by Al Gore.

“Earth’s atmosphere encompasses all people, creatures and habitats,” says Sr. Pat. “The response to global climate change must reflect our interdependence and responsibility to the whole of life. This issue is really about the future of God’s

creation." How's that for a good old catholic statement, catholic in the small 'c' sense – meaning universal. Earth's atmosphere surrounds all people, plants, animals and ecosystems, a wonderful metaphor for God's love, as something we breathe and move in.

Catholics are deep down at their core small 'u' universalists and most nuns I've met get that. They can be some of the most powerful and subversive voices in the Catholic church, which is why I love them so. Her own community's website describes Sr. Pat as "an activist dedicated to the creation of a new world order." I guess it can take committed women in a patriarchal institution to be as subversive, albeit quietly, as many nuns are.

And the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary are visionaries. A decade ago, when it was clear they must renovate their Motherhouse or move out, they took on a \$58 million project to "recycle" the complex and turn it into a model of sustainability. They know that God is calling them to live in harmony with all life and they found a way to do it. This order of a few hundred religious sisters with a median age of 75. These little old ladies took on a grand vision that was fueled by their religious faith. Knowing that if God cares for all people, all creatures and all habitats, then they must, too.

Their deep gladness met the world's deep hunger. They answered the biblical call to be stewards of the earth.

One of the reasons people hold up when they reject the Bible is the passage in the first chapter of Genesis that comes right after God has created humans. Chapter 1, verse 28: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'"

In this first Creation Story in the Bible (yes, there are two), God creates man and woman at the same time and *both* are created in the image of God. This version of creation is usually overshadowed by the parable of Adam and Eve which is the second story. What people remember from this first story is God's command to this woman and man to subdue the earth and have dominion over "everything that hath the breath of life."

And indeed this passage has wrought much damage throughout human history. It has provided fodder for many a one who sought to profit from taking from the earth, pillaging it for personal gain, exploiting its resources and its people

Some translations soften some of the language. In the King James Bible, the man and woman are commanded to "replenish" the earth rather than fill it. My favorite is from The Message Bible, a recent translation from the original languages which uses modern English rhythms and idiom to make its meaning work in a contemporary context. It reads,

"Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth."

Yet the problem with this passage is as much about interpretation, theology and context as it is about translation. The problematic words really are more literally translated as have dominion, subdue and master, but people read them in the most convenient, self-serving way possible. The people who took the time to write down their ancient stories never meant to create a book that was convenient or self-serving. It was and remains a book to challenge humans to live right relationship with God, with each other and with the world.

Who is more to blame for the damage the Bible has wrought? The text itself or the people who (mis)read it? I think the fault lies with people who read the Bible to confirm themselves in their own righteousness and who use the Bible to justify all manner of injustices. Sometimes this is done more out of ignorance, and sometimes, it is done deliberately and even with malice.

What people usually miss in this problematic passage from Genesis is the surrounding context. God has just created humans in God's own image. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'.... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

This kind of repetition is significant. It alerts us that whatever commands follow this passage are things humans should strive to do as God would do them – in the image of God. To have dominion as God would. So, what kind of ruler is God?

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann answers, "The human creature attests to the Godness of God by exercising *freedom with* and *authority over* all the other creatures entrusted to its care. The image of God in the human person is a mandate of power and responsibility. But it is power exercised as God exercises power. The image images the creative use of power which invites, evokes, and permits. There is nothing here of coercive or tyrannical power, either for God or for humankind."

He continues, "In the now popular indictment of the biblical tradition the notion of human 'subjugation' of earth is blamed for the abuse of nature by way of technology.... It is doubtful, however, if that indictment is appropriate. The 'dominion' here mandated is with reference to the animals. The dominance is that of a shepherd who cares for, tends and feeds the animals. Or, if transferred to the political arena, the image is that of a shepherd king. Thus the task of 'dominion' does not have to do with exploitation and abuse. It has to do with securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to fruition."(Genesis: Interpretation, p. 32)

It is one of our highest religious values to remember that we are part of creation, not apart from it. We are called to recognize with complete humility both our deep connection to all of creation *and* our power in it and over it. That power – and how we use it – is the subject of these passages in Genesis. It is also reflected in Stephen Mitchell's translation/interpretation of the 8th Psalm

Unnamable God, how measureless
is your power on all the earth
and how radiant in the sky!
When I look up at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the multitude of stars,
what is man that you love him,
and woman that you gladden her heart?
Yet you made us almost like the angels
and crowned us with understanding.
You put us in charge of all creatures
and placed your whole earth in our hands:
all animals, tame and wild,
all forests, fields and deserts,
even the pure air of the sky,
even the depths of the ocean.
Unnamable God, how terrible
is our power on all the earth!

