

**We are what we seek            Genesis 1:26-31a; (Love Letter to the Earth by Thich Nhat Hanh)**  
*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden; October 6, 2019*

*God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth." God created human beings; [God] created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. [God] created them male and female. God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth." Then God said, "I've given you every sort of seed-bearing plant on Earth and every kind of fruit-bearing tree, given them to you for food. To all animals and all birds, everything that moves and breathes, I give whatever grows out of the ground for food." And there it was. God looked over everything [God] had made; it was so good, so very good!*

Franciscan priest and teacher Richard Rohr was giving a retreat for a monastic community and wandered through the woods one afternoon during a break. Along the way, he crossed paths with one of the hermits, a monk dedicated to silence and living in seclusion for most of his life. Rohr respected that silence as they passed each other and was stunned when the monk turned and called out to him, saying: "Richard, tell everyone: GOD IS NOT OUT THERE!" Then the monk went on his way, silently. What had gotten into this monk devoted to silence to speak up in this way? What might it mean to say that God is not out there? Why should it matter?

There has been a growing movement in theological circles urging us to look for God in creation and the energy behind, within and among creation itself rather than a somehow autonomous independent being who relates to the created world from a distance. Religion and science are discovering new avenues of dialoguing together about such mysteries. Mark's older brother, David, is an astrophysicist. He likes to say that theologians are dealing with more concrete ideas than astrophysicists! I am not a scientist but would like to remind us of some pertinent aspects of what science teaches about the universe, just to put some things in perspective: we are part of an evolving and expanding universe (amidst many universes?) that is approximately 14.7 billion years old and supposedly emerged through a "Big Bang" that set into motion the particles that still make up what we know today, down into our very bones. Our solar system is

part of an intermediary galaxy among over 100 billion galaxies. The Milky Way has over 100 billion stars stretching over 100,000 million light years in diameter.<sup>1</sup> People, we are living on a small and fragile planet spinning around its own axis hurling through the universe. It's a miracle that we can walk on this planet and not just fly off into space.

There are also some who say that no energy is lost in this evolving universe. Energy is only constantly shape shifting and renewing itself in new forms. Our own bodies, as solid and separate as they may seem, are constantly changing as cells continue to renew themselves and also respond to their environment, for good or ill. Your liver (and every other organ) will not be the exact "same" liver a few weeks from now that it is today. Our aging process shows us that this renewal itself changes over time. Our bodies eventually dissolve as the latest atoms that form us are used to form something else. I recently listened to an older gentleman introduce himself by saying, "Hi, I am the current manifestation of this particular set of cells, atoms, molecules and my name is Brian." What will remain of Brian is another question of faith and one for another sermon. Today, I am focusing on how intricately we are related to everything else in the universe by the grace of God. I do so in part to invite us to rediscover this connection and perhaps narrow, even if ever so slightly, the gap between our perception of creation and our actual being part of it.

We are part of ongoing evolution and renewal. God is somehow at the heart of this. It is difficult to capture this in images. Our ancient ancestors sought to suggest this dynamism in the way they told an evolving story in the differing accounts of creation without access to modern science. We are only hearing a portion of the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis today. Prior to the creation of human beings in this chapter 1, God is described as separating out earth and sky, light and dark. Plants and animals are created first and only later do human beings arrive. We tend to see the polarity, particularity and distinction which has its place but we tend to forget their underlying interdependence and unity.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, (Orbis Books: New York, 2010) 16.

This story of creation is told as an evolving process accompanied by commentary by the divine. Notice the beautiful and curious plural pronoun for God. God speaks of God's self as "us" and as "male and female." What stands out here is that God's self is inherently diverse, communal, participatory and interconnected – we are expressing this again as Christians in referring to God in Trinitarian communal and inter-related terms. God is not the solitary father in the sky or judge demanding recompense but the living matrix of love flowing over from one member of the trinity to the next loving and sustaining the whole into being.

