

The Cosmic Scope of Love

“Earth Day” is every day for those who believe that “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” The scope of God’s love is cosmic: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” not only for persons, as the familiar John 3:16 puts it, but also “in order that the world might be saved through him,” as John 3:17 claims.

I want to do two things in preparation for subsequent discussions: First, outline the gospel for the earth that God’s love brings. Second, inquire how our love of the neighbor cannot stop short of its own inevitable cosmic scope.

First, God’s love is not limited to a funnel’s narrow outlet focused only on one person at a time. To the contrary, God’s love sees and embraces no less than we see and embrace when we view that famous photo of earth that was taken from space. Not the narrow outlet at the bottom of a funnel, but that photo of a blue-and-white orb indicates the vast inclusive scope of God’s love.

The great ecumenical leader/theologian William Temple put it this way: “No object is sufficient for the love of God short of *the world* itself. Christianity is not one more religion of individual salvation, differing from its fellows only in offering a different road to that goal. It is the one and only religion of world-redemption. Of course it includes a way of individual salvation... But its scope is wider than that – as wide as the love of God.” [Readings in St. John’s Gospel (Macmillan, 1952), p. 48]

Were it not for God’s love there would be no creation in the first place. From the earliest years of Christian faith that has been our claim, for Jesus as the Word of God is “the real basis of creation.” [Barth, CD, III/2, 483] Our earliest statement of faith (I Cor. 8:6) claims that “through him all things” came into being. The Head of the Church is no less than “the firstborn of all creation; for ... all things have been created through him and for him. ... in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:15-17). If the creation provides the place for God’s covenant with us, then in turn that covenant “provides the basis for creation.” [Barth, CD III/2, 483] “As for me,” God said to Noah, “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants ... and with every living creature that is with you.” So it was that the rainbow became “a sign of the covenant between [God] and the earth.” [Gen. 9:8-13]

Second, if the scope of God’s love is cosmic, what is the reach of human love? Those who were made “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:26) cannot avoid that question about the full scope of our love, for we were commissioned to “till and keep” the earth (Gen. 2:15). Further, the three texts for today show in three dramatic scenes the impact of God’s love on the cosmic totality and on our life within it and for it.

Scene 1: Psalm 24 declares that faith in the Creator is consequential. If “the earth is the Lord’s,” then it matters what kind of people we are who try to enter the sanctuary of earth’s Lord. “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy

place?” As worshippers gather outside the sanctuary, antiphonal choirs sing out the answer: “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. Such is the company of those who seek [God].”

“What is false” in our time includes changing peer-reviewed scientific reports about global warming in order to fit an ideology that denies human causes of climate change. “Swearing deceitfully” in our time has included the groundless claim that ecology and economy conflict unavoidably, as if care of earth inevitably costs jobs and impoverishes us all. The opposite is the case. The “company of those who seek God” use “clean hands” to replace industrial agriculture with sustainable agriculture. With “pure hearts” we “cherish the whole of creation, not for our sake alone, but for its sake and for God’s sake.” [WCC Publications: [Accelerated Climate Change: Sign of Peril, Test of Faith](#), p. 14]

Scene 2: Prophet Isaiah envisions messianic leadership transforming the face of the earth. If we are going to restore the earth to its God-given “goodness,” then the spirit of the Lord must guide our leaders. That is, “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” When that Spirit leads us we conquer environmental racism, and assure poor nations (usually nations “of color”) that they will not bear the brunt of climate change that the rich nations have done most to aggravate.

The earth will not remain “good” and fit to serve God’s purposes unless we in the “First World” move beyond self-serving decision-making (11:3b) of lobbying special interests (pharmaceutical, military, fossil-fuel...). For the sake of the earth and all her people we must instead “decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”

What would happen if the spirit of the Lord were miraculously to become the spirit of the times? Then harmony would be restored to creation, and earth’s pristine goodness would be recovered: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. ... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” What’s the use of a faith unless it can dream such a vision, and work toward such a fulfillment?

Scene 3: “Come and have breakfast.” Fish had cooked on the open charcoal fire. Bread had been set before them. In this his last appearance the Risen One, in character as hospitable host, makes his last invitation: “Come and have breakfast.” Quite a fishing trip, including the “Q & A” after breakfast, something remembered and retold across centuries and continents. We recall that Q & A, for it explains the seashore meal. Do you love me? Yes, of course. Then, feed my lambs. Do you love me for sure? Yes, you know that. OK then, tend my sheep. Do you really love me? You know everything, so you must know that I love you. Jesus replies in effect: In that case, you know what it means to love me. It means: “Feed, tend my sheep.” It means something sacrificial and specific in each case, for it means: “Follow me.”

Let us, then, follow Him and see that “the wrong side of the tracks has always been more toxic” than the rumored “right” side. [Rasmussen, Earth Community (1996), p. 77] Let us follow the One who sees what happens when the ocean rises only 39”. It will displace 10M people in Bangladesh alone. [Christian Century, 2-20-07, p. 5] Let us follow the One who sees human usage depleting the world of fresh water. In 1972 the Yellow River in China failed to reach the sea for the first time ever—not a trickle for 15 days. By 1997 just 25 years later it did not reach the sea for 226 days. God knows, even if we don’t want to, that India’s aquifers drop 3-10 feet per year, depending on an aquifer’s location.. Every major river in Asia originates in the Himalayan ice cap, but that cap is shrinking faster every year, threatening future water supply for _ of the human race. [“State of the Earth,” www.webofcreation.org]

“Come and have breakfast.” How many will we take with us? How many starving people, how many refugees, how many immigrants, how many diseased, how many thirsty and without hope? How much of the earth belongs in his presence? How much righteous and equitable “Eco-Justice” can we construct for people and planet alike?

Since our best scientists report that 6B humans are imperiling the whole earth with global warming, then we have no alternative but to change how we live for the sake of all our neighbors, both human and non-human. Love requires it, love of God and love of neighbor. Restoration of creation begins with the restoration of God’s people. Renewal of our churches begins with affirming the cosmic scope of God’s love. Out by the seashore, atop highest mountains, among the poor and meek of the earth, wherever we are, let us hear and move in answer to his invitation: “Come and have breakfast.”

-John G. Gibbs

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