

Preaching for the Whole Creation

The Season of Easter, Part 2.

Easter 5-7 and the Festival of Pentecost
May 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, 2021
Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

Commentary on the Lectionary by the Rev. Dr. Dennis Ormseth*

Theme: The community which the death and resurrection of Jesus raised into being is a community of life that embraces all of creation. It is a community of love, one for which all creation gives fulsome praise to its Creator as to its Savior. It is a community which hopes that all Creation will be liberated from human possessiveness and domination. It is a community in which the Spirit of God will make this hope a reality, until all creation is restored.

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:25-31
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower . . . 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.' John's use of the metaphor of the vine for the community of life encompassing God, Jesus and his disciples, so beautifully characterized in the second lesson from 1 John as a community of love, is rich in implication for the church's vocation in relationship to the creation. The life of branches is inseparable from the life of the vine: on this natural truth hangs the power of the admonition: "apart from me you can do nothing." A like truth is that a vine cannot live without being rooted in soil; vine and branches together grow fruit when the vine is well rooted and watered in the vineyard. The relationship of vine and branch is thus part of a much larger relationship that embraces the vine-dresser, or the gardener, the vineyard in which the vine is planted, and its sustaining environs. Jesus, according to John's account, is not unmindful of this larger frame of reference: on the contrary, could he be "the true vine" if "the vinegrower," who brings all these elements together, is not his "Father", that is, the Creator?

As in the case of the image of the "shepherd" from last Sunday's gospel, the metaphor of the vine as used here bears theological significance, as a word about the Creator no less than the Redeemer. Background for this understanding is found, of course, in the Hebrew Bible. As Walter Brueggemann observes, "Yahweh as Gardener-Vinedresser" is an "enormously supple metaphor." Already in Exodus 15:17 it is used "in anticipation of Israel's reception of the land of promise: 'you brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established'" (*Theology of the Old Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, p. 255). And in what Brueggemann regards as the paradigmatic construction of the metaphor, Isaiah 5:1-7, Yahweh is seen to be "generous and attentive in caring for the vineyard that is Israel/Judah."

*These comments are adapted and revised from those available from 2015 on the website of Lutherans Restoring Creation.

Already here there is concern for “the true vine,” Brueggemann observes: God *cares* that the vineyard produce good fruit. Indeed, “failing that (v. 7b), Yahweh the vinekeeper will destroy the vineyard.” The combination of generosity and destructive judgment is characteristic of the use of the metaphor in prophetic literature, as it expresses the relationship between God and the people in connection with “the loss of land and the regiving of the land after exile.” The metaphor expresses

both the destructive potential of Yahweh against a recalcitrant object of love, and the remarkable generosity of Yahweh, which becomes the source of hope for rehabilitation in times of displacement. In the midst of destructive potential and remarkable generosity, we note that the gardener-vinedresser has firm, clear, nonnegotiable expectations for the vine. The vineyard must be productive, yielding in obedience the fruit intended by the planting (Brueggemann, p. 257).

Against this background, we want to suggest, the development of the metaphor in the Gospel reading for this Sunday offers “hope for rehabilitation in times of displacement,” or in our time of ecological crisis, for the restoration of the creation in the face of the destructive alienation of the human community from the earth that sustains it. There is hope here in this season of resurrection, given God's care, for what the Gospel of John and the second reading from the second reading from 1 John together confidently anticipate, the restoration of the community of life as an all-encompassing community of love.

