

Homily—Overcoming the Disconnect

5 2 21 UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi

Facebook reminded me on Thursday that this Fellowship called me to ministry with you just three years ago. We were so completely new to each other, but there was so much about you and about Mankato that was and continues to be attracting and grounding for me.

I continue, for instance, to be thrilled by the opportunities for recycling in this region. Yes, recycling, and composting. That first year, I bought a little compost bucket for under the sink, complete with compostable collection bags. I had tried compost piles at two of the houses I lived in before, but an open pile in the middle of the city—that is not a good thing generally. We all love urban wildlife—rabbits and squirrels and deer, but oh my, the rats. Hardly anybody likes rats. And if you are the person with the open compost that is attracting rats, believe me, the neighbors are not thrilled with you. I also tried a closed composting bin, but I could never get the balance right. So, city living kept me from composting.

But then I move to Mankato, and I bought my little compost bucket and compostable collection bags and when that little bag of cooking scraps was full, I would drop it off at Sibley Park on my way to the Fellowship. Wow. No worries about rats. A bag or two a week. Now that Jeff is here, and we live in North Mankato, that compost bucket is still handy, but we have a bigger bucket in the garage, too, and we take that down to the Riverbend Recycling Center once a week, full to the brim.

It feels good to know that all the carrot tops and cabbage leaves and whatnot are going back to the earth, not into some landfill, where the rotting would produce methane gas rather than the rich loam that eventually I get to work back into my garden. And composting isn't the end of it. I recycle everything that I can, scanning the information sheet from the City and the used container in my hand to make sure I don't miss anything. And I find it sad when I must by-pass the recycling bin for the garbage can, wishing the packaging were not going to end up in that landfill. I started using compostable garbage bags, along with the compost containers. And now, on the recycling front, I can make my next effort with the plastic films recycling program, that partnership between Trex and HyVee.

So now, even less in my actual garbage can. But, I can't help but have this image in my mind—deep down in the landfill, this tattered and decaying bag surrounds a pile of plastic that will not degrade in a million years. It reminds me of those tragic photos of albatross, starved to death and decomposing around a bellyful of plastic that could not feed them, no matter how much they ate.

I hope this minor obsession with recycling and composting shows you just how interconnected we were three years ago and are now. When you called me to ministry, I knew about the composting from the Fellowship kitchen. I knew about the organic garden, supported by the labor of Fellowship people and from the free will donations of the congregation. I knew about the “Center for the Recycling of Strange Objects,” the boxes and programs you maintained so that pens and markers and toothbrushes and razor blades and cereal bags and more would not end up in the landfill. I knew about the cloth napkins and the rejection of disposal plastic tableware. I knew your mission, now recited as our Chalice Lighting,

calling us, among other things, to nurture the earth. Nurture the earth. What a beautiful phrase. And what a beautiful commitment.

And here we are together, three years later, in the midst of a pandemic that reminds us that we are all connected even while still isolated in our own homes and meeting mostly through the magic of Zoom. And perhaps now, more than ever, we are weighted down and depressed by the story of global climate change, climate crisis, and climate injustice. There is a bad story out there, friends, and it is an all too true story. There is too much petroleum and coal and gas extracted from deep in the earth, and there is too much carbon in the air. Each of our own carbon footprints produces devastating effects. Extraction poisons the water, both during the process and when fossil fuels are burned. The chemicals released into the air rain toxins into the oceans, acidifying them, killing off corals and breaking the food chain that sustains us all. Our atmosphere is warming, melting the frozen world, calving icebergs that raise the sea levels and thawing permafrost into a slushy peat releasing its millennia of captured methane. All this and more drives a mass extinction of plant and animal life.

And the climate crisis is destructive to the justice we seek as well. Government subsidizes wealthy industrialized companies, favoring the polluters and the extractors. Landfills of trash are built in the neighborhoods of people with the least economic and political power. Diseases and syndromes emerging from Western extraction practices hurt our siblings more and hurt more of our siblings who live more precariously, with less means and less cultural authority. Chemical dumps and processing plants, too. Wherever you find trash heaps and chemical rubbish, you find people whose “No” was refused or unheard by those with power. In the physical and existential realms, our human lives are sicker and less vital.

In this story, we do not nurture the earth at all. We do not nurture. We rape and pillage. We ignore earth’s cries for care and for justice. And this is a story driven by fear—fear of scarcity, fear of “not enough for me,” fear of our powerlessness in the face of monolithic and anonymous corporations and backroom lobbies, fear of the powerful positive feedback loops of the cosmos unleashed by our actions and now out of our control. This is a bad story, and it is a true story. But it is not the only story, and it is not the only truth.

