

Mt. Carmel Lutheran May 13

Connection – Abiding with Creation

One day I was waiting for the bus. A bus that wasn't mine stopped at the station and a few people filed out. One man was nonchalantly holding a soda pop. Then he walked away from me and I heard something splash on the ground. He had tossed the soda pop behind his head and let it fall on the ground. I stood there in confusion and a little bit of shock. How can someone so blatantly throw trash on the ground? How can someone have such a disregard for the earth?

Douglas John Hall, a theologian and author of many books, whom I have come to deeply respect, wrote a book in 2004 titled "Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship." In this book he argues that because we are created in the image of God we, people, are to be caretakers, and stand in solidarity with nature. In this book he describes three important distinctions between how people relate to the earth: humanity *above* nature, humanity *in* nature, and humanity *with* nature. Humanity above nature holds that people are superior to nature. We, as humans created with intellect are superior to the natural world around us and therefore can destroy, pillage and tear nature a part. Humanity in nature takes a much different view of our relationship to nature. This view emphasizes that we are one part in-nature. There isn't a uniqueness to humans (or anything in the natural world). We are imbedded as something else to find in nature. The last view Hall proposes is humanity *with* nature. This, he argues, is the view we should adopt as our understanding of our relationship with nature. This view recognizes that people (and other creatures) are unique and have a specific function. The preposition *with* is integral to this understanding of our relationship to nature. We are to stand in solidarity *with*, we are to accompany nature.

This brings me to the text for today. Jesus uses this beautiful imagery of vines and branches to describe our relationship with God. In verse 5 he says, "I am

the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” This image of vines and branches describes a relationship. The branches cannot survive without the vines and the vine does not produce fruit without the branches. Jesus uses this word “abide” to describe that relationship. And this is to describe OUR relationship with God. We are to abide in God. We are to stay or remain with God. This is an intimate relationship. Jesus must have used the imagery of the vine and the branches to depict how we are to have a relationship with God because nature is so good relationships of reciprocity. There is a mutuality in the vine and branches’ relationship. The vine knows that in order for it to perform its function, it must work with the branches. And the branches rely on the vine for its well-being. This is the type of relationship we are to have with God, and even further this is the type of relationship we are to have with the land.

Let’s go back to the word “abide.” Jesus uses the word “abide” 11 times in this passage alone. There is an importance of abiding in God. I chose the hymn “Abide with Me” today to further remind ourselves what abiding in God looks like. Let’s read through verse 2 again.

“Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;
Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see—
O Thou who changest not, abide in me.”

In this hymn, the author describes the coming of the close of the day. When darkness is coming and “earth’s joys grown dim,” God is present. This hymn is a reminder of God’s continuous and abiding presence in our lives. I also love that the lyricist for this hymn uses so much earth-centered language throughout the whole hymn. It reminds me that God has a relationship with creation too. God doesn’t

care for just us but the rest of creation. And we are called into that relationship as well.

So what does abiding in the land, the Earth look like? Or, in the way Douglas John Hal describes it, what does humanity *with* nature look like?

It's hard to build this relationship with something that can't use words or emotions. As the person who tossed the soda pop on the ground in my first story, we become complacent with our relationship with nature because we do not have a relationship with it. There are ways, however, to build a relationship with nature.

One place I like to start is with animals. This does NOT mean if you are not an animal lover, you don't have any way to connect with nature, but it is one place to start. I'm sure many of you either now or at some point in your life had a pet. I have a cat in Arizona with my family, named Crookshanks. (Any Harry Potter fans here?) Does anyone else have pets? Share with your neighbor a little bit about this animal(s). My parents, a few weeks ago, made the hard decision to put my dog, Keats, to rest after several months of lots of medication. It was a difficult decision for my family, but knew she was in lots of pain, and it was time to put her to rest. What would you do for your pets? To what lengths would you take care of them? How often do you put their needs above your own?

What if we had this type of relationship with the land? What would it look like for us to care as deeply about the death and decay of a lake, river or stream as we do our pets? Some people do have that relationship. Farmers, scientists, and others who work with or study the land abide in the land. One reason I think farmers and scientists have this intimate relationship with the land is their knowledge of naming what is around them. Naming is the beginning, an opening, to a relationship. When you meet someone for the first time, what is the first thing you ask? What is your name? Naming is powerful and impactful. This can be a way to start building a relationship with creation. AND once we move in and begin

to have this relationship with the land, it's hard to ignore it. It's hard to ignore someone's suffering when you know their name, know their values, and passions. It's hard to ignore the suffering of creation when you build a relationship with it.

I find it so fitting that we are talking about care for the land and creation in the season of Easter. Just a few weeks ago we celebrated when Jesus overcame death. We proclaimed the power of God through Jesus' resurrection. During this celebration of Jesus' resurrection, who through that provides us with new life, is the season of spring: a time to witness new life first hand. Doesn't spring seem like a resurrection of sorts? After a long winter of all creation huddled up and retreated to survive the cold, spring brings new life. Spring brings new birth. A resurrection of creation. A resurrection of creation AND of people. Just last week it was beautiful to walk through my neighborhood and witness kids playing in the park, and adults talking in the street again. Spring is the time when we come out of our homes, enter the warm spring air, ready to tend to the Earth once again.

As we enter this spring/summer season I encourage, no urge, you to stop and recognize the new life budding up around you. Soon trees and flowers will begin to bud. Animals will come out of hibernation. People will come out of their homes to work with the land in their gardens. New life is springing up everywhere. During this season reflect on what it means to abide in each other and abide in the Earth. Remember in this season that Jesus spent his life abiding in others and we are to take that example and abide in all of creation. Creation needs a relationship with us. May we live into that calling. Amen.