Jesus' claim to be the “true vine” would appear in this context to mean that he is the true Israel that produces the rich fruit God desires from the land. Raymond E. Brown observes that it is “a feature of Johannine theology that Jesus applied to himself terms used in the OT for Israel and in other parts of the NT for the Christian community.” And because John “sees the Christian believers as the genuine Israelites, the vine as a symbol of Jesus and the believers is, in a certain way, the symbol of the new Israel” (*The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*. New York, Doubleday, 1970, pp. 670-72). This theme is of crucial significance for creation care as an integral aspect of the church's mission. John appropriates for Jesus the significance of Israel, and particularly of Israel at worship in the temple, for the well-being of the people in relationship to the land. As we just noted from Exodus 15, the vine of Israel was planted “on the mountain of [Yahweh's] possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.” A golden vine with clusters as tall as a man, Brown observes, was a notable ornament of the Jerusalem Temple. Coins of the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66-70), struck to honor Jerusalem the holy, were stamped with an outline of a vine and branches. Rabbinical disciples regrouped at Jamnia were known as a vineyard (Brown, pp. 674-75.) Whether Jesus cast as “true vine” as over against the “false vine” of Israel's religious leadership need not concern us for the moment; the important point for us here is that as was the temple in relationship to Israel's existence in the land, so is Jesus' relationship to the church: the true vine is the sign of right relationship, Creator, people, and land taken together, producing good fruit..

Readers may object that there is no explicit reference to the land in John 15:1-8. A narrow focus on the metaphor as having to do solely with the relationship between Jesus and his followers easily leads to this conclusion. When the Creator is seen to be part of the metaphor, on the contrary, the land the Creator provides is clearly relevant to the interpretation. One needs, we propose, to think wholistically about the structure of the original metaphor. As we noted above, the vine needs soil, it needs to be rooted, it needs to be nourished and watered. No less than the absence of the vinegrower, displacement of the vine from the vineyard would in fact entail the elimination of the very possibility of life for the

vine. Given the context of the Gospel's composition, the claim that Jesus is the true vine retains for the future of his community the Jewish heritage of the land, although not necessarily limited to the specific land of Israel, since the natural metaphor is easily universalized. Against the dualism and gnosticism of the religious context of the Gospel's author, Jesus the true vine is rooted in the earth. If humans are "fundamentally rooted in this world, . . . earthbound," as David Rhoads puts it in introducing *Earthbound: Created & Called to Care for Creation*, "most importantly and surprisingly, so is God" (Seraphim Communications DVD, 2009, Episode 1: Created/Called).

This interpretation of the gospel reading does place strong emphasis on the importance of what Brown called "the anti-Synagogue polemic in John." Brown counsels readers of his commentary that John's "harsh statements about 'the Jews' must be understood and evaluated against the polemic background of the times when it was written (*The Gospel According to John I-XI*. New York, Doubleday, 1966, p. 368). We would add, however, that displacement of the presence of God from the temple to the person of Jesus and the body of Christ, as his presence came to be identified in the Eucharistic worship of the Christian community, liberated the experience of that presence from the social and political bonds in which those authorities had shackled it. Nothing illustrates that liberation so dramatically, perhaps, than the narrative concerning the Ethiopian eunuch in this Sunday's first lesson.

The eunuch had gone up to Jerusalem to worship in the temple; custom would have limited his access to an outer courtyard. Now on his way home to Ethiopia he encounters an apostle led by the Spirit of God, who shows him how he can enter fully into life with God, in and through the relationship with the Christian community in the body of Christ. If Ethiopia was then understood to be "at the ends of the earth," already in this exchange the good news of the reorientation to the creation as the gift of a loving God is becoming a reality everywhere, on what we now understand to be one planet in a marvelous universe. (For this reading of the lesson, see Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998, pp. 290-301). The liberation of the experience of God's love from the temple and its governing authorities makes possible the reorientation to the earth – *all* the earth – as the gift of God's love in which the true vine-dresser plants the true vine. Thus we appropriately sing in today's psalm text that

"All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him."

God's "rootedness" in the earth, in sum, is not limited to one mountain, or even to one land. It is available wherever there is water (even in the desert) by means of which we can enter and become part of a "new creation." Once seen as limited to a "holy land," that experience is now opened up in the presence of Christ to all who inhabit this "sacred earth." The vine grows where the vine-grower plants it, and its branches, pruned, trimmed as they may be, but also fed, bear good fruit.