As climate crisis confronts us, whether we are afraid or not, do we imagine that it is too late to do anything to save ourselves? Is fear getting us anywhere? I don’t think so. I respond to fear with anger and rage rather than action. I respond to fear with weeping and shutdown, with distraction in the face of extraction. But there is another story, friends. There is another truth. As Emily Dickinson urges us to see, we can “Tell the truth but tell it slant” (1263). There is abundant testimony out there to enable us to, as Terry Pratchett urges us, “Change the story, change the world.”

It is possible to tell a story other than devastation, other than scarcity, other than collapse. This new story exists alongside the story of fearfulness. And it is a story of love, of abundant love, a story of enough for all when we are not wasteful, when we are not greedy, when we are instead caring, nurturing, and grateful. It is a story where we nurture the earth, and the nourishment flows back to us

morefold. For nature is not outside of us. It is us. We are part of the land. We are part of the animals and plants. We are part of the all the people. And nature is all part of us, too, in memory and body knowledge. We in this Fellowship are part of this story, and it is important to acknowledge and celebrate this truth at a slant.

There are a multitude of loving stories out there, and they are true, too. We need to pay attention to them because fear never made for productive action. We must attend to these stories because they sing of life itself, of the life that has given rise to us. We are inhabitants of a wounded, fragile earth, a being overflowing with life and creativity. Our human identity is connected to and inextricable from the creative energy of liveliness, in all its power and vulnerability, in all its flourishing and demise and change. We human beings can learn the story anew, how to be just, loving, and responsible members of a sacred household.

Witness the Water Protectors, telling the story of generations of grief and triumph, of thankfulness and joy. Realize the healing of relationship that comes from sharing a meal, comes from puppetry, from song and dance, the healing that arises from knowing the plants and the animals as our relatives, all of us becoming through the sunlight and water that we, in fact, are. Partake of the reciprocal care of harvesting wild rice, tapping the maples, taking enough of the bounty but not too much, and protecting the water. Water is sacred. Without water there is no life. Feel this new story in your body accompanied by ancient and new songs. We'll celebrate together the action taken in love.

Witness the reciprocity of trees and cities, not opposites of each other. Nature is more than prettiness and a rest for weary eyes. Because we humans are nature, when trees are cultivated and nurtured, the humans are healthier, too. Justice demands that we plan trees and parks into urban space not simply for the beauty but because that plan, that intention, that loving engagement revitalizes life itself in all beingness.

Yes, we need to preserve wilderness areas, enabling animals to live their animal ways. Yes, we need to preserve our air and our water, fighting at the sources where industry and government try to collude just out of our sight, where the powerless and the disenfranchised start the fights that we need to join. But yes also, in our own yards, small as they may be. To learn the names of the plants and how they grow. To encourage the birds and the animals to liveliness. To lie in the grass on the night of a full moon or a new moon or any moon or in the day in the sun and soak in the warmth and the cold of the earth that we are made of, *humus*, just like her.

We will only act because our love is engaged. Our sensual, bodily love that remembers how we were all brought into the world—out of our mothers' bodies on a whoosh of water. That remembers life created us with the blueprints of eons, passed from our ancestors. This love is not a mere intellectual ideal. It is the love that acknowledges bodies and their inherent vulnerability, bodies that need love and nourishment, physical and spiritual. This is a love that knows the physical reality should be held tenderly and reverently, as the sacred life giving and life sustaining being that the earth is.

May we be as the *humus*, humble, sensing where we come from and caring about our family, our parent, our mother-father. May we feel those earthly and earthy connections. May we continue our engagement as a community, adding into our lives, collective and individual, that one more and one more action to nurture the earth, not an obligation but a clear sign that we are not be severed from the living world. And may you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may the people say, "Amen."

Works consulted and further reading:

Ayres, Jennifer R. *Inhabitation: Ecological Religious Education*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019

Emergence Magazine Podcast. "The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Invisibility of Nature" by Michael

McCarthy. [Spotify – The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Invisibility of Nature – Michael McCarthy - Emergence Magazine Podcast | Podcast on Spotify](#) Accessed April 28, 2021.

Macy, Joanna and Chris Johnstone. *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*.

Novato, CA: New World Library, 2021

Ray, Sarah Jaquette. *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Coll on a Warming Planet*.

Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020