

**For the Beauty of the Earth: Creation as Gift**  
**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**  
**NPMC – July 9, 2023**

*Scripture: Psalm 104:1-13, 24; James 1:16-18*

*Hymns: For the Beauty of the Earth - VT 120; All Creatures Worship God Most High - VT 81 v 1-4; This is God's Wondrous World – VT 180*

**Psalm 104:1-13, 24 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul.

O LORD my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honor and majesty,

<sup>2</sup> wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent;

<sup>3</sup> you set the beams of your chambers on the waters;

you make the clouds your chariot;

you ride on the wings of the wind;

<sup>4</sup> you make the winds your messengers,

fire and flame your ministers.

<sup>5</sup> You set the earth on its foundations,

so that it shall never be shaken.

<sup>6</sup> You cover it with the deep as with a garment;

the waters stood above the mountains.

<sup>7</sup> At your rebuke they flee;

at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

<sup>8</sup> They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys,

to the place that you appointed for them.

<sup>9</sup> You set a boundary that they may not pass,

so that they might not again cover the earth.

<sup>10</sup> You make springs gush forth in the valleys;

they flow between the hills,

<sup>11</sup> giving drink to every wild animal;

the wild asses quench their thirst.

<sup>12</sup> By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;

they sing among the branches.

<sup>13</sup> From your lofty abode you water the mountains;

the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

<sup>24</sup> O LORD, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;

the earth is full of your creatures.

**James 1:16-18 (NRSV)**

<sup>16</sup> Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup> In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

My family has been fortunate to be living in the same house for several years now, meaning that some of the garden plants have become really well established. One of these is our little strawberry patch, which is in its fourth year of producing delicious little berries from about June to October! (see the picture) They're smaller than the store-bought kind, but they're also so much sweeter and more flavourful. It's a delight to check under the leaves every day or two to see whether they're ripe yet. And the miracle is that this happens with very little effort on our part, aside from perhaps some watering. Otherwise, the berries just appear, as a gift.

This year, when my strawberries began to bloom and produce fruit, I had Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass* on my mind. You see, she spends a whole chapter talking about this very thing; it's called "The Gift of Strawberries." Now this book itself is a gift because of who Kimmerer is – she is a botanist or plant scientist who teaches and researches plants on an academic level. She is also an Indigenous woman, belonging to the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. In her writing, she weaves together Indigenous wisdom and ways of approaching and understanding the plant world and creation with her scientific expertise. The results are a beautiful hybrid of knowledges.

In terms of strawberries, Kimmerer writes about them as central to her memory of what a gift is. She writes, "You could smell ripe strawberries before you saw them, the fragrance mingling with the smell of sun on damp ground. It was the smell of June, the last day of school, when we were set free, and the Strawberry Moon, *ode'mini-giizis*. ... Even now, after more than fifty Strawberry Moons, finding a patch of wild strawberries still touches me with a sensation of surprise, a feeling of unworthiness and gratitude for the generosity and kindness that comes with an unexpected gift all wrapped in red and

green. ‘Really? For me? Oh, you shouldn’t have.’”<sup>1</sup> In her language, Potawatomi, strawberries are known as ‘*ode min*,’ the heart berry, hence the connection to gift. She continues: “Strawberries first shaped my view of a world full of gifts simply scattered at your feet. A gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning. It is not a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present. Gifts exists in a realm of humility and mystery – as with random acts of kindness, we do not know their source.”<sup>2</sup> She goes on to speak about how as children, she and her siblings would always pick wild strawberries to make strawberry shortcake for their dad on Father’s Day. He had them convinced that there was no greater gift they could give him than that. Looking back, she remembers that they didn’t have a whole lot of extra money as a family, and this was one way of making the day special without spending a lot. As a child, she remembers believing that a gift was by definition something homemade, something that “couldn’t be bought.” She states, “Gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. The field gave to us, we gave to my dad, and we tried to give back to the strawberries,” by helping the shoots and runners spread and get rooted in new places. “Because they had given us a gift,” she concludes, an ongoing relationship opened between us.”<sup>3</sup>

Isn’t this a wonderful way of looking at our relationship with the earth – in this kind of mutual, reciprocal way? Those of you who are farmers or gardeners or retired from those things likely resonate with Kimmerer’s view. But – hear me out – so does the

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Kimmerer, 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> Kimmerer, 25.