The significance of "Jesus the vine" for the contemporary reader is expanded dramatically because the way in which the related metaphor of the "Tree of Life" has been employed in recent theological discussion to express scientific truth. As Elizabeth Johnson notes, in Charles Darwin's hands the image of the Tree stands for the whole community of life, as it

illuminates an ecological truth: 'Let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life.' . . . This is true not just here or there but everywhere; not just now and then but always.

That all species are related in the flow of life and death is a keystone of evolutionary theory. The grandeur displayed in this view of life is ecological in character. Reading [Darwin's] *Origin* with an ecologically open eye allows its deep appreciation for the interrelatedness of life to emerge, offsetting the stereotype that life consists of nothing more than brutal competition (Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, London; Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 121).

Unfortunately, considered as a species, as Larry Rasmussen argues, we humans have now placed ourselves outside of this community. He writes,

“The Tree of life as part of us and we as part of it lives somewhere outside our modern self awareness. Modernity's prized bubble--the built environment as our true habitat—leads to 'apartheid' consciousness at the species level. Like whites in apartheid South Africa, we think “our kin” can develop separately. Human beings collectively become the center and focus, drawing upon all the rest as needed. We do not regard ourselves *internally* related as kin to the rest of a shared and indispensable community that also lives embedded in the earth and cosmos (Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 19-20).

Accordingly, the image of Jesus as the Vine who gives life to its branches can serve to encourage us to re-enter into that community of life. Although “bio-social creatures by nature,” Rasmussen further observes,

we might acknowledge that our deepest human need is for social bonds in committed relationships—the opposite of self-absorption—we for some reason do not extend these bonds and commitments to other-than-human life. The outcome is the kind of anthropocentrism that smothers the cosmophilia (love of the cosmos) and biophilia (love of life) native to the kind of creature we are (Rasmussen, p. 20).

So the metaphor is finally not just about “life.” It is also about *love*. When “the vinedresser” is God the Creator of all things, we can indeed hope to transcend the “constricted and alienated sense of ourselves” that is “the species counterpart of the heart-turned-on-upon itself (*cor curvatum in se*) that the Christian tradition has identified as sin. This is indeed hope for all who live in exile from God's good earth. They can re-enter the community of life., and produce good fruit. As Norman Wirzba writes,

True followers are beloved friends of Jesus who know from the inside what the intention and the life of the Father is all about. If they are grafted onto Jesus – most basically by continuing Christ's ministries of feeding, healing, forgiving, and reconciling – then they will be continuing in the world God's own life-building ways that have been in place since the first day of creation. They will garden creation like God does. Jesus is the vine that makes possible every fruit-bearing branch. (*Food and Faith*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 67).

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B

May 9, 2021

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises” (Psalm 98:4) As the season of Easter draws to a close – the Feast of the Ascension follows in four days and the readings for the Seventh Sunday will take note of the dramatic shift in the immediacy of Jesus' presence with his disciples – the Psalm for this Sixth Sunday of Easter calls for a final chorus of joyous praise from “all the earth.” Why this call for praise from *all* the earth? According to the psalm, it is because “The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.” The statement of praise thus bridges from God's covenant with Israel to God's love for all the earth: “He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel” (98:3a), and “All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God” (98:3b) So indeed, “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things” (98:1).

What is particularly interesting for us relative to our concern for care of creation, of course, is that otherkind as well as humankind is called on to sing these praises. Part of the chorus is clearly human, accompanied by lyre, trumpets and horn (98:5-6). But the full ensemble includes the non-human creation as well: “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth (98:7-9). Terry Fretheim observes how intimately related these voices are to their respective places in creation: listing various creatures together – as in Psalm 98, the sea and all that fills it, the world and those who live in it – with mention of their particular capacities for praise – e.g., the sea's roar, the waters' clapping, the hills' singing – renders “each entity's praise . . . distinctive according to its intrinsic capacity and fitness, with varying degrees of complexity. Yet each entity is also part of the one world of God and contributing its praise to that of the whole, they perform a “symphony of praise” as an acknowledgment of the “range of God's creative work and hence God's praise-worthiness” (Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2005, pp. 255-59). The psalmist gives voice to joy in creation that is solidly what we know today as “ecological. Arther Walker-Jones agrees, and adds the important observation that in the psalmist's view, here and elsewhere, all creation praises God because “all creatures are subject of God's just reign.” Their joy “at the presence of the Lord” is due to their expectation that “he is coming to judge the earth.” They can look forward to a future when God will bring all creation together in a community characterized by righteousness and equity.” (*The Green Psalter: Resources for an Ecological Spirituality*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2009. p. 146). The community of life is a community of justice and mutual regard.

