

“Confessing to the Plants and Finding Transcendence in the Faces of Children”

Proper 20C (September 22, 2019)

Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 4:23-25; Job 12:7-10; Ephesians 1:9-10

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

Christian Twitter this past week was in an uproar over “PlantGate.” There’s no such thing, of course, as *Christian* Twitter, but there sure are a lot of Christians *on* Twitter; and it seemed like they all had an opinion about PlantGate. PlantGate started with a Tweet - a Tweet sent out by Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan. Union is very active on Twitter. The Tweet in question pertained to one of Union’s chapel services - chapel services that, according to Paul Raushenbush, son of the legendary preacher at Riverside Church, Walter Raushenbush - chapel services that Paul Raushenbush, who attended Union years ago, said could be “outrageous,” at times. “Chapel at Union,” he Tweeted, “is an adventure, a pedagogy tool meant to stretch our spiritual and moral imaginations. [Chapel at Union, he said,] can be good and bad but is rarely boring.” The chapel service at Union that led to PlantGate, that led Paul Raushenbush and countless others on Twitter to comment - the chapel service in question involved several large potted plants placed in the center of Union’s chapel - potted plants that students at Union used as props to offer confession. Yes, they confessed to the plants. If you Google “confessing to plants,” you can see the pictures; and you’ll see a host of headlines from various websites, including one from the *Washington Examiner* that called the practice “absolute theological bankruptcy.” “Chapel at Union,” said Paul Raushenbush, “is an adventure,” “and is rarely boring.”

What were those students doing? Like the *Washington Examiner*, some on *Christian* Twitter shook their heads at this plant confession, and erupted in outrage after seeing the pictures, calling the confession paganism, idolatry, another sign that liberal Union, as one person Tweeted, is “super weird.” And a few joked that confessing to plants was like a bad “Veggie Tales” movie - Veggie Tales is the cartoon that uses vegetables to tell Bible stories. But other Christians on Twitter had a different take. Several people pointed to various figures from Christian history who have honored creation, and who were also a little weird. Theologian Karl Barth in the 20th century said Christ could be revealed in the body of a dead dog. St. Francis of Assisi from the 16th century called the animals his brothers and sisters. St. Francis once preached the gospel to the birds (his “sisters” as he called them); and, according to another legend, he tamed a wolf by reasoning with it, saying, “brother wolf, I would like to make peace with you in the name of Christ.” Hildegard of Bingen from the 12th century once said, the “Word [of God, Christ himself is] manifest[ed] ... in every creature.” Christ is revealed in the plants and the birds and the animals. And, Pelagius of Britannia way back in the fifth century praised the presence of God’s spirit in all living things: “Look at the animals roaming the forest,” he wrote; “Look at the birds flying across the sky”; “Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass”; “Look at the fish in the river or sea”; “God’s spirit dwells in all of them”; “God’s breath brought them to life.” So, some on Christian Twitter pointed out this long history in Christianity of treating creation and animals as sacred, as bearers of God’s spirit, as siblings - trying to point out that what those Union students were doing may not have been so weird after all.

When the PlantGate kerfuffle died down, Union Tweeted an explanation of confessing to plants. Those students weren't "confessing faith *in* plants," said Union. That *would be* what our tradition calls "idolatry" - putting a thing in place of God - a *thing* like money or power or guns or nationalism or trees or plants. No, they weren't confessing faith *in* plants. And those students weren't "confessing as an act of worship" - that, too, would be to put a thing in place of God. No, what they were doing, explained one theologian, was "bearing witness to harms done to the earth [in the name of religion]." "Far too often," Tweeted Union, "we [have seen] the natural world only as resources to be extracted for our use, not divinely created in their own right Theologies that encourage humans to dominate and master the Earth have played a deplorable role in degrading God's creation." So, said Union, "we must birth new theology, new liturgy to heal and sow, replacing ones that reap and destroy."

I've been thinking a bit this week about that statement: "*we must birth new theology, new liturgy to heal and sow*" And I've been thinking that maybe what's *actually* needed is not *new* theology. After all, from Pelagius to Barth, from Hildegard to St. Francis, Christians in our history - some of them living centuries ago - have developed eco-friendly theologies. God *in* all things; God's spirit *sustaining* all things; God's creation declared by God to be "good." Maybe what's needed is a better grasp of just how ancient (not new) a theology of creation is.

