

Belonging: A Concern for Earth Stewardship

In the Beginning: Belonging Who is Christ to Me?

Imagine appreciating that there is the Holy, a Mystery I call Christ within and around us. Imagine Christ flows like water, blows like the wind, surrounding us, penetrating us, flowing from us—then we might know that we all belong to one another and all creation. Drawing from Panentheistic philosophy and theology, embrace a universal Christ, embodied in all creation. Now imagine that we might pivot, all together into care for all creation, now, with immediate personal and corporate action.

In my life and ministry, I draw upon the Gospel of John as a scriptural foundation for knowing the Holy in all creation. The prelude in John 1: 1-18 sets my heart on fire as my whole being leaps in recognition when I hear, *In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, (1:1-2) He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him (1:10)*. The Word was one with the Divine. In earlier times, the Word was Wisdom, the was perhaps Sophia.

Wisdom asks us to live in peace with one another and all creation. John Dear offers that each and every one of us can be part of the great work of creation, and of healing the division between us through nonviolent direct action. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. That wisdom found in the Sermon on the Mount¹. Theologian John Culp observed that creation is an interaction between nothingness and all of everything. There is nothing outside God's infinity, and God leaves space for creation to, well, create. He notes, "Panentheism as mutual interpenetration preserves unity and difference in a variety of differences in kind such as God and human being, person and nature, and the spiritual and the sensuous."² Life is relational. Eventually, human consciousness was able to perceive this relational nature, and this relationship has been a work-in-progress ever since." Quaker George Fox said much the same when he said, "If there was no scripture ... Christ is sufficient."³ Relationship through a direct encounter with the eternal Christ offers a ground of being one in all creation

From John the Evangelist, to modern theologians, including Sallie Mc Fague and Friend Doug Gwyn, we can sense the same core mystery of faith. In my experience, God is an embodied mystery. An intuitive knowing of God might be experienced as a gut sense or a Light in our minds, or our ears and eyes are opened to deeper understandings of the world around us. Matter is made in such a way where the finely tuned, calibrated dance of molecules interact with conscious beings able to make choices. Both can yield healthy outcomes or harmful results. We see this in action today through the lens of Covid-19. This novel virus was perhaps born out of pain, human appetites, or poor habits. It is spreading because of the same. Yet at the same time our Earth, another manifestation of the body of God, is healing at an amazing speed. Sallie McFague offers the idea that we are in God and God is in relationship with us. McFague invites us to consider that, "God as lover values the world and all its creatures so passionately and

¹ John Dear, *They Will Inhereit the Earth: Peace & NonViolence in a Time of Climate Change*, 2018, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York p 2

² John Culp, "Panentheism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/panentheism/>.

³ Dean Freiday, "Robert Barclay and Scripture," *Quaker Religious Thought* 97, no. 1 (January 1, 2001), <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol97/iss1/4>.

totally that God enters into the beloved, becoming one with them.”⁴ Our home, our Earth, is one manifestation of Christ, the body of God. We have scarred our Earth; you might even say we have crucified her just as we harm one another because we do not fully realize this abiding reality that we are one with the Body of Christ. Yet, our Earth, heals. In just a handful of weeks, we see change for the better. We can heal if we tend our wounds. The embodied mystery is that God desires our well-being.

The Pre-Covid world in the US was one that assumed that our economic system, our western way of life, and our extractive treatment of the environment was a right given us no matter who was our elected leader. We had created a narrative that our way of life was self-perpetuating, that no reasonable person would expect that the entire world could stop in the blink of the global eye. Before Covid-19, The driving economic forces in the US assumed we had unfettered freedom to wreak havoc. This has been a part of our US history of using all resources we had at our disposal and disposing of our waste in careless ways. From fouling our rivers and streams, to air pollution and poor waste management we now live with the consequences of these choices. I have a concern that a sort of post-apocalyptic calamity is already looming in our post-Covid-19 world. Thievery of many kinds are occurring as I write. Narrow self-interest, unleashed fury, and passions (meant in the old sense as appetites of the ego) are already evident. Our government had been reversing the early twenty-first century regulations that protected our environment. In 2020 our government criminalized the right to protest environmental concerns. This must be reversed and our environmental protection laws restored, and even improved. Some elected leaders are calling for a stampede to return to the pre-Covid-19 life, a return to business as usual, even if our most vulnerable die as a result of their actions. The manufacturing sector in the global south must be drastically restructured to increase the safety of those workers. If there is no sense of communal value, no concern for the climate crisis, there will continue shameless focus on short term profits.

To ensure we are standing together in our witness for earth we must realize that we all belong to one another and to all creation. The way forward is the way of love. As a Christian in the Quaker tradition I welcome wisdom as a mystery as well as a way of knowing experimentally. Quakers invite others to listen to and realize the inward Christ, our teacher. Doug Gwyn offers a quote from Sarah Blackborow (1658) that illuminates this way of being in conversation:

Wisdom hath uttered forth her voice to you, but the eye and ear is abroad, waiting upon the sound of words without you, is that which keeps you from your teacher within you; Therefore come out of the manie things; theres but one thing needful, keep to it...that into my Mother's house you all may come, and into the chamber of her that conceived me, where you may embrace, and be embraced of my dearly beloved one, Love is his name, Love is his nature, Love is his life.”⁵

I think Christ operates through practical actions. The Holy might be experienced like water, flowing around us, falling upon us. We might want to wonder, “What if God can co-occupy us, flowing through and around and in us, even while remaining God, while we remain ourselves. What if such a God affects us at the deepest level of our being...may be a flow in subconscious psyche- as well as the edges in our interaction with rest of the world.”⁶

⁴ Sallie. McFague, *Models of God : Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1987),p144

⁵ “Conversation with Christ,” QuakerBooks of FGC, accessed April 25, 2020, p7 <https://quakerbooks.org/products/conversation-with-christ-2252>.