Read in the context of the season of Easter we take this expectation of all the creation to be fully vindicated by the victory over the powers of death in the death and resurrection of Jesus. While our texts for this Sunday are focused almost exclusively on the human realm alone, readers might well note the astonishment of the “circumcised believers with Peter” over the fact that the Spirit present in this community “had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). Something unexpected is happening here in the wake of the resurrection. The Spirit promised to this community is an “other-inclusive” presence, we might suggest, a presence which according to today's Gospel reading, binds the community together in the Creator's love. We note this Gospel follows directly on Jesus' description of

his relationship with his disciples in terms of the metaphor of vine and branches which the church read last Sunday, so that, as Raymond Brown argues, “vs. 9-17 with their theme of love are really an interpretation of the idea of bearing fruit in 8” and “the whole of 9-17 is still very much related to that imagery.” Thus the power of that metaphor is fully developed as an expression of the Creator's love: Jesus' life, death and resurrection is a manifestation of the love that bears this fruit of full community in the Spirit. As soil, vine and branches work together to produce food, so God's love creates the community that sees in Jesus' life and death the source of its new life. The vine's life given for others is an essential aspect of Christian life, Brown argues (*The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*. New York, Doubleday, 1970, p. 682). Life in Christian community is like the life of the vine: rooted in God, fed by the vine, growing fruit, the Christian community properly understands itself as embedded in the righteousness, or “right-workings,” of the new creation.

As an entire act of God's love, Jesus' life, death and resurrection creates sustained community. Other-kind thus has reason to rejoice because the way the human community is healed is seen to be the way the vine grows in the new creation of God. The way things work in ecological community is the way things will work in the human community re-created by God's love. The right relationship that exists in the community of otherkind is in this sense the broad framework within which human-kind can recover its right orientation to creation. Otherkind can accordingly hope that humankind will come to live in harmony with its way of life. But the correspondence derives from a greater, all encompassing source; as Norman Wirzba observes, “The language of sacrifice and self-giving” in this understanding, “should not come as a surprise to those who wish to participate in God's gardening ways,” because

Christ is the embodiment of God's nature as the one who gives without end. Christ reveals the 'eternal kenosis' that is active in the divine Trinitarian life, and so demonstrates that 'God desires to give and realize his love in what is “other.” God's original creation of the Garden of Eden was and continues to be an act in which God 'makes room' for what is not God to be and to flourish (Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 69).

Elizabeth Johnson makes the point similarly, at the conclusion of a work in which she has listened intently to what “the beasts” have to say:

commitment to ecological wholeness in partnership with a more just social order is the vocation which best corresponds to God's own loving intent for our corner of creation. We all share the status of creaturehood; we are all kin in the evolving community of life now under siege; our vision must be one of flourishing for all. The immediate aim is to establish and protect healthy ecosystems where all creatures, including poor human beings and plants and animals being driven to extinction, can thrive. The longer-term goal is a socially just and environmentally sustainable society in which the needs of all people are met and diverse species can prosper, onward to an evolutionary future that will still surprise.

This is the vision, she concludes, “that must guide us at this critical time of Earth's distress, to practical and critical effect”: “A flourishing humanity on a thriving planet rich in species in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God” (Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 285-86).