In fact, eco-friendly theology appears throughout the Bible. Last week's scripture readings from Ezekiel and Revelation and Romans are examples. And so is today's reading from Job. Today's reading is just five verses buried in a 42 chapter book with hundreds of verses - a book that wrestles with the meta-question of suffering. Job, as many of you know, was a legendary suffer-er. His children died tragically. His business collapsed. He was afflicted with a terrible illness. His life was upended. Would he blame God? *That* is the key question of the book. Job had friends who came to his aid. When his friends heard about the tragedies of Job, they visited him, and, according to the story, *at first* had nothing to say - what could they say? They just sat with him in silence. Sometimes it's just our presence with someone who's hurting that's needed. But when Job broke the silence and began to curse the day of his birth, and when he began to wonder *why* these tragedies had come, his friends made the mistake of offering explanations. They said Job deserved it, because no one suffers unless they've done something wrong. They insisted that God is just, and that God only punishes with suffering those who deserve to suffer. These are the unhelpful people who try to explain suffering by saying things like, "God's ways are not our ways," or that "God has a bigger plan in mind," etc. etc. - trying to probe the mysteries of God, when all a suffering person needs is kindness. Job's friends pleaded with him to repent, so his suffering would end. But Job held firm, insisting that he did nothing wrong, that his suffering was unjust. (Maybe our suffering planet could make the same case as Job.) And after enduring the various explanations from his friends, Job interjected, lamenting his misfortune, and turning to the animals, in today's text, as witnesses to the rightness of his cause. "Ask the animals," he says, "and they will teach you. "Ask the birds of the air Ask the plants of the earth Ask the fish of the sea." Ask them, says Job, and they will tell you that my suffering *is* unjust. Job is using an analogy here. The plants and animals and fish who suffer, suffer unjustly, because they *can't* do anything wrong. They are innocent victims of injustice, like Job.

In an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* this week, Veery Huleatt, wrote about PlantGate at Union Seminary.¹ “When I was a child,” she writes, “I spoke to trees. I knew my secrets would be safe with these great green friendly things. And I thought the trees spoke back to me. I’d press my ear against their trunks to hear the reverberating, strangely musical sound of branches knocking against one another in the wind, a sound that seems to be traveling to my ear from the decades coded into each tree’s annual growth rings. I’m comfortable talking to plants,” she continues, “but I’m not sure if I could do so through a microphone in front of a bunch of seminarians, as ... student[s] at Union Theological Seminary [did].” What those students called attention to, she writes, is the “pressing question that many Christians and people of no faith are grappling with: What is our moral responsibility to nonhuman life-forms? ... Just as the [suffering and] death of one person can rend the fabric of a congregation or family,” she says, “the death of a species can spell the end of a particular ecosystem. Whole communities, webs of relationships that sometimes took centuries to develop, are destroyed. ... [W]hat do these biological and ecological facts have to do with our morality and the expressions of our faith?”

Today’s reading from Job gestures toward an answer this question by saying the suffering planet suffers unjustly...like Job. Today’s reading from the New Testament book of Ephesians theologizes this issue by incorporating creation into God’s larger plan of salvation. Ephesians is one of my favorite books of the Bible. In fact, I’ve been studying it each morning over the past couple of weeks. Ephesians claims to have been written by St. Paul, but there are good reasons to think that one of Paul’s disciples wrote in his name - writing in the name of one’s teacher was a common practice in the ancient world, a way to honor one’s teacher. This disciple of Paul - the writer of Ephesians - begins by speaking in grandiose terms about, what theologians call, God’s election, God’s choice. “God chose us,” says the writer. God *elects* us. God “destined us,” says the writer, to be “adopted” as God’s children. The writer of Ephesians is trying to frame the church’s story as *part of* the story of ancient Israel. Ancient Israel was chosen/elected by God. The people of ancient Israel were called God’s children, according to scripture, the biological descendants of Abraham and Sarah. The church, says the writer of Ephesians, has been “adopted” into this family - adopted into this family with ancient roots, the family charged with mission, a mission that goes all the way back to Adam and Eve, who were told by God to tend and care for the earth; and a mission that goes back to Abraham, through whom God promised that all the families of the earth would be blessed; and a mission that runs like a thread through Israel’s story in the Old Testament, that people and earth are precious to God, so *both* need care. A family, a charge, a mission that the writer of Ephesians condenses into a single phrase in today’s reading. “God’s plan,” says the writer, “is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.” Our English translation uses five words to translate one Greek word. “To gather up all things” is one word in Greek, and means something like *to bring all things together, to unite all things into one, to bring all things into union*. It’s a salvation term. God’s plan is to save the world - people and planet. Our mission, as adopted heirs of this grand story, this grand plan, is to *live into* this vision. To confess - to admit - our shortcomings to plants and animals, to glaciers and trees, and then to put feet and hands to work to “gather up all things” into Christ. This is not a *new* theology; it’s an ancient one, woven into the fabric of God’s salvation plan for people and planet.

