

Chapter Seven

Commission and Blessing

based on

A Theology of Ministry to Earth

Commission:

We hear the call of Christ to serve him
by caring for Earth.

We respond with a commitment to listen for
the cries of injustice rising from Earth
and to join with Christ as partners in healing creation.

We announce our intent to love nature
and nurture Earth as she has long nurtured us.

Blessing:

We invoke the blessing of God's Spirit so that our spirit
may be renewed to discern God's presence
and the cosmic Christ in creation.

Chapter Seven

Commission and Blessing: A Theology of Ministry to Earth

Introduction

Having raised our consciousness about the crimes against creation and the ecological needs of our planet, as well as the Gospel message of restoration for all of creation, we are ready to consider our commitment to serving Earth as servants of Christ. If we discover during The Season of Creation a renewed sense of service, we need to consider how our ministry extends to creation, to our kin in creation and to Earth as our home in creation.

The Season of Creation is an opportunity not only to come home to Earth and rejoice in our reconciliation with Earth, but also see our ministry to creation as an integral part of our commission from Christ. We are called as disciples of Christ to care for creation.

Serving Earth

We are called to minister to creation. Earlier (Chapter Three) we discussed the implications of the mandate to dominate found in Genesis 1.26-28. That mandate has been one of the factors in our alienation from Earth. We now return to Genesis Two where the first commission of God to serve and sustain Earth is announced.

The biblical story begins with God and Earth—potential partners. There are, however, three significant components of creation missing before God begins work (Gen. 2.4b-6). There are no plants or herbs growing on the face of the ground. God had not yet sent rain to fertilise the soil. And there is no human being to ‘till’ the ground. Three things are necessary: Earth to give birth to vegetation, rain to bless the land with fertility, and human beings to care for the ground.

At first glance this seems like a simple myth that provides a story about the origin of agriculture and because of our utilitarian orientation to Earth we have readily accepted this reading. A closer analysis of this text makes it clear that human beings are to be created for a specific reason—to ‘*abad*’ Earth. One can, of course, simply render this Hebrew verb ‘till’, but that is a minimal reading. The most common and frequent meaning of this verb is ‘serve’. Serving in the Scriptures can refer to a wide range of activities—everything from the labour of a slave to the work of a priest in a temple. Humans are created to ‘serve’ Earth—to minister with respect!

The full implication of this role for humans becomes apparent in verse 15. After the first human being is created, God places him in a fertile garden of trees to ‘till’ and ‘keep’ it, or more precisely, to ‘serve’ and ‘sustain’ it. As we outlined in an earlier chapter, the verbs to ‘till’ and to ‘keep’ express opposite images to the verbs ‘rule’ and ‘subdue’ in Genesis 1.26-28. The first pair of verbs identifies the role of humans beings as creatures serving Earth, the source of their being. Humans (*adam*) are to serve the ground (*adamah*), their biological mother. The second pair are royal images reflecting the domination of one group over the rest of creation.

Which of these images is more consistent with the orientation of Christ in the Gospels? Which of these traditions does Jesus appear to endorse? In Mark 10, Jesus compares his ministry with the way Gentiles rulers function. They ‘lord it over’ their servants and their leaders are tyrants who dominate their people.

The way of Christ--the way of the cross--is not dominion but service. The disciples of Christ are called to be servants of all. And, by implication, the all includes all things in creation enunciated in the Gospel message to creation outlined above (in Chapter Five).

The motivation for pursuing this calling is a theology of the cross, the way of Jesus Christ ‘who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark. 10.42-45). This text urges us, I believe, to speak of serving creation or ministering to creation rather than exercising dominion or stewardship over creation. Or in the words of Santmire,

As restored creatures, we members of the martyr church can enter into a new life of righteous cooperation with nature. Traditionally the words *dominion* and *stewardship* have been employed in this connection, but I now believe that it is best to retire them, for the foreseeable future, so that we do not have to explain constantly to others what they really mean and can simply say with conviction what we really mean. These terms still carry too much baggage from anthropocentric and indeed androcentric theology from the past; they are still fraught with the heavy images of management, control, and exploitation of persons and resources. (2000, 120)

Our mission is to minister to Earth, to care for creation and to serve our kin in creation. This role implies that we cooperate with nature, learning the needs of the creatures around us and finding ways to meet those needs. By using the expression ‘serving Earth’ we in no way suggest that Earth is a deity that is being worshipped. To serve is to treat with respect, to take care of and to minister to another as Christ has ministered to us.

Speaking for Earth

Pursuing ecojustice, or justice for Earth, is another important dimension of our ministry to creation. Many ecologists argue that, *a priori*, nature and the diverse parts of nature have a right to survive and a right to justice. All of the natural world has intrinsic value and therefore ought to be given the appropriate respect and rights. In the Wisdom books of the Bible, I would argue, the respect and rights due to every creature and domain of creation is grounded in a God's eternal design for creation.