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year B

May 16, 2021

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

As congregations hear the readings for this last Sunday of the Easter Season, perhaps only a few participants might be moved to comment, “well, Easter was great, but what happens now? What do we do next?” Families quickly move on to their list of spring activities, with graduations, weddings, plans for summer camps high on the agenda. The notion that the congregation might consider what they should do next in terms that relate specifically to the care of creation will not seem so strange, however, if the message of God's love for all creation we have been developing these past weeks has been persistently presented by the congregation's pastor. And the strange episode in our first reading this Sunday, the replacement of Judas by Matthias in the circle of Jesus followers could well prompt final food for thought relative to that message. Indeed, the narrative offers a fascinating stepping -off point for some summary reflections on the significance of the Easter lectionary for the church's commitment to care of creation.

Jesus' disciples have returned to the city of Jerusalem from “the mount called Olivet,” where they witnessed Jesus' ascension. They go to “the room upstairs where they were staying” --the room in which they celebrated Jesus last supper? (The suggestion is Luke Timothy Johnson's from his *The Acts of the Apostles*. The Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 34) Luke draws a vivid picture of a community united in prayer as they await the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:12-14). Peter stands to interrupt their prayer with a concern to replace Judas in the circle of the disciples. It was an order of first importance, Johnson suggests: one of the original circle of twelve disciples who were being prepared to replace the religious and political leaders of Israel who rejected Jesus had fallen away. He must be replaced before Pentecost “because the integrity of the apostolic circle of Twelve symbolized the restoration of God's people” (Johnson, p. 39). The seriousness of Peter's concern is echoed in the Gospel reading, in which Jesus' priestly prayer on their behalf brings to mind the danger to the community represented by Judas' defection: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world,” Jesus prays, “but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). The Psalm's admonishment is accordingly appropriate: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers” (1:1). We, too, should be so blessed.

Remarkable here is how relevant Johnson's insight is to our concern for care of creation. We have seen, of course, how the character of the community has been of central and constant significance throughout the Easter lectionary. The community of the disciples gathered around the resurrected Jesus is the core of the community of life being raised up as the restored community of love in a new creation. Repair of Judas' betrayal is accordingly of crucial significance for the future of the community's mission. Noting that Luke's account of Judas' death differs markedly from that of Matthew 27:3-1, Johnson argues

that everything, including the scriptural citations, centers on the defection of Judas as one of the Twelve. And as he does so often, Luke uses the disposition of possessions as symbolic. Judas does not return the money as a sign of repentance, but goes to buy a farm with the payment for his wicked deed (1:18). This action stands in direct contrast to his “having a share in this ministry” (1:17). Rather than be one of those who “left their own things” and will “sell their

farms” and “call nothing their own,” Judas separates from the group by his purchase of property for himself. We notice that like Ananias and Sapphira, who will later be described as doing the same thing, Judas is said to have been possessed by Satan (Luke 22:3; Acts 5:3), and to have “entered into a conspiracy” to get the money (Luke 22:4-6; Acts 5:9). Spiritual disaffection is symbolized by physical acquisitiveness (Johnson, p. 39-40).

Johnson then sums up the significance of Judas betrayal and death as follows:

Judas' fate and that of his property is intertwined. He dies on the farm and his dwelling place is to be deserted (1:10). And, as his *property* is vacant, so is his place in the apostolic circle; therefore “let another take his office” (1:20). Each stage of the story is symbolized by the disposition of possessions: Judas' apostasy from the Twelve is expressed by the buying of a farm, his perdition is expressed by the desertion of the property, that empty property expresses the vacancy in the apostolic circle. That Luke intends just such an interpenetration of the notion of authority and the symbolism of property is shown by the final statement concerning Judas, that he left his “Place” (*topos*) in the ministry precisely by his “going to his own place” (*ton topon ton idion*, 1:25).

Luke, Johnson concludes, not only “solved the problem posed by Judas' betrayal by reintegrating a leadership of the Twelve for this people that awaits the promised gift of the Holy Spirit;” Luke has “also prepared his readers to see in the restored people a community that calls nothing its own and shares all its possessions as a sign of its spiritual unanimity (Acts 2:41-47; 4:32-37) (Johnson, p. 40).