Of course, this account of creation from Genesis is still very humanly focused (and binary in gender) and it behooves us to cultivate a sense of humility regarding our own tendency to project what we want onto God. However, there is great beauty in saying that we are made in God's image and likeness in as much as we affirm by it that we are deeply connected with God and the image cannot be lost. The trouble is that we claim this status exclusively for ourselves in our limited imagination.

While we affirm that we are made in God's image, our tradition also says that we struggle to live according to God's likeness – that is - we struggle to reflect God's interrelated nature that pours itself out in mutual love and get wrapped up in our own fears and the illusion of disconnection. Furthermore, humans have too often taken the lines about stewarding creation from our text and turned them into a license to use and abuse creation for profit and without a care for the long-term consequences. Many of our own current policies regarding environmental protections and climate change reflect the ways we project creation as being out there and somehow separate from us.<sup>2</sup>

I believe this kind of attitude also implies that we tend to think of God as somewhere out there, separate from the rest of creation. Would we be so careless if we thought otherwise? While we always want to maintain that God cannot be limited to what we can see and perceive and touch, I would like to lift up some voices in the Christian tradition (and other religions) that

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<sup>2</sup> We are living in a time when the health and future of the whole planet is at stake. I hope and pray that we will focus on this crisis more deeply together (likely the focus of Lenten Study Series).

affirm that God is not simply OUT THERE as some separate unaffected entity. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Hildegard of Bingen (1098 -1179), spoke of God as the greening power that gives vitality and being to all that is. Or as is written in the Book of Acts, God is being itself, “In whom we live and move and have our [own] being (Acts 17:28).”<sup>3</sup>

Meister Eckhart from the 13<sup>th</sup> century went so far as to say: “*Apprehend God in all things. For God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar – I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.*” Thich Nhat Hanh also beautifully affirms that we are part of this creation through and through in his *Love letter to the Earth*. St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day was celebrated by many Christians on October 4<sup>th</sup>, likewise called sun, moon, stars, animals and plants his own sisters and brothers. For Francis, everything and everyone was family as we all together are creation imbued with the energy and being of God.

In humility, these mystics say that we are not God but we are also not separate from God. This belief is known as *panentheism* meaning that God *is in* everything.<sup>4</sup> Everything somehow bears the imprint of God and has a role to play in the God given cycles of living, dying, and renewal. What happens in you when you hear this? Can you trust the possibility that the original blessing of God is: “It is good, it is very good.” For some of us, the hurdle to a deeper integration of God’s original blessing is rooted within ourselves. Maybe we have stumbled in our lives, made decisions we regret, hurt relationships. Or, maybe we have never been able to affirm our own bodies as beautiful gifts and live an existential disconnect within our own being. This feeling may be especially strong at a time when our bodies may feel like they are failing us in older age.

For some people, there seems to be a different disconnect in terms of seeing ourselves as intricately related to everything and everyone else. Some of us get stuck on seeing ourselves as

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality can change Everything we See, Hope for, and Believe*, (Convergent: New York, 2019) 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Pantheism* on the other affirms that God is everything.

the center of the universe and don't connect with a notion of God at all. Or if we do, our God is often very small and privatized, constrained and confined by our own projections of fear or grandeur.

The title of today's sermon is "We are what we seek."<sup>5</sup> We are more accustomed in our culture to connect the idea that we are what we seek with our ambitions, goals and accomplishments as individuals. In the context of this sermon, however, this phrase is meant to affirm existentially that *it is that of God in us which seeks God*. To the extent that we are yearning for God and connection with God and each other, it is God or the Holy Spirit herself driving this longing within us. God loves us into being, carries us through life, and loves us beyond the current reality we know to be our life. I think this is part of what the hermit monk meant when he said, "...tell everyone that GOD IS NOT OUT THERE!"

Our invitation in life is to trust that the love of God is foundational and integral to our being. Our invitation in community is to continue to affirm this original blessed and to mirror it for each other when we cannot see it for ourselves. Jesus, as the embodiment of the divine, modeled this life for us. As we seek to honor the presence of God throughout creation, may the Holy Spirit open us to the mystery of becoming more fully what we seek for the sake of all creation.

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<sup>5</sup> Also see Richard Rohr's *Daily Reflections* from September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019.