

Learning from Creation: For the Beauty of the Earth Series
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NPMC – Aug. 13, 2023

Scripture – Job 12:7-10; Luke 12:22-31

Hymns – For the Beauty of the Earth – VT 120; Seek Ye First – 417 – The Garden Needs Our Tending Now – 788

Job 12:7-10 (NRSV)

⁷“But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
⁸ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you,
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
⁹Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
¹⁰In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

Matthew 6:25-33

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

When I was a kid, family gatherings with my dad’s side of the family always involved a mix of languages. That side of my family comes from Paraguay, so everyone is fluent in Low German, High German, English, and other languages. The problem is, little Canadian me doesn’t know a lot of Low German. So as the conversation at gatherings switched back and forth between mostly English and Low German without others really

noticing, I was lost half the time! And worst of all, it seemed like most of what I was missing were the punchlines of the jokes, which don't really translate well into English. Maybe some of you can relate to this kind of "mixed language soup" with which I grew up. And I know some of you remember the very emotionally charged conversations about 50 years ago, when Mennonite churches were switching from German language worship services to exclusively English services. So why were these such intense conversations? I think we can safely say that it wasn't because God only speaks German! But it nevertheless was a big deal, because language matters. Languages carry entire cultures and worldviews, humour and history, things that cannot be translated into another language, that can be lost in translation.

In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Indigenous plant scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer talks about discovering new aspects of her heritage as she learns her traditional language, Pota-wa-tomi (which is closely related to Ojibwe/Anishinabemowin). It is a language that is on the brink of being lost, which only has nine elderly fluent speakers left – lending a certain urgency to her efforts to learn it.¹ As she learns the language, she also learns more about the cultural and spiritual worldview of her people. Especially interesting for her as a plant scientist, is what she calls "the grammar of animacy" – that is, the ways in which the grammar of the language itself reflects a deep respect for the rest of creation, a sense of other living things as equals with whom we as human beings are in relationship. She writes,

Imagine seeing your grandmother standing at the stove in her apron and then saying of her, 'Look, it is making soup. It has gray hair.' We might snicker at such a mistake, but we also recoil from it. In English, we never refer to a member of our family, or indeed to any person, as *it*. That would be a profound act of disrespect. *It* robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere

¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 50.

thing. So it is that in Potawatomi and most other Indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family.²

Now some of this sense of kinship with the rest of God's created world is familiar to us, but Kimmerer's language takes this notion of animate being, of being relatives, much further than what many of us would expect. Sure, we can recognize animals and plants as fellow living things, but what about rocks, mountains, water, fire, certain sacred locations? These are all "animate"/ living things in the Potawatomi language. So for example, the word for bay (the body of water) is not a noun or object in Potawatomi, but a verb – translated to something like "to be a bay." In learning this word, "to be a bay," something clicked for Kimmerer, and she realized that "A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiik-we-ga-maa* – to *be* a bay – releases the water from bondage and lets it live. 'To be a bay' holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores." So the language itself reflects "the life that pulses through all things."³

Do we have room in our Christian worldview for this sense of the interconnectedness of all living things? The typical Western worldview has emphasized a kind of hierarchy of the natural world, with human beings at the top of the food chain, in charge of everything else. But as I've mentioned before, Indigenous worldviews invert this, recognizing that human beings are the most vulnerable, the most dependent on

² Kimmerer, 55.

³ Kimmerer, 55.

other living things for our survival.⁴ I would even question the idea that the first image – the hierarchy of domination – is an accurate reflection of Christianity. When we read about being created alongside the rest of the created world to “steward” rather than dominate it (Gen. 1), covenants made with animals and humans in the Noah story (Gen. 9), sabbath rest for land and wild animals in the Jubilee laws (Lev. 25), and our Scriptures for today, the hierarchy of domination starts to seem like a distortion of the true relationship between human beings and the rest of creation. In fact, in the Bible, trouble has tended to come when we forget that we too are creatures.