In our view, Luke has also shown us the crux of Jesus' reorientation of the community to God's creation as a key aspect of their post-resurrection existence. All this talk about farms and place in the community suggests that Judas' acquisitiveness is not merely symbolic of spiritual disaffection; it also embodies an orientation to creation that has to be refused by the community as it begins its mission. Judas' replacement by Matthias thus represents the restoration of the community of God's people to right relationship to their habitat in the new creation. It is a distinctive feature of this community that pretension to self-sufficient ownership of land has no part in the community's relationship to the creation which sustains it in life. For this community, all creation will be a “common good” for which the community shares responsibility for righteous use and restorative care.

The replacement of Judas thus serves as a bookend to match the readings for the Second Sunday of Easter, in which the story of Ananias and Sapphira referenced by Johnson stands over against the appearance of Jesus to the disciples and his breathing on them of the Holy Spirit. It prompts us to consider what needs to be repaired in our own practice of community, so as to make it a proper model for the care of creation as an essential aspect of the Christian witness. The following review of the learnings from the Easter season will assist us in answering the question, “What's next?”

In our comment on the readings for the Second Sunday, we suggested that the concern about possessions is grounded in a theology of creation as what M. Douglas Meeks, in his book on *God the Economist*, calls “the self-giving life of the trinitarian community of God.” God, he wrote,

has a claim on the creation and all creatures, “not as maker (labor theory of property) or owner (first occupancy), but rather as creator and liberator. At the heart of God's act of

liberating/creating is God's suffering and self-giving. God's work of suffering is the source of God's claim in, that is God's property in creation. God brings the world into being through God's costly struggle against the power of the *nihil*. God has suffered for the creation and will not allow it to fall into vanity or be alienated. The creation is properly God's because God's power of righteousness makes its life fundamentally a gift of God's grace (Meeks, p. 114).

Jesus' conferral of the Holy Spirit empowers the restoration of relationships in the community that reflect the manner of God's relationship to God's creation. Accordingly, the readings for the Third Sunday of Easter underscored the importance of relationships in the community as relationships worthy of the Lord who now reigns from heaven. "What makes the relationships heavenly," we quoted from Norman Wirzba, "is that God is present and known in them (John 17:3)." {*Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 213-1). Christians turn to Christ to picture heaven, Wirzba suggests, because his

"ministry, death, and resurrection are the definitive expression of life in its fullness and truth. In his life we discover what it means to live into the memberships of our life together so that these memberships are places of healing, nurture, and hope. In the flesh of Jesus, heaven and earth meet" (Wirzba, p. 214-15.)

"Heavenly" does not connote dualistic alienation from earth; on the contrary, it captures the beauty and sufficiency of our relationship to the earth as our home.

In turn, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we saw how use of Psalm 23 served to point up the contrast between the unity of the community and the preoccupation of the temple authorities with relationships of power and privilege. Again Norman Wirzba's insight is helpful in describing for us the failure of relationship typified by Judas' conspiracy with the temple authorities to betray Jesus. By providing for themselves, he writes, people

often work against the very memberships that sustain them. In our often thoughtless and aggressive hoarding of the gifts of God we demonstrate again and again the anxiety of membership. We act as though we can thrive while the habitats and organisms that feed us can languish and die. In a fit of ecological amnesia, we have forsaken our natural neighbor-hoods and abdicated our responsibility to care for them (Wirzba, p. 89).

On the Fifth Sunday of Easter the Gospel offered us the alternative of "hope for rehabilitation in times of displacement," – i. e., in our time for the restoration of the creation in the face of the displacement of the human community from the earth that sustains it, the alienation which is at the heart of the environmental crisis." The metaphor of the vine, we suggested, serves to root the resurrected Jesus in the earth, and God his Father with him. This "rootedness" means for believers that their "ministries of feeding, healing, forgiving and reconciling" continue "in the world," as Wirzba writes, "God's own life-building ways that have been in place since the first day of creation. They will garden creation like God does. Jesus is the vine that makes possible every fruit-bearing branch" (Wirzba, p. 67).

