

SACRED ECOLOGY

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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Now that I have been duly installed, with much pomp and circumstance and celebration, I suppose it is safe for me to confess a few things—though I do this knowing well the old saying that confession is “good for the soul, but bad for the reputation.” So fasten your seat belts, and here goes:

I confess that once my native South discovered air conditioning, the windows in our homes were never opened, so that when I moved north to Chicago to enroll in divinity school I found open windows to be a novelty. I also confess that in my entire life I have only been camping twice, for a single night, and both times were singularly unpleasant experiences for me in which I fretted about scurrying noises in the dark and insisted on hauling along my cappuccino maker. I further confess that for me roughing it consists of staying in a modest motel that has no in-room broadband internet connection and provides only two towels as opposed to “real” motels where internet service and enough towels to last a week are available.

Still glad you’ve installed me as your senior minister?

I make these confessions today to clarify why preaching an Earth day sermon is a challenge for me. I am thoroughly a creature of a culture that has viewed the natural world as at best a commodity to be used for personal gain and at worst as an inhuman, alien place where things like “killer tornadoes” and “monster snowstorms” are forever threatening our peace and security. I enjoy visiting places of natural beauty for short

times, after which I want to jump back into my comfortable car and spend the evening watching DVD movies or playing computer games.

The Southern Baptist church of my childhood warned us repeatedly that the natural world, this world in which we live and move and have our being, was the realm of evil, a place we endured as best we could until the blessing of death came along to transport us into heavenly existence. God gave us the natural world, so I learned, to use and “have dominion over”, all the while remembering that it was a place cursed as being nothing more than dust. As for our physical bodies, those too were inherently evil and mere dust, temporary houses for our immortal souls.

And this teaching was not unique to the Southern Baptists, for it appears in various permutations in most traditional churches, and so shapes our lives that to reorient ourselves in the ways that Earth Day invites, to see earth as a gift, a garden to be lovingly tended, and then to extend that view to our own bodies as gifts rather than challenges to be slimmed down, muscled up, cured of illness and disability, feared in aging, and finally returned to dust at death, presents extraordinary challenges for all of us, including those who camp in the woods as well as those who camp in hotels. In case you believe this is a non-issue for all of us enlightened Unitarian Universalists, I can tell you that around BUC, much like any other UU congregation, conversations about our use of energy, or paper mailing, or plastic and disposable dishes for potlucks and coffee hour, are rarely simple, tending often to get caught in trying to balance a diminished carbon footprint with a diminished budget as a result of costlier environmental expenditures, or trying to balance aesthetic choices with ecological choices, or trying to balance wise energy use with wise use of time and human energy. That same pattern appears in my individual

life, and perhaps in yours as well: I take great satisfaction in hauling my recycling out for pickup, install those energy-efficient funny light bulbs all over my apartment, minimize my water usage, except when I need to save time or need convenience, and then I give no more thought to being environmentally conscious. Similarly, I exercise faithfully except when I am in a hurry, and I only eat fast food for convenience's sake (though I do always recycle the containers). To live with care for our natural surroundings and our physical surroundings, our bodies, is a discipline that requires attention and commitment and above all, these days, requires sacrifice. Liberal, educated, thoughtful people often do not do sacrifice and discipline well.

Which makes us no different from anyone else, at any other time. Spiritual traditions of all kinds have struggled with the pressure to embrace a dualistic worldview because we seem so strongly programmed to interpret our experience in dualistic terms. You need not look far in any of the major world religions to discover the same message that we know best from inherited Christianity, namely that the physical world and the physical body are less valuable than the heavenly or enlightened realm and the soul. Theologians and sociologists contend that such distinctions are crucial for motivating ethical behavior, as they give us a means of sorting out good from bad, better from worse, right from wrong. They also introduce a kind of tension that energizes and fosters creativity (when it is not energizing and fostering conflict). While our dualisms become more sophisticated over time and with further development, they remain with us as dualisms, judgments that help us move in positive directions, make positive choices. And so attached do we become to our dualisms, so convinced are we of their necessity, that

we have no idea what to make of those prophets and teachers who come along every now and then preaching a very different kind of message.