There is a powerful relationship of trust in all this – Brueggeman calls it a covenant. Because we are powerful on the earth, our first call from God is to be wise caretakers of that which has been placed in our hands. The power of a covenant is that it is a promise freely entered into, and therefore potentially freely broken. Within this framework, the way we presently live is dramatically out of covenant with God, with each other and with creation. Even as some of the earliest written religious scripture warns us against such arrogant, greedy use of our power, we are still at it.

Brueggemann says, "The calling of human persons in the vocation of shepherd is offered against an ideology of grasping exploitation and against retreat into irresponsible self-indulgence. It invites new modeling of humanness after "The Good Shepherd" who does not grasp."(p. 38)

Our first calling then is to care for the earth. Indeed, it is the very first call that God places upon us in the Bible. It has been a challenge to us ever since. How do we answer that call?

Frederick Buechner tells us our call lies where our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.

Being a part of this church is not about life being convenient or self-serving. I hope here that you will find a calling. I hope you will touch your deep gladness and find a way to answer the world's deep hunger. I hope that we can do this together.

This sense of call was reinforced at the workshop where I met Sr. Pat Nagle. I went with a team from Atkinson that included our architects. It was inspiring and it reminded me powerfully of how we live our call as a community.

There are lots of things we can do individually, and we are. We're kicking off our Green Sanctuary program and the with a CFL bulb sale and a thermostat challenge. We are reading the Great Turning and considering how we can be part of it.

Yet I saw from the example of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart a way a community can be called.

Sr. Pat spoke of how all the great religious traditions realize that our common ground is Earth. None of us is apart from the earth. In her international work on sustainability, Sr. Pat sees traditions being called together around a common concern for what she, too, calls the interdependent web.

This powerful, fundamental truth requires of us that we consider future generations. It requires us to expand our ethical horizon as well, considering how we relate to one another, considering how our actions affect each other and the world. Addressing climate change is a justice issue for its affects will be felt most by the poor and marginalized in the world. We must learn to redefine progress and happiness. And we must celebrate life, together.

Sr. Pat spoke of the great privilege we have been granted to be on hand at this crisis time in the world.

That was what probably got to me the most. As frightening as these times are on so many levels, it is a privilege to be alive now. For it can give our sense of call more gladness and more urgency.

So how are we called as a community?

We have this wonderful building project before us. Like the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart, we have decided to "recycle" our church. Officially our first green decision. What more can we do?

At the workshop, I also learned about the Living Building Challenge, a program put forth in 2005 by the Cascadia Region Green Building Council to challenge builders, architects, and engineers to build environmentally sound and self-sustaining buildings. To meet the challenge the building must generate all of its own energy with renewable resources, capture and treat all of its water on site, and be an aesthetically beautiful design.

So far there are no buildings in the world that meet this standard. It is an aspirational goal. But the point is to take us orders of magnitude beyond our present conception of building green.

Our present building cannot become a Living Building in this way. And our addition will likely not be able to do it completely either. But it is a framework for us to work within, an aspiration that can take us farther. Make us more than just sustainable. To help us live into our call as a community.

I still marvel in many ways that you all have the vision and inspiration to take on this project – and that you are carrying on in these uncertain times. You have raised an impressive amount of money for our building. It is not enough for all you want to do and be. In a very real way there will never be enough. Yet in another equally real way, you will always have what you need.

You know that coming to church is not about living a convenient life that meets all your personal needs. Coming to and being involved in this church will ask something of you. It gives us all a way of strengthening, sustaining and living our deeply held values. It fosters our deep gladness and carries it into the world.

This building is not just for us. It never has been. It stands for something in the community. It stands for our values. It stands for justice and compassion and for living in harmony with creation and with the divine.

This is a place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger can meet.

Amen

Blessed be.