We conclude, in summary, as we wrote in our comment on the readings for the Sixth Sunday of Easter: finally all creation joins in praise of God because "the way the human community is healed in the death and resurrection of Jesus is seen to be the way the vine grows in the new creation of God. The way things work in ecological community is the way things will work in the human community re-created

by God's love” and in its relationship with the other communities of earth. Both communities are caught up together in the life of the Trinity whose persons “are the constant movement of offering and receiving, a movement in which there is no holding back and no one is ever alone” (Wirzba, p. 231). When humankind lives in harmony with the way of life of otherkind, their consonance is grounded in the great, all-encompassing, self-giving of God.

Day of Pentecost, Year B

May 23, 2021

Acts 2:1-21 or Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

Romans 8:22-27 or Acts 2:1-21

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

In our comments for the Season of Easter we have shown how the death and resurrection of Jesus are brought to bear on the life of the community he gathered, in such a way as to anticipate and initiate the restoration of all creation in and through the Christian community. The readings for the Feast of Pentecost, we find, recapitulate the features of this movement, only now with focus on the agency of the Holy Spirit. As Gordon Lathrop frames the meaning of the Day on the basis of the Gospel reading from John 15, “the Spirit is God present” in our assembly, “seeing to it that the words and actions of Jesus Christ are alive in our midst as powerful words and actions, judging and forgiving, sending, giving life. The Spirit is all that belongs to Christ, all that pertains to him—and thus all that truly pertains to the ancient God—alive here and declared to us” (“The Day of Pentecost,” in *New Proclamation Year B, 2000*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000, p. 67). Alternatively, as Luke Timothy Johnson puts it in commenting on the reading from Acts 2, “Luke's Pentecost story is a rendering of the primordial Christian experience of the resurrection.” Only “here the emphasis is not on what happened to Jesus, but what happened to [the disciples]: the 'fact' of Jesus' new life is verified by the 'fact' of their new experience of power, manifested by their bold proclamation of 'the great deeds of God'” (*The Acts of the Apostles*. Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 45).

The focus, to be sure, is on the community of believers as the reconstituted people of God. However, in coupling these two powerful narratives of the gift of the Spirit with select verses from Psalm 104 and the lesson from Romans 8, both of which further reference the Spirit, the church makes it clear that the “great deeds of God,” “all that belongs to Christ,” and the work of the Spirit present in the assembly, concern *all of creation*. “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures (104:24); “when you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (104:30). “Psalm 104 celebrates God's creation as a rich and beautiful reality, but one that is entirely dependent on the 'face' and breath of God,” comments Lathrop. “Singing this psalm today, Christians may celebrate that the intention of the Spirit, poured out in the assembly, includes the renewal of all the beloved world” (Lathrop, p. 73). Even more comprehensively, the reading from Romans 8 offers hope in the Spirit, not only for “ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit,” but also through us, as children of God, for the “whole creation” that “has been groaning in labor pains until now,” as it “waits with eager longing” to “be set free from its bondage to decay and . . . obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (8:19-23).

That both these readings for the Day of Pentecost make the connection between the presence of the Spirit in the community and God's love for the creation should suffice to make care of creation a top priority for preaching in Time after Pentecost. Psalm 104:24-34, 35b is the appointed psalm for the Day of Pentecost all three years of the lectionary. This psalm is, in the words of Joseph Sittler's interpretation of it, "ecological doxology." Arthur Walker-Jones regards it as "one of the longest creation passages" in the Bible, a portrayal of the "direct, unmediated, and intimate relationship of God with all creatures." In the psalm, Walker-Jones points out, "God is the spirit of life in all creation." There is no need for mediation by either king or temple, Jones insists, because God's presence "is as close to every creature as the air they breathe" (Walker-Jones *The Green Psalter*, p. 120).