In that design, everything has its place, its specific *locus* in the web of creation. That *locus* or place is where each entity is supposed to be and has a right to be. Place rather than power governs the relationship of the components and creatures in the cosmic design of things. The will to survive seems to be greater than the will to rule. The clearest presentation of this Wisdom understanding of the rights and role of Earth is found in the speech of God from the whirlwind in Job (chapters 38-39).

When God confronts Job from the whirlwind God does not challenge Job's capacity to think about the disasters of life that have befallen him or his general knowledge about the created world. Rather, he challenges his critical capacity to grasp the underlying blue print or design (*'etsa*) of creation (Job 38.2). With each of the components of creation that God introduces, there is a challenge to identify or locate its inner identity and its locus in the design of creation. Everything has its 'way', its 'place' in the order of things, its right to be.

Where the rights and integrity of creation have been violated, Earth cries out for justice. Creation groans. But that cry is often not heard by those who are abusing Earth. We are called, I believe, to be prophets, like Jeremiah of old. We are called to hear the cries of Earth and speak against the injustice done to our parent, our kin, our home. As Santmire writes,

We Christians will be a voice for the voiceless, for the sake of the creatures of nature who have no voice in human affairs. We will listen to the plaintiff cries of the great whales and hear the groaning of the forest, and we will be their advocates in the village square and in the courts of power, by the grace of God. All the more so we will hear the bitter wailing of little children who live on the trash mountains and who wear clothes that have been washed in streams overflowing with heinous poisons and who sometimes drink these very waters. (2000, 121)

Ours is a prophetic mission, a call for justice as well as peace on Earth and for Earth. As advocates of justice it becomes clear that social justice and ecojustice are interrelated needs. It is the oppressed who suffer most from the exploitation of forests and the pollution of our waters. We are faced, for example, with evils such as environmental racism. Environmental racism is perpetrated by many powers and corporations who dump toxic waste—including nuclear waste—and other toxins on individuals or communities of colour and indigenous peoples. (Bullard, 1996)

Whatever the injustice, we are called to speak for the oppressed—both the people and the lands of Earth—and to expose the wrong. We assume this role as those who know Christ the crucified, who has suffered with creation and for creation, with the oppressed and for the oppressed.

The cross, as Rasmussen and others have demonstrated, involves linking social justice with ecojustice in the task of redeeming Earth. Earth and the poor of Earth are united in suffering; they have a common experience of injustice. Neither are helpless victims in the struggle, but active participants against alien forces that oppress them:

The particular twist of cross theology is that, like Jesus himself, it moves in the power of the Spirit to the places of negative suffering to discover and uncover power for life there. As an ethic of compassion and solidarity it seeks out the places of oppressive suffering in order to overcome suffering's demonic, or disintegrative, manifestations. It goes to the victims to stand with them in their reality. Its quest is not for victims but for the source of suffering and the empowerment needed to negate the negations that yield victims. (Rasmussen, 1992, 54)

Those of us who know the cross of Christ, the Christ who suffers with the oppressed to empower them, are called to discern this same suffering Christ where creation is oppressed and join in the struggle with the groaning Spirit for Earth's liberation.

Healing Earth

It is common today to hear expressions like 'saving earth,' 'sustaining earth', 'preserving this planet' and 'healing earth'. A special report of *Time* magazine in August 2002 was entitled, 'How to save the Earth' and subtitled 'The hot and wild weather is a sign of things to come. But fresh ideas and new technology can cool us down and make this a Green Century'.

Kluger and Dorfman, in their article in this edition of *Time*, stated quite clearly:

The globe does not need to be saved by us, and we couldn't kill it if we tried. What we do need to save—and what we have done a good job of bollixing up so far—is the earth as we like it, with its climate, water, air and biomass all in that destructible balance that best supports life as we have come to know it. Mulch that all up, and the planet will simply shake us all off, as it has shaken off countless species before us. In the end then, it's us we are trying to save—and while the job is doable, it won't be easy. (page 9)

The orientation of this edition of *Time* and most of its contributors is the welfare of humans on Earth. Ultimately the goal is to sustain Earth in such a way as to maintain human life at the level of prosperity currently enjoyed. And the way to achieve that ecological conversion is through bright ideas and technology. Once again, science is expected to come to the rescue.

The language of healing creation can easily be subsumed under a medical model where Earth is the patient and humans are the experts, the scientists with all the technological answers. And indeed, the contribution of the science is very important. There is, however, an inherent problem in the medical model. As children of Earth we seek to relate to Earth as a partner, a significant but different other in our lives. Healing, as leading feminist writers have demonstrated, ought not be an expression of dominance but of sharing relationship. As Lucy Larkin writes,

We have come to believe that power is demonstrated by dominance, status, authority, and control. As Brock says, this may be the power I know but it is not the power I am born with. I am, in truth empowered, but I can only exercise a certain kind of power. The power I am born with is not the power to dominate, and it is not necessarily the power to be active in regard to nature. Activity may be required (for example, in terms of restoration and reparation), but a letting be or openness to the inherent healing capacities of nature may be equally appropriate. (Larkin 2001, 155)

If we are to be involved in healing nature, we need to begin with precisely this openness to the healing capacities inherent in nature. We are called to discern how creation heals itself and us before we suggest how we might share our knowledge and skills.

