

For the Beauty of the Earth: A Theology of Creation Care

**All Things Hold Together**

Colossians 1:15-20

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Wednesday of this week, I received a phone call from Agnes Norfleet. Of course, many of you know her — she was the senior pastor of this church for seven years, from 2005 until 2013. I picked up the phone and she said, “Jenny, I told your story in my sermon on Sunday, and you’re never going to believe what happened.” These are words that make my heart suddenly start working overtime. What story, exactly? I tell a lot of them. And what happened? I’m sorry? You’re welcome?

Well, it just so happens that Agnes and Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church are also thinking about creation care in worship right now. Neither of us had any idea about such synchronicity. And it turns out she had referenced one of my more recent columns in the Presbyterian Outlook, in which I mentioned a friend of mine who, a few months ago, posted a picture of the dental floss she bought, made of biodegradable material and housed in a small, refillable glass vile. It was the most recent in a series of her efforts toward a more sustainable lifestyle. And then I confessed that my immediate response to that photo was to think about how I don’t even floss my teeth enough with *regular* floss, never mind earth-friendly floss. I was intrigued, though, and in my attempts to learn more, I fell all the way down an internet rabbit hole, trying to weigh the pros and cons of the dental floss situation. After all, if such floss is not available locally, then it has to be shipped to me, and I don’t know — does the energy and fuel required by delivering it straight to my door negate the good of that kind of floss in the first place?

Apparently my public workings out of my existential uncertainty was good for a laugh in Philly. But then — and this is the reason Agnes was calling me — she received a package in her office Wednesday morning. Inside was an assortment of eco friendly dental floss, and then a padded envelope with a post it note that said, “More floss and more information is included in this envelope. Please send it to your friend Jenny.” So now, somehow, I am awaiting a package from a stranger in Philadelphia who wanted to help ensure at least one of my ecological conundrums could be resolved.

It’s such a small world, isn’t it? Even when it seems like nothing could be further from the truth, we are all so very connected to one another. This is true not just for humans, however. It is true for the entirety of the created order. People, plants, animals, insects — all come from the same Creator, all borne out of the same motivation. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson puts it this way — “To put it in dramatically simple terms, human beings and other species on earth have more in common than what separates them. This does not mean they are all the same; of course they are not. But in their beautiful, terrible, fragile, and vulnerable

lives, they share the fundamental identity of being creatures of the same generous God.”<sup>1</sup>

That is why she argues for dismissing the word “nature” in favor of “creation.” Creation, she points out, is a word rooted in relationship — relationship with with a God whose love is beyond imagining. This is where faith provides a unique, and I would argue essential, element to the whole notion of caring for the earth around us that goes beyond the scientific. Note carefully I did not say, *in place of* the scientific. I said, *beyond* the scientific. Taking all that science has taught us and told us about climate and creation as true, but also not *stopping* there.

Steven Charleston, an Episcopal theologian, says, “We can tell people how fast the polar ice caps are melting, how many bird species are disappearing, and how toxic their water is becoming. In a sense, we can try to heal them by telling them how sick they are. But that creates denial and guilt, not transformation. Statistics may present a valid picture of reality, but they are not convincing arguments [that can overcome] denial. We need another approach.” Climate journalist Eric Holthaus is more direct: “If you’re trying to motivate people,” he says, “[scaring them to death] is a really bad strategy.”<sup>2</sup>

The best approach, the best strategy, I believe, at least for people of faith, comes from fidelity to scripture. “Jesus is the image of the invisible God,” the letter to the Colossians reads. “In him, all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” This passage that Trish read for us is known in scholarly circles as a Christ hymn — words that were likely used as liturgy in some of the earliest moments of Christian worship. In it, Jesus is both the subject of creation and the cosmic reconciler, through whom God restores harmony between God and every bit of creation.

In every question of faith, including the question of creation care, love is always a better strategy than fear. I mentioned last week that there are a variety of reasons that Christians can be so deeply divided about ecology and conservation and climate. One of the reasons that tends to surface more loudly than some others is rooted in the belief of a cataclysmic second coming of Christ that is good news for a select few and bad news for the vast majority. A “Left Behind” sort of theology, a theology very much outside the belief system of this church and the denomination of which we are a part. That theological belief system, though, states that some are in and some are out, and those who are in will be whisked away to heaven, while the rest are left on earth, which will become increasingly less desirable as everything remaining dissolves into ruin.

If your theology hinges on being removed from creation, you don’t need to be especially concerned about creation. Especially if you conclude that God will ultimately destroy whatever is left. This way of thinking, this system of belief, turns God’s loving redemption into something of a game, something conditional, something limited. It defines God by fear, rather than by love. And it represents, as Biblical scholar Patricia Tull says in her

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> Quotes from Steven Charleston and Eric Holthaus were shared with me by Agnes Norfleet. She quoted them in her sermon at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church on May 15, 2022.

book *Inhabiting Eden*, “a human self-centeredness that has taken the rest of the earth for granted. But,” she says, “scripture [actually] tells a different story, one in which human culture finds itself embedded within, and dependent upon, a larger cosmos that invites our respect and gratitude.”

In addition to a human self-centeredness, this theological persuasion purports to believe in a God who is all powerful. But that which is used to extol God’s power, actually ends up limiting it. It puts a condition on God. It says that God’s mercy is dependent upon human will and decision. It says that God’s mercy cannot have its own way in the world — that it must submit to a humanity that is prone to failure and fragility. And that, beloved, is in direct contradiction to the God revealed in scripture from the first word of Genesis to the last word of Revelation.

John Muir, the 19th century American naturalist, tells the story of hiking in the Yosemite wilderness and coming upon a dead bear. He stopped, he says, to reflect upon this creature’s dignity: here was an animal with warm blood and a heart that pumped like ours, who rejoiced to feel the warm sun on his fur, for whom a good day was finding a bush filled with berries. Later he wrote a bitter entry in his journal, criticizing the religious folk he knew who made no room in their faith for such creatures. They think they are the only ones with souls, he complained, the only ones for whom heaven is reserved. To the contrary, he wrote, “God’s charity is broad enough for bears.”<sup>3</sup>

The naturalist offered his own way of expressing a deep theological truth — all creatures are the recipients of divine love. All of creation is the recipient of divine love. And this love is not simply a generic benevolence. It is love that contains redeeming care for each and every particular creature. Their origin is from God. Surely, then, they are cared for by God, and will be redeemed by God. That is why I believe it to be theological truth, and not just sentimental or wishful thinking, that has led me to proclaim with confidence many times that all dogs go to heaven.

When it comes to creation care, fear is a flawed motivator. Fear is a flawed motivator for faith, too. In both instances, we as Christians raise our voices to sing of a God of enormous, overwhelming, unmerited, unconditional love — love that is poured out for the flourishing of creation. All of creation. And when we order our lives around this understanding of God’s mercy, we cannot deny the ties that bind. In our Lord Jesus Christ, “all things hold together” — all things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, people and penguins, trees and tide pools, opossums and the ozone, beetles and the beating heart of God.

We have been reciting the facts of a creation in crisis for as long as I’ve been alive — and probably longer. But it is a central tenant of our faith, that where facts and fear falter and fade away, love breaks through. May the goodness of God’s love compel us to care for God’s good creation.

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Johnson includes this story in *Creation and the Cross*.