

Forest Sunday (6 August 17) Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17; Colossians 1:15-20

We begin with a reading from the prophet Aldo: “It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value.” [*Sand County Almanac*, p. 223]. And we know—forester that he was—when Aldo Leopold refers to land he includes forests of the land. Love, respect, admiration. ... Love?!... Is there any way, in the next few minutes, to stir up love for forests? Well, again, it might’ve been easier to do that taking a walk in the arboretum, but since we’re here, let’s give it a shot ...

Why love forests? Well, for one thing, they do a whole lot for the planet, including, of course, the absorption and storage of carbon dioxide. This from the national Forest Service: Forests in the United States absorb and store about 750 million metric tons of CO₂ each year, an amount equivalent to 10% of the country’s CO₂ emissions. So, obviously, forests have to be part of the discussion about global warming. We have to face the extreme harm to the planet’s health wrought by reckless deforestation. And any hope of mitigating climate change has to honor forests as the lungs of the planet. ... Well, so, maybe we could fall in love with forests for their benefits, for what they do for us. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

But this morning, I’m suggesting another reason for loving forests—including trees, but not just trees: forests are family, forests are kin. Forests are fellow creatures beloved by our Creating God. ... And lest you think that tree-hugging is a new-age thing, check this out: Way back in the 12th and 13th centuries there was a radical Italian friar who recognized that in God’s creation, we are all siblings. Let’s look at hymn #835 [*Francis of Assisi*]. Perhaps a bit binary, but you get the point: we are siblings with all creation. And specifically, about trees there is this legend: “One day Francis was filled with joy because he was beginning to enjoy God in all creatures. He went through the streets singing and inviting everyone to sing along with him. Then he came upon an almond tree, and he said, ‘Brother Almond speak to me of God.’” Yes, a legend, but not out of line ... Francis loved all creation as kin, as family formed and bonded together by our creating God.

And the case for kinship doesn’t just go back 800 years to Francis: it goes back much further than that. Genesis 2, anybody? Obviously, there’s a whole lot in this lesson that we won’t get to this morning. I’ll just highlight this detail: “then Yahweh God formed an earthling from the dust of the earth” (v. 7) “Out of the ground Yahweh God made to grow every tree ...” (v. 9). We and the trees of the forest are made of the same stuff by the same creator ... a down-to-earth creator who apparently likes mucking around in life-giving soil, a creator not unlike all the faithful gardeners in this room. Made of the same stuff! (And, in fact, we share a surprising percentage of our genes ... with trees.) ... Too often in the history of Christianity, we’ve acted like we were formed as some special project apart from creation. But, that’s not what we have in Genesis. God didn’t say “Abracadabra, let there be unearthly spirits untouched by the soil.” No, the earthling is formed from the earth. We are one with all creation, so says Genesis.

Speaking of the soil, I want to take a scenic detour and talk about this remarkable little book: “Hidden life of trees.” Nick quoted from it a few weeks ago about how trees live in community and support each other. I want to share this tidbit about soil: “There are more life forms in a handful of forest soil than there are people on the planet. A mere teaspoonful contains many miles of fungal filaments.” [*The Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben.] Apparently, when the Divine Gardener was bringing forth earthlings and trees out of the soil, the Gardener was working with some potent raw material.

Forests and all that is in them are our kin, our sibling creation. As the prophet Aldo puts it: “the land ethic enlarges the boundaries of the community [as in human community] to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” [S.C.A. p.204.] But, we have not loved our kin as ourselves; in fact, sometimes we don’t even recognize our kin as our kin. Listen again to the prophet: “Perhaps the most serious obstacle impeding the evolution of a land ethic is the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward an intense consciousness of land ... In short, land is something [the true modern] has ‘outgrown.’” [S.C.A. pp. 223-224.] And let me just confess to you right here and now, when I hear the words of the prophet, I stand convicted. Many of you are patient, faithful gardeners who work the soil and you have an intimate connection to life-giving dirt. But I have not spent time in the MCC garden.

