Learning from Creation

Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen

Green Discipleship Series

Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Feb. 19, 2017

**Scripture: Job 12:7-10 and Luke 12:22-32**

I want to start my sermon today with bit of a confession: I’m a very indoor person. Unlike a number of you, I grew up in cities, somewhat removed from the natural world. As a child, my mother was concerned about this, having spent her entire childhood playing outside in any kind of weather, all year round. She would have to shoo me out the door in the summer, to try to get me to play outside. So, I would bring a book and sit in a hammock under our crabapple tree and read for countless hours. Not quite the active play my mom was hoping for. But at least I was outside, right?

 Though it’s a bit ironic for me to be talking about the natural world, I think my experience isn’t all that uncommon today. As our world becomes increasingly concentrated in urban centres or cities, many people now live at a distance from the natural world, and are out of touch with it – not knowing where our food and water come from, never mind how to grow or raise food or the details and intricacies of our larger ecosystem, whether healthy or damaged. As a somewhat extreme example, I once saw a documentary about the first camping trip taken by a number of kids from New York City, on which they saw starry night sky for the first time. Where they lived, the city lights were simply too bright to see the stars. To me, this is a really sad reality – there’s something fundamental that these children are denied in having so little contact with the natural world. It doesn’t seem right. There’s something missing.

Our two Scripture texts for today would certainly agree that contact with creation is integrally important for us as human beings. These passages are interesting in that they not only call us to value God’s creation as good or to commit to learn *about* it. They go one step further: they invite us to learn *from* creation, to pay attention to what creation has to teach us, to the wisdom that it offers us. And for us, with our cultural and theological history of thinking human beings are “in charge” of creation or that it’s there for us to use for our own intents and purposes, the idea of learning from creation can really turn some of our assumptions upside down. So let’s dive in, shall we?

In Job 12, we read, “But ask the animals, and they will teach you;

the birds of the air, and they will tell you;

ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;

and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?

In [God’s] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being” (12:7-10).

Ask the animals? Ask the plants? This passage really overturns our assumption that we as humans are at the centre of creation, suggesting that the animals, birds, plants, and fish are not only as wise, but wiser than human beings in their knowledge of God! Here creation is intimately in tune with the Wisdom of the Divine, and if human beings are willing to listen, they can learn that Wisdom from their fellow creatures.

What a profound assertion – and one which, interestingly, sounds a lot like the traditional perspectives of First Nations peoples. Seriously – how many of you, if this passage hadn’t been identified as biblical, might have guessed that this was a quote from an Indigenous elder? The similarity is striking, and I would venture to say that it points our creation care theology and practice in a very specific direction. You see, if we are to truly care for creation in this particular time and place, in our Canadian prairie context, I don’t think we can avoid talking about Indigenous-settler relations, both past and present. Our treatment of this land and this place we call home is directly related to the profound mistreatment of the people who first called it home, including the attempts to destroy their cultural and spiritual traditions, which are so in tune with the wisdom of creation.

Indigenous Christian theologian George Tinker, who is a member of the Osage Nation in the Midwestern US, talks about his people’s relationship to creation as “the most precious gift” they can offer to those of other, non-Indigenous cultures and traditions. He describes it as

“our perspective on the interrelatedness of all creation and our deep sense of relationship with the land in particular. We are all relatives: from buffaloes and eagles to trees and rocks, mountains and lakes. Just as there is no category of the inanimate, there can be no conception of anything in the created world that does not share in the sacredness infused in God’s act of creation.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Along these lines, he speaks of how, for many people who are both Indigenous and Christian like himself, their sacred stories, ceremonies, and traditions function as a kind of extra “Old Testament” alongside the Christian Bible.[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, their stories and traditions expressing the sacredness of creation function as an additional sacred text, alongside the biblical stories. In effect, their traditional relationship to the land is just as sacred to Indigenous Christians as the Bible, and both *together* shape how they live in relationship with God and all of their relatives.