Healing begins with recognising that we are working with our kin, our Mother and our God in this process. For our God is a God who heals, a God whose healing Spirit penetrates creation and 'renews' the very ground from which life emerges (Ps. 104.30). Christ, the Wounded One, heals not only human spirits but also life forms.

A healing ministry with Earth may involve a range of practical programs and environmental activities. A theology of Earth ministry requires a sense of mission to creation, what I have elsewhere called the Third Mission of the Church (Habel, 1998). Traditionally, the first mission of the church, grounded in Matthew 28.19, was to go into the world and preach the Gospel to 'save souls' or save human beings from personal sins. The second mission, grounded in Luke 4.18-19, extended the saving power of Christ to include saving lives, liberating human beings from whatever forces oppressed them.

The third mission goes beyond the first two and embraces the whole Earth. This mission brings the message that there is good news for Earth. The Gospel of Christ is for all creation, all things are being reconciled and restored. This mission, however, involves more than preaching this message at creation. It involves working with the cosmic Christ, the groaning Spirit and creation itself in finding ways to halt the destructive forces at work against creation and reviving, where possible, the innate processes of renewal that restore creation.

Nurture and Love

Our mission and ministry to creation may also be viewed from our position as children of Earth and kin of creation. We are indeed creatures of Earth, born of its elements and connected will all our kin on Earth to its centre—its soul. We all have a common biological origin, a common parent. There is an impulse in Earth, however, that seems to be more than biological—the impulse to nurture. We are born of Earth. Giving birth is itself an act of nurture with Earth sustaining and bonding with future lives. The process of nurture extends to all aspects of life on Earth and indeed to Earth itself. This impulse to nurture, I would suggest, is from God’s Spirit moving through creation.

Suzuki and O’Connell call this spiritual impulse of Earth to nurture the ‘law of love’ in nature. Humans are all too ready to view themselves as the one species that knows how to nurture or love. Listen again to the insights of Suzuki and O’Connell.

When we observe the care with which a mud dauber prepares a mud enclosure, inserts a paralysed victim as food and deposits an egg, can we be so anthropocentric as to deny this the name of love. How else can we interpret the male sea horse’s protective act of accepting babies into his pouch, the months-long incubation of an emperor penguin’s egg on the feet of its vigilant parent or the epic journey of Pacific salmon returning from their natal stream to mate and die in the creation of the next generation? If these are innate actions dictated by genetically encoded instructions, all the more reason to conclude that love in its many manifestations is fashioned into the very blueprint of life. (Susuki, 1999, 173)

The spiritual impulse to nurture or love that is deep within Earth and the creatures of Earth is a force we not only need to recognise as vital to our connection with Earth. We also need, I believe, to return to Earth and discover again the best ways to feel those impulses and live in tune with them.

We need to recognise that deep within us we possess a spiritual impulse to nurture not only our human children but also our parent Earth and the Earth family. The task is to stimulate that dormant spirit within us.

This nurture and love at work in creation is ultimately grounded in God’s love for creation. Creation itself is an act of divine grace, of God’s unrequited love. Creation exists because God chose to create and continues to do so, in spite of what we have done to creation. If we return to the first account of creation in Genesis One we discover that after various acts of creation the text reads, ‘And God saw that it was good.’

It is significant that this is God’s response to what has been created, not part of the initial plan. God ‘sees’ or ‘discovers’ that what God has made is ‘good.’ A similar expression in the Old Testament is ‘good in the eyes of’ meaning to delight in. When Moses’ mother first saw her child ‘she saw that he was good’. This could mean that he was a healthy child or, as is more likely, that she delighted in him, she loved him and would do anything to save his life.

The continuing love of God sustains all creation (Ps. 136.1-9). God celebrates all creation and rejoices with all living things (104.31) and with wisdom the very soul of creation (Prov. 8.30). The God who loves creation invites us to do the same, to love our mother Earth, to nurture our kin, to embrace our home. James Nash entitles one of his works *Loving Nature* and justifies this change in attitude to the physical world. He writes,

Divine valuations appear to be cosmocentric and biocentric, not simply or primarily anthropocentric. As a divine gift of love, the world was created as a habitat not only for humanity but also for all living beings....The logic of the doctrine of creation itself leads to a similar conclusion. Its stresses on divine sovereignty and universal providence imply that the Creator is concerned about the whole creation and all its parts, not only the human parts. Ethically, since fidelity to God implies respect for divine valuations. Christians are called to honor and nurture what God honors and nurtures, and that includes the whole good creation. (1991, 99-100).

Reflecting God's love for us and for creation, we in turn respond with a ministry of care, nurture and love for nature. Our worship in The Season of Creation provides the opportunity to stimulate this love and to renew our ministry as a ministry of nurture for Earth.

Renewal of our ministry may be reflected in a commitment not only to love one another but to love our kin in creation. We are called to serve and are constrained by the Gospel to love creation as God, in Christ, has loved us and all our kin.

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