⁶ Marjorie. Suchocki, *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1996). P9

Christ is teaching us that life has beauty and goodness, as well as critical opportunities to be the change we wish to see. I see the sparkling skies, the restoration of the fragile life at the oceans' edge and in ocean depths and I commit to the following: I will pollute less, consume less, care more for the vulnerable people in my congregation, my neighborhood or the world,

It has never been my way to lay blame at God's feet when bad things happen to good people or me. But I have often wondered where Christ went in the people who call themselves Christian and who have done and are doing hideous things to other people and the environment. My work as part of the Body of Christ is to nurture my flock, care for the Earth, teach the people.

Belonging: Earth Care in Action

Christ has come to teach me, to teach us about at-one-ment and so restore our unity and trust in God's presence in our lives.⁷ For my post-Covid-19 ministry to be effective, a hopeful Christian foundation can build on our understanding of God's promise in the First Testament. This is not a distant or ideal God, as was discussed during Hellenist times. Instead, this was a suffering and relational God. And the face of God in Jesus is an immediate expression of this relationship.

The guiding principle and ethic throughout these days of tragic beauty, risk, and promise is God as love. Love is Christ's character. We are invited into a relationship with Christ so that our character may grow in Love. In a way, we are invited to emulate Christ through finding that, like the sun, this Love shines equally on everyone. The ingredient that has been central to God's love has been humility. Roberta Bondi makes it clear that this revolutionary trait was mind-blowing for its day (and may even be mind-blowing today!) God renders Godself to the humble and small, God's tangible expression was, "To share in human birth with all its mess and vulnerability and limitation as well as a shameful death."⁸

Realizing Post Covid-19 Care for all Creation

I write this reflection as I prepare for a day of prayer, shared worship, and work on Earth Day 2021. With all of our pandemic pandemonium, every single person I meet has marveled at the beauty of the sparkling skies, the sense of fresh air, cleansing rains, streams that run clear once more. Amazing healing is occurring, and we are witness to the evidence that we can make different choices in earth care. We can make these choices right now. Reason for hope is found in here as "... ecitheologian Thomas Berry insists in *The Great Work* that we all stand at the brink of a new Ecozoic Era, in which human beings must learn to live in harmony and right relationship with the Earth and the natural, living world. According to Berry, our task is to align ourselves with and participate in the 'dream of the earth' by honoring and drawing upon the foundational creative principle animating all life and the cosmos as a whole, a principle early Friends knew as the Word (Logos, Wisdom) of God."⁹ I welcome us to consider the earlier sense of our understanding of Wisdom as heard in Proverb 3:13-19:

⁷ "At-One-Ment, Not Atonement."

⁸ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁹ "Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability: Quakers and the Disciplines: Volume 6 - Kindle Edition by Bock, Chalice, Potthoff, Stephen, Artinian-Kaiser, Rebecca, Heller, Mike, Burks, Douglas, Mulhern, Jean, Pitzer, Cathy, Randazzo, Christy, Kershner, Jon, Anderson, Paul. Religion & Spirituality Kindle eBooks @ Amazon.Com.," accessed April 22, 2020, <https://www.amazon.com/Quakers-Creation-Care-Sustainability-Disciplines->

Blessed are those who find Wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed. By Wisdom, God laid the Earth's foundations, by understanding God set the heavens in place; by God's knowledge, the watery depths were divided.

If we dwell in Wisdom, we might realize the nature of Christ in all we are and all we do. The best image of the pervasive quality of Christ in my life is the image of water. As mentioned earlier, this sense of permeation is so well encountered through water. The rain soaks the land, becomes one in the streams and rivers, runs to the oceans, becomes one stream which again ascends to the sky, to heaven and becomes life-giving rain in an endless cycle. As Aquinas noted, this is so very difficult to communicate in words, so I am grateful to poet Mark Nepo, as he writes: “*Language is no more than impressions left by birds nesting in snow. Prayer is the path opened by a leopard leaping through the brush. And grace is how the water parts for a fish letting it break surface.*”¹⁰

Today, in this post-Covid-19 life, the living Christ has come to teach us that the waters, air, land are intimately connected. A living testimony of Christ Light has moved beyond the walls to meaningful care and connection amongst us. We are sharing our resources in new ways both electronically and in deliberate statements of faith regarding public policy. Many people from the wide spectrum of faith on Earth are sharing this testimony, leading by moral example in our words and actions. Yes, The Journal of Positive Futures published a hopeful essay written by David Korten. He offers the following potential changes we can work to realize:

Among the needs that will become more important in a post-COVID world are:

- Converting to wind and solar energy.
- Growing nutritious food locally in ways that restore the health of the soil.
- Eliminating waste by recycling everything.
- Assuring everyone access to affordable high-speed internet.
- Caring for and educating our children.
- Preparing for the inevitable emergencies ahead.
- Providing care and housing for the homeless while helping those who can transition back to community life.
- Providing health care for everyone.¹¹

We are speaking up, teaching and leading by example and demanding change. This voice for the vulnerable, the prophetic voice is part of our Quaker tradition, it is part of our Christian faith, and we can speak now.

ebook/dp/B07Z9JPBWC/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=Quakers%2C+Creation+and+Care&qid=1587597543&s=digital-text&sr=1-2.

¹⁰ “Mark Nepo’s Weekly Reflection: Language, Prayer, and Grace,” SoulSpring - A hub for conscious insights on all things life, wellness, love, transformation and spirituality, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.soulspring.org/language-prayer-and-grace>.

¹¹ “Opinion | From Emergency to Emergence,” *Yes! Magazine* (blog), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2020/04/23/coronavirus-rebuild-economy>.

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