In the book of Job – one of the wisdom books wrestling with difficult life questions – there is much reflection on suffering, vulnerability, and power. When Job’s so-called friends insist that God must be punishing him for some kind of sin, he insists that he has done nothing wrong and yet is experiencing suffering: “I, who called upon God and [God] answered me, a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock” (v. 4). Life is not that simple, he is saying, that suffering only happens to those who sin. And to make his point, he appeals not to the wisdom of priests or scholars or teachers, but rather to the wisdom of the rest of creation. This is where our passage comes in:

- ⁷ “But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
⁸ ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you,
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
⁹ Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
¹⁰ In [God’s] hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.” (**Job 12:7-10, NRSV**)

⁴ Rose Roberts and Stryker Calvez, “Land Acknowledgments: Worldviews and Positioning,” video, Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, https://teaching.usask.ca/curriculum/indigenous_voices/land-acknowledgements/module.php

When he is seeking to make a point about God, Job therefore appeals to those who have an intimate relationship with God – the animals and birds, the fish, even the plants (which I'm sure Kimmerer would appreciate!). These living beings know what Job's friends struggle to understand about God's ways. They, like us, are in communion with God, their Creator. In the words of eco-theologian Thomas Berry, "we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects."⁵ There is a creatureliness that we share with other living beings that links us to each other, and to the Creator who loves all of us.

Our passage from Matthew 6, part of the Sermon on the Mount, paints a similar picture. Within this collection of teachings on how to live, on the ethics of Jesus-followers, Jesus speaks to the human tendency to worry about being able to meet our basic needs – survival, food, drink, clothing. Like Job, Jesus appeals to our fellow creatures – animals and plants – as examples of what it means to live wisely, to live with a sense of trust that God cares for us and will provide for us: "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . . Consider the lilies of the field, 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" (v. 26, 28-29). But wait a moment, doesn't this seem a bit heavy-handed of Jesus, to tell people not to worry about meeting their basic needs? In our current context of the cost-of-living crisis and skyrocketing grocery prices, it seems especially cruel to tell people not to worry, that God will miraculously provide. As Bible commentator Emerson Powery points out, "For those whom scarcity of food is a daily concern, it is not easy to be

⁵ Berry quoted in Kimmerer, 56.

unconcerned.” But Powery also makes the case that there is something else going on here. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus has taught his listeners the Jesus prayer (or Lord’s prayer), with its teachings on debt forgiveness (v. 9-13), and has also taught people not to store up earthly treasures (v. 19-21). Here, he says that the lilies are even more beautiful than the opulent robes of one of the richest people Israel has ever seen – King Solomon. This means, Powery says, that “God’s care for nature is even more attentive than this unnatural acquisition of wealth.”⁶ The problem is not worrying about meeting the basic necessities of life, but rather when that worrying becomes manifest in taking more than our share, in causing harm to others – both human and non-human – in our desire for our own financial security, at any cost. That is a different type of worrying, isn’t it! When our family of creatures becomes disposable for our own gain, when we are destroying our own home planet for the sake of profits, that is when we are not setting our hearts on the kinds of treasures we were created to value, or seeking first the reign of God and God’s ways of justice and peace.

As we continue to learn from Indigenous ways of knowing, I want to close with a local story that very much reflects Kimmerer’s “grammar of animacy.” When we think of the Truth and Reconciliation process, we probably think of two groups of people, Indigenous and settler peoples, reconciling and learning to live better together in mutual relationship. But within the Indigenous worldview, that is much too narrow, since it doesn’t include those non-human relatives all around us – animals and plants, rocks and waters. At Wanuskewin Heritage Park, when there were discussions about bringing

⁶ Emerson Powery, “Commentary on Matthew 6:24-34,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/eighth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-624-34>

the bison back, there was a chair at the table of the meetings that was left empty for the bison. What a powerful symbol of respect that they felt these bison relatives must be represented at the decision-making table. And if you go to Wanuskewin, there are several videos on display about just what it means to the Cree and other Indigenous peoples here that the bison have returned to these lands after 150 years of absence. It is a homecoming, and a very healing reunion between the peoples here and the bison they consider family. As we continue to open our time of worship with a land acknowledgment each week, may this serve as a reminder to continue to find common ground between Indigenous and biblical ways of knowing. May it serve to remind us that God's wide, wide love created and includes all living things, that we can learn from the wisdom of the birds and animals, plants and fish on whom we depend for our very lives, that ultimately, wherever we look is holy ground. AMEN