Kathy—my wife—spends hours looking at nature through the lens of her camera, and loves, respects, admires and is constantly amazed by what she sees in sibling creatures. (Quite a few of the bulletin cover pics are hers.) Me? ... Maybe, not so much. In April, we took a road trip to the Smokies to spend time in that great forest. And in planning the trip down and back, for Kathy we plotted out all these natural areas—protected forests. For me, we plotted out all the breweries. ... In all honesty, when it comes to honoring our Creator by honoring God’s creation, I am a deeply flawed disciple and a cowardly prophet. Francis I am not. Aldo Leopold I am not. Bill McKibben I am not. For that matter, I’m no Nick Utphall. I am deeply complicit in our wantonly consumptive economy and have way too often softened the edges of my proclamation about care for creation. So, believe me, as I try to stir up some love for the forest this morning, as I try to rekindle our connection to our woody kin, our stately siblings, I’m preaching as much or more to me than to anybody. So, yes, thank you, Nick, really, thank you. I needed to reread “A Sand County Almanac”; I needed to read this little book [*Hidden Life of Trees*]; I needed to up my monthly pledge to the Sierra Club ... and I needed to walk in the woods with open eyes – open to the wonders of our amazing, but threatened and wounded kin.

Now, before I get to the “Amen,” I need to get some Jesus in here. As the folks in the Henning-Olson row know, I never preach without Jesus making an appearance.

I believe that the good news of Jesus’s life, death, resurrection and continuing presence is not just about us human beings. I believe the Risen and Wounded Christ is not just Servant for the church, but Servant for the whole creation, including all this

universe and whatever other universes may or may not be out there. I believe our Risen and still-wounded Lord bears not just the sin of sinners and the suffering of the sinned against, but the wounds of all creation ... the wounds of every slaughtered whale, every murdered elephant, every polluted stream, every flooded coastland, every drought-parched field, every endangered species, every melting glacier ... and, yes, every threatened or destroyed forest. We're talking the presence of the Cosmic and Crucified Christ in, with, and under all of God's holy creation ... and maybe especially where our kin are most vulnerable and most damaged.

In this Risen and Crucified Christ, can we catch at least a glimpse of the depth ... and the breadth of God's mad love for God's creation and all that is in it? There are biblical scholars like N.T. Wright and scientist theologians like Robert Russell who are reminding us to think big about the promise of God's new creation ... not just a heavenly escape for human beings, but the reconciliation of all things: "and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things." [*Colossians 1:20*.] You know, maybe the amazing thing about the promise of the New Creation is not that other parts of creation might be included, but that in spite of everything we're still included in the promise, that we still have a place, that we still belong, that we are still embraced as God's beloved ... amazing grace indeed.

In the meantime, there is much work to be done, including protecting our forests, for their planetary benefits AND for their own beloved status in the family. I don't want to preach a fairytale here, because a fairytale is never gospel. Our planet—including our forests—is in a world of hurt and it's going to take a lot of truth facing, truth telling, and hard, sacrificial work to effectively deal with the mess we've made. But, of course, the good news is that we are not alone in the work. The Risen and Wounded Lord of the Forest and all creation comes to us, here and now, comes to liberate us **from** our willful denial, immobilizing fear and self-destructive idolatries. And comes to liberate us **for** loving and sacrificial kinship with Sibling Forests and all God's holy creation. With a Servant-Lord that faithful in our midst, there is no need to brood or despair. With a Servant-Lord that faithful in our midst, we can indeed be people of hope who face what needs to be faced and do what needs to be done.

End with this: at the risk of missing the forest for the trees, I want to tell you about this picture [*distributed a pic of olive tree from Bethlehem*]. This is an olive tree at the Environmental Education Center of the ELCJHL, in Bethlehem, which we visited in October [Nick led a group]. This tree was living its long life (500 years maybe?) when it got pushed over by an Israeli bulldozer to make way for the monstrous and obscene wall that scars that land. But faithful Palestinian Lutherans rescued the tree and replanted it at the Environmental Center where it seems to be thriving. ... I think it's fair to say, that all of us on the trip last October were deeply moved by this tree. Why so moved? In part, yes, because it's symbolic of the courageous resilience of our Palestinian Siblings, but, also, I think, because of the tree itself ... this old, resilient Olive Tree, our Sibling in Christ. AMEN.