

*Loving our neighbors in nature*

- Friends, this past Monday saw the coming and going of Earth Day, the day each year that for the last 55 years we've marked with a focus on the environment, on our relationships to the world at large, and on the journey towards global peace
  - For people of faith, Earth Day invites us to consider how our spiritual traditions engage with these sorts of questions
    - What does a particularly Christian perspective on environmental issues look like?
    - What sort of relationship with the natural world does our faith call us into?
    - And how might we start building up those Spirit-centered relationships?
- These questions can take us in so many different directions, and so I thought we might keep our focus on these sorts of issues for the weeks ahead
  - We'll explore together in the weeks to come what lessons our faith has for us and what type of living Christ calls us into when it comes to our place within and relationships with the natural world
  - Today, we might consider together—what *is* nature, from that Spirit-centered perspective? And how might we begin to think about the ways we ought to engage with nature?
- I've been reading Sallie McFague lately, who was a renowned theologian who worked extensively around these questions
  - McFague approaches the question of "What is nature from a Christian perspective?" by considering the incarnation of Jesus himself

- Our faith is one that finds the divine embodied in the physical world, incarnated in a living, breathing, Christ whom we follow
- And for McFague, the world-embodying incarnational nature of our faith isn't limited to the body of the living Christ
  - When we read of God speaking the universe into existence in the Genesis accounts of creation, we read of God's will and intention taking on form, shape, and body
    - The light and dark, the land and waters, the plants and animals that are formed from the dust to spread across the planet—all of this is the will of God, the word of God, springing into bodily existence
- And so for McFague, our encounters with the natural world are always encounters with God's living presence
  - When we're face-to-face with nature, we're face-to-face with the fruits of God's loving creativity
- And in nature, we also experience a living focus of God's love
  - Just as we hold ourselves to be beloved children of the divine, so too is the natural world the beloved fruits of God
  - When we read the Genesis creation stories, we hear God's love for the natural world echoing after each day of creation that ends with "God saw that it was good"
    - Not that it was good *for* human beings to live in and make use of
    - Not that it was good *for* resource extraction, good *for* a nice hike, or good *for* any of our other purposes
    - Simply, good—in and of itself

- So if we consider nature in these sacred perspectives—as part of the incarnating will and word of God, and as a focus of God’s love—how might we, as people of Christian faith, relate to nature?
  - Well, a good starting place might be the commandments that Jesus tells us are greatest, the commandments upon which Jesus says all of the Law and Prophets hang
  - Jesus tells us in Matthew chapter 22:
    - “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ’This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
  - Perhaps the love that Jesus is always talking about is a love that we ought to focus towards nature as well
  - We might love nature *through* our love for God—again, seeing nature as the fruits of God’s embodying creation and itself a focus of God’s love
    - We might think of Francis of Assisi, who so exemplified profound love for the natural world and of whom a 12th century biographer said, “he admired in everything its Author and in all events he recognized the Creator”
  - We might also hear an invitation to love nature in Jesus’s call for us to “love our neighbors as ourselves”
    - Because what are all of the plants and animals and mountains and rivers around us if not our neighbors of a different sort?
      - And we mean here our neighbors, not just our neighborhood
      - It might feel easier to consider nature, the Earth, as being the neighborhood in which reside us and all of our human neighbors

- But what if we think of nature as itself our neighbors?
- We might think again of Francis of Assisi, of whom a different biographer in the 15th century said, “he was filled with a great gentleness when he thought of the first and common origin of all beings, and he called all creatures, no matter how small they were, by the name of brother or sister because he knew that they all had in common with him the same beginning”
- What would it look like for us to love the natural world around us in the ways that we love our neighbors?
- For one, we might start to see nature not as a static, monolithic phenomenon but rather as a multiplicity of neighbors, countless neighbors large and small
  - When we think of “nature” we often think of it as all together one thing
    - And there’s truth in that, in the ways that all things are so deeply interrelated, and how nature embodies that woven interconnectedness
      - We could never really separate the fruits of a tree from the tree itself, or from the soil the tree is rooted in, or from the birds and insects that help to pollinate the tree, or from the river nearby that keeps the tree watered, and on and on
  - Nature is so deeply interconnected all together, but when we relate to it as a loving neighbor, suddenly that one thing becomes many
    - I might look outside my house and see a particular tree neighbor, and some squirrel neighbors hanging out in its branches, and the pond neighbor further back where my duck neighbors are floating about

- Our love for our neighbors in nature is always an engagement and relationship with the particulars we encounter
- And that holds true for our human neighbors as well, doesn't it?
  - It might feel comparatively easy to declare "I love everyone!," but the rubber meets the road when we're practicing our love with particular people in a particular moment
    - Of course we can say "I love everyone" and mean it, but how are we loving them in practice? In actuality?
      - How am I loving the family members that I have a lot of tension and baggage with?
      - How am I loving that neighbor right next door?
      - How am I loving my enemies?
    - That's the kind of lived-out *agape* love that Jesus wants us to engage one another with—so perhaps the ways we love nature might not be so different
- And what does this kind of Christian love for nature look like?
  - We might think of Paul's descriptions of *agape* love in chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians:
    - 4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails.
    - What if that described our loving care for the planet we live on and the natural world around us?
      - How might we be patient with nature?
      - Kind to nature?
      - Humble, not proud, with nature?

- How might we protect the natural world, trust the natural world, hope in the natural world, and never fail it?
- Another way that *agape* love is sometimes described is always treating other people not simply as means to an end, but rather as ends in themselves
  - We don't consider a client or employer simply a way for us to be paid, or a tradesperson simply a way for a job to get done that we need done, or farmers simply as a way for us to get food, and so on
  - Instead, each person we meet is a beloved child of God, important and wonderful just for who they are
  - All too often, we engage with the natural world as a means to an end for us
    - Trees are important and we need to care for them—because they produce the oxygen we breathe
    - Biodiversity and environmental protections are important—because they're essential to our survival
    - The park in my neighborhood is important to tend to and care for—because it's a great spot for me to relax
    - This way of relating to nature is always looking for a purpose for me, or a purpose for humanity in general
  - But what if we looked at our nature neighbors and saw them as important, deserving of our care and protection, simply because they exist?
    - Sallie McFague describes that kind of caring relationship with nature as “A way in keeping with the earthly, bodily theology suggested by the tradition's incarnationalism, a way that allows us to love the

natural world for its intrinsic worth, to love it, in all its differences and details, in itself, for itself”

- And so how can we put this kind of love into practice?
  - Well for a first step—we can pay attention
  - McFague recalls the French theologian and philosopher Simone Weil who said that “absolute attention is prayer,” and suggests that a great first step of loving nature is simply to pay attention
    - To look and really see the flowers blooming outside the church door
    - To not just glance over appreciatively, but to really pay attention, to notice the subtle variations of color, to see how they move in the wind, to consider the differences and peculiarities of each flower in a bunch
  - When we pay attention, love takes root, just as our love for another person deepens as we come to know and understand that person more
- And so friends, let us pray
  - Let us ask, O God, that you help us to always widen the reaches of our love
  - Open our hearts to love our neighbors in nature with the great love that you call us to
  - Help us to encounter the nature neighbors around us with attentive love
  - Help us to be with nature, in nature, of nature, as you would have us be—amen