The significance of this universal availability of God's presence will not be lost on those who have followed our argument in these comments on the lectionary for year B, concerning the displacement of the Jerusalem temple as the *locus* where heaven meets earth unto Jesus, as key to understanding how the narrative concerning Jesus comes to provide fundamental orientation to creation. First in Jesus, then in the Spirit of Jesus, access to God is open everywhere. It is striking in this regard, that, as Walker-Jones further notes, the psalm shows much more of what we would call ecological awareness than does Genesis 1-3, and that its "depiction of the role of humanity in creation is less anthropocentric." The goodness of creation is celebrated without reservation: unmarred by the 'fall' of Genesis 2 and 3, far from being cursed, creation has goodness and blessing that includes a sense of beauty and joy, without setting aside an awareness of nature 'red in tooth and claw' so essential to the modern theory of evolution (Walker-Jones, p. 142). Reading this particular psalm is accordingly highly appropriate for the Day of Pentecost, which sets out parameters for the church's mission as witness to the resurrection: it suggests a re-orientation to creation as the *new* creation into which the death and resurrection of Jesus ushers us, a re-orientation intended and open to the all humankind.

Romans 8 follows a similar trajectory. The passage speaks of hope that the "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, in the day when it "will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (8:22; in order for the full weight of this passage to register with the congregation, the reading should begin with verse 18). A strong argument for an ecotheological interpretation of this text has been presented by David Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate in their *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis*. The authors set the passage within a narrative structure in which

an "enslaved-to-decay creation has been subjected to futility by God." But that it was "subjected in hope" means "that the focus, from the subjection onwards, is entirely *forward*-looking; there is no description of the act of creation, no indication as to what (if anything) preceded its subjection to futility." The "co-groaning" and "co-travailing" has been the state of creation since its subjection; the creation is "bound up with humanity and the Spirit in a solidarity of shared groaning, and, similarly, a shared hope" (The quotation is from Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, p. 82).

The hope for creation is-- again quite fittingly for the theophany of Pentecost-- focused on the "moment of the revelation of the sons/children of God." They are leading characters of the narrative, the authors suggest,

since it is their liberation on which that of creation depends and onto which the hopes of creation are focused. In terms of the plot, these children of God are crucial for the progression of the story of creation from groaning to freedom. Yet the character most crucial to the progress of the plot is also a character little evident in the explicit wording of the passage: God. . . .God's actions, hidden within the force of the so-called divine

passives, are clearly the crucial motor of the entire plot, as encapsulated *in nuce* within two (passive) verbs: *creation was subjected . . . will be liberated* (Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, p. 83.)

Romans 8, to their mind, is “a particularly developed and powerful depiction” of the Pauline narrative of “a process, decisively begun yet still to be worked out through suffering and struggle (e.g., Phil 3:10-14; cf. also Col 1:24)” with “its insistence that it is only in conformity to the sufferings of Christ that a sharing in his glory and inheritance is attained (8:17), a narrative in which verses 19-23 so enigmatically include the whole of creation as co-groaning” (Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, p. 83.) Combined with Colossians 1:15-20 as a parallel narrative of the “reconciliation of all things”, the authors argue, our reading is

focused on the world-transforming act of God in Christ, an act with cosmic dimensions and implications. Just as humans are transferred from old to new creation by their incorporation into Christ, dying with him and beginning a new life, empowered by the Spirit, so too the whole creation is in process of being reconciled and incorporated into Christ, and so into the life of the One who will in the end be all in all.

From this insight, the authors conclude, follow a set of “ecoethical responsibilities” on the part of the community of faith which incorporate as normative principles an “other-regard” and “corporate solidarity” in relationship to creation that is derived from the “christological paradigm of self-giving for the sake of others”(Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, p. 193). In the weeks to come in the season of Sundays After Pentecost, we should be alert for opportunities under guidance of the Spirit to develop the implications of these principles for care of creation.