Bible. It's true! Much of what Kimmerer says about creation's gifts and this kind of close, attentive relationship with creation sounds a lot like the biblical understanding as well.

Let's take, for example, our Psalm for today, Psalm 104. This is a psalm of praise, all about the wonders of God's creation. God's presence is interwoven with creation as the light wraps around God "like a garment." God is described as living in the sky and water: "You stretch out the heavens like a tent, you set the beams of your chambers on the waters." Wind and clouds and fire are all part of God's transportation and communication: "you make the clouds your chariot; you ride on the wings of the wind; you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers." And then God's work of creation is described: setting the earth on its firm foundations, covering it with water and providing water to the wild animals and birds, setting boundaries for the waters, etc. What's remarkable about this description is that it all takes place in the present, right now. This isn't some primordial act of creation that happened once and then was left; this is a vision of God as actively creating and tending creation in an ongoing way. And, much like with Kimmerer – the earth responds! It says that "the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work" (v. 13). In other words, it's not just dead matter to be manipulated, but is part of the ongoing relationship between Creator and creation and creatures.

The other thing that is emphasized beyond a doubt in this Psalm is whose creation and creatures these are: God's. We all belong to God; God is the one who is to be praised for all of these gifts of creation, for all this work of tending it: "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (v. 24). This is very much in keeping with other passages of the Bible where

this logic of God as the one to whom the earth and the land belong is clear. The significance of this claim – that all of creation is rightfully God’s – means that it is not rightfully that of humanity. We are seen as “tenants” on God’s land or “stewards” of it, in contrast to the old sense of having “dominion” over it, as some translations of the Bible used to word it. And when the guidelines for a biblical year of Jubilee are declared – a societal ‘reset’ when enslaved people are set free, debts are to be forgiven, etc. – an interesting item that is included is that the land itself is allowed to rest.<sup>4</sup> There is to be “an agricultural fallow year” every seventh year. God says to Moses,

“When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a Sabbath for the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in their yield, <sup>4</sup> but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. <sup>5</sup> You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. <sup>6</sup> You may eat what the land yields during its Sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you, <sup>7</sup> for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.” (Leviticus 25:2b-7; see also Exodus 23)

Because the earth is God’s the Israelites are not permitted to do what they wish with it; they must respect its limits and allow it a Sabbath rest, as it were. They must remember that it is God’s gift – which is quite different from believing that we humans are God’s gift to the earth! There are some Indigenous people who point out that in their worldview, humans aren’t the pinnacle of creation but the weakest members of it! For example: a river would get along just fine without us, but we couldn’t survive long without water.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 16-19.

<sup>5</sup> See: [https://teaching.usask.ca/curriculum/indigenous\\_voices/land-acknowledgements/module.php](https://teaching.usask.ca/curriculum/indigenous_voices/land-acknowledgements/module.php)

If we return to Kimmerer's understanding of gift, this is precisely what she points out: that gifts are grounded in and foster relationship. She writes, "From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the 'gift' is deemed to be 'free' because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a 'bundle of rights,' whereas in a gift economy property has a 'bundle of responsibilities' attached"<sup>6</sup> – including the responsibility to make sure it stays healthy for future generations.

In a similar way, James 1 speaks of every gift and every act of generosity, as being rooted in God, who is in relationship with us and in whom all our relationships have their source. This is God, our Divine Parent, our Creator, who showers us with good gifts. James uses rich creation imagery here, speaking of God, "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (v. 18). Recalling God's creation by poetic speech in Genesis 1, James mixes metaphors of words and birth, fruitfulness and creatureliness. We are bound up with this good creation, and in many cases, our agrarian ancestors recognized this. As an old poem by Menno Wiebe goes, "With one hand in the soil and the other in the sky, my people maintain the balance between bread and belief."<sup>7</sup> Isn't that a lovely summary of the type of relationship we are to have with the rest of God's good creation? As Kimmerer puts it: "How, in our modern world, can we find our way to understand the earth as a gift again, to make our relations with the world sacred again?"

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<sup>6</sup> Kimmerer, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2022).

I know we cannot all become hunter-gatherers – the living world could not bear our wait – but even in a market economy, can we behave ‘as if’ the living world were a gift?”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout this summer series, I invite us to ponder these good questions, and ways in which they might become fruitful in our own lives, as we participate in gratitude and reciprocity for God’s many gifts. AMEN

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<sup>8</sup> Kimmerer, 31.