As we try to recover a sense of connectedness with creation, it’s almost a cliché to say that Christians of European descent or “settlers” like myself and many of you have much to learn from First Peoples. But it’s nevertheless true. To be clear, I’m not advocating that settlers should try to adopt aspects of First Nations cultures as our own, or to reduce these cultures to resources for settlers as we try to reconcile with creation. These are more subtle but still harmful forms of exploiting and appropriating First Nations cultures for the benefit of settlers. What I am suggesting, however, is that the hard work of relationship-building and reconciliation between Indigenous and settler peoples can be transformative. In really listening to one another – especially when settlers are doing most of the listening! – settlers can not only learn from Indigenous traditions, but can also learn to see their own tradition with new eyes, noticing the places where it too displays a reverence for creation. So respect and relationship with the land is both something we can learn from Indigenous traditions and something that we can recover in our own Scripture and theology. To name just one example, the twelfth-century mystic Bernard of Clairvaux spoke of creation as “the book that God wrote,” and that “whatever he knows of divine things . . . he learned in woods and fields,” with “the beeches and the oaks” as his teachers.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In recognizing this, Indigenous and settler peoples can cease to be “us” and “them” – that is, we cease to be people from drastically different cultures, the “settler” cultures, which have no resources for creation-care, and the Indigenous cultures, which are full of such resources, because we come to realize that Christianity and Judaism *also* call us to turn to creation to learn the Wisdom of God – an orientation toward creation is in fact *common ground* between our cultures, not something that divides us. Thus, care for creation as our shared home becomes something we have in common.

After all, our sacred Scriptures also invite us to “ask the animals, and they will teach you. . . . ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you.”

But you might be wondering whether I’m making too much of this obscure little passage in Job. Is that really an authoritative or central part of Scripture? Well, probably not. But the sentiment of these verses is echoed elsewhere in Scripture, including in many of Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels. Jesus, being a Galilean, grew up close to the land, among peasants, shepherds, and subsistence farmers. The crowds that followed him and whom he taught would have been predominantly from this group – ordinary, simple folk who lived close to the land, farming and fishing and raising animals and children! So it’s no wonder that so many of Jesus’ stories and parables and images are drawn from the natural world; this would have been what was most familiar to people, something they could easily relate to.

Thus, Jesus, drawing from people’s everyday lives, tells parables about vineyards and sowers and seeds (Matt 20, 13); compares himself to a true vine, a lamb, the bread of life, a shepherd, a mother hen (John, Luke 13); and speaks of the growth of the reign of God in profoundly organic terms: as yeast rising through dough, as a tiny mustard seed growing into the tallest shrub, as a tree that bears good fruit (Matt. 12-13). And in what is perhaps one of the most well-known of Jesus’ sayings, found in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, he sounds very much like Job in that he arguably invites us to learn from creation. He says,

“24Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! 25And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 26If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? 27Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 28But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!” (Luke 12).

While on the surface it seems as though Jesus is establishing the superiority of human beings over ravens and lilies, he is also doing something pretty surprising: he is pointing to the ravens and the lilies as *examples* for us of living without worry or anxiety – examples of what it means to trust in God, to rely on God. In other words, the raven and the lily are here examples of *faith* for us! God’s feeding and clothing – providing and caring – for the ravens and the lilies thus has something to teach us about the abundance of God’s love, which encompasses all of creation, down to the little birds and the grass underfoot.

 So what do the animals and the plants have to teach us, according to Jesus? What is the lesson, here? Well, I think Jesus’ use of all of these nature metaphors as well as his practice of spending time in prayer in the wilderness, indicates a deep sense that creation is alive with God’s presence, that God is everywhere in creation, infusing it with God’s wisdom and love. This means that we are not above the rest of creation as human beings, but integrated with it: we are interdependent with the animals and plants, who are also enfolded in the love of God.

But today, in the context of global warming, desertification, ocean pollution, and animal extinction, the lesson may be more difficult to stomach: creation is giving us some pretty clear signs that all is not well, that the overall relationship between human beings and the rest of creation is imbalanced, even broken. But this does not mean that we are to sit and worry – Jesus is pretty clear about that! We are to listen to what creation is telling us: about the need for balance and careful limits, about generosity and the interconnectedness of wondrously diverse living things, even about creation’s fragile-yet-resilient ability to heal and eventually recover from harm and destruction. All of these lessons – as difficult and challenging as some of them may be – are available to us from our fellow living things, created by the same creating, redeeming, and sustaining God of Life.

The only question remains: are we willing to listen?

AMEN

1. George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tinker, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)