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/09/18/progressive-seminary-students-offered-confession-plants-what-are-we-make-it/>

Across the world on Friday we witnessed the largest mobilization of youth in our time, who are living into this ancient vision. Not all of them, of course, were energized by faith, though some certainly were. *The New York Times* wrote on Friday that “turnout” for the climate strike was “estimated ... to be around four million in thousands of cities and towns worldwide.”² A quarter of a million marched in New York City alone. “Rarely, if ever,” wrote *The Times*,³ “has the modern world witnessed a youth movement so large and wide, spanning across societies rich and poor, tied together by a common if inchoate sense of rage.” And all of it was started one year and one month ago by a teenager from Sweden named Greta Thunberg. A picture circulated on Twitter of her first climate strike in August of 2018. There she sat alone outside the Swedish Parliament building. Her backpack next to her on the sidewalk, and a single sign she’d written about the climate emergency leaning against the wall. “I ... have a dream,” she said before a panel of U.S. Senators this week, “that governments, political parties and corporations grasp the urgency of the climate and ecological crisis and come together despite their differences - as you would in an emergency - and take the measures required to safeguard the conditions for a dignified life for everybody on earth. Because then,” she said, “we millions of school striking youth - could go back to school. I have a dream,” she said, “that the people in power, as well as the media, start treating this crisis like the existential emergency it is. So that I could go home to my sister and my dogs. Because I miss them. ... [W]herever I go,” she said, “I seem to be surrounded by fairytales. Business leaders, elected officials all across the political spectrum spending their time making up and telling bedtime stories that soothe us, that make us go back to sleep. These are ‘feel-good’ stories about how we are going to fix everything. How wonderful everything is going to be when we have ‘solved’ everything. But the problem we are facing,” said Greta, “is not that we lack the ability to dream, or to imagine a better world. The problem now is that we need to wake up. It’s time to face the reality, the facts, the science. ... This is the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced,” she warned. “... Our main enemy now is physics. And we can not make ‘deals’ with physics.”

Greta’s words remind me of that great Yale sociologist, the late Peter Berger, who once said that “faith can ... flourish in modern society if people learn to recognize the transcendent and supernatural in ordinary experiences.”⁴ We can see God - we can meet the transcendent - said Peter Berger, in ordinary life, in the faces of children like Greta, and in the hundreds of thousands of children who marched on Friday. Climate change is, as Gandalf once put it in *The Return of the King* when Middle Earth was imperiled, this is “the great battle of our time.” It’s a battle that we, people of faith, *need* to have a voice in. We bring to the table an ancient perspective. We bring to the table a theological perspective. We bring to the table a moral perspective. And we have the tools at our disposal to talk about this great battle of our time with words put on paper by the writer of Ephesians: We, Christians, said the writer, have been adopted into God’s Abrahamic family; and we Christians, said the writer, can offer a vision - *not* a new theology, but an ancient one - an ancient one that proclaims God’s plan for people and planet: a plan to save them all; a plan God has charged *us* to put into action. Amen.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/climate/global-climate-strike.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/climate/global-climate-strike.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

⁴ Here’s his NYT obituary: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/29/us/obituary-peter-berger-dead-theologian-sociologist.html>