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as they are. . . . Take no thought for tomorrow.” Jesus came into the culture of his time, a culture where greed and power had resulted in extreme economic injustices, with a viewpoint that denied dualistic separations of body and spirit, earth and heaven, God above and God within, and in short order was executed as a threat to stability.

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there lies a field: I will meet you there.” The Sufi poet Rumi makes clear that dualistic thinking about right and wrong is limited, and finds himself accused of the worst kinds of immorality.

Our Universalist ancestor Hosea Ballou sought to reason away dualistic theological arguments that divided eternity into heaven and hell, and divided humans into saved and damned and was judged to be not a “real” Christian, as though “real” Christianity depended on being able to draw clear lines between good people and bad people.

We have a very hard time giving up our dualistic views for views that are more embracing of opposites; instead, it seems we have to choose between one or the other, this or that. Many of our current environmental challenges continue to put us in that same dilemma, demanding that we choose between convenience and conservation, bigger cars and more expensive gasoline, the Democratic view of global warming or the Republican view of global warming, an earth that is here to serve us and ourselves as but one more part of all life, the lifestyle we have always enjoyed and a lifestyle that seems, somehow, diminished.

In traditional churches, this Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the time when the last few events of Jesus' life are recalled, from the triumphant procession of today, Palm Sunday, through the poignant final meal with the friends who would all desert him when things got tough, then the nightmare of execution followed by the unbelievable stories of resurrection. This is also the season of Passover in the Jewish tradition, when what had seemed to be a life defined by hardship and slavery was completely overturned with the passage through the Red Sea to freedom and, in time, a Promised Land. Older earth-centered traditions also mark the springtime as a season of life returned after the long time of winter dormancy. The common thread in all these stories is the denial of limits: over and over again, the symbols point us toward seeing how mistaken our usual assumptions about the way the world works, the way life works, are wrong, limited by our dualistic thinking. This is difficult for us to comprehend, so thoroughly caught are we in our experiences of not having enough, of needing to struggle for control, of scarcity. If I truly believe there is not enough—not enough time, not enough energy, not enough resources, not enough money, not enough room—then I have no choice but to hoard, to consume, to overuse, to spend all my efforts in making sure I get mine before supplies run out. And that is a life stance that will always motivate me to choose against the environment and against others in order to be sure of getting what I need.

But to try out the meaning of the great myths of spring and rebirth and resurrection and liberation would result in a very different kind of life stance. The desire to consume, to have more and more and more still because of a fear of not having enough or of running up against a limit, that desire might be extinguished if I understood fully that liberation from slavery abolishes limits, that resurrection abolishes limits. Greed is

fueled by a belief in scarcity. If we become convinced of abundance, of the reliability of the promise spiritual traditions bring of always having more, then the fear that translates into our habits of consumption might disappear. All the ways in which we try to convince ourselves that we will not die, all the strategies we adopt to try and be assured of having enough for ourselves and for those we love are no longer necessary.

Poet farmer Wendell Berry has a beautiful description of what life could look like for us today if we risked trusting the reality of resurrection, of Passover freedom, of the rebirth that always comes with springtime. He writes:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay.
 Want more of everything made.
 Be afraid to know your neighbors and to die.
 And you will have a window in your head.
 Not even your future will be a mystery any more.
 Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer.
 When they want you to buy something they will call you.
 When they want you to die for profit they will let you know.
 So, friends, every day do something that won't compute.
 Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing.
 Take all that you have and be poor.
 Love someone who does not deserve it.

 Ask the questions that have no answers.
 Plant sequoias.
 Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant,
 that you will not live to harvest.

 Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.
 Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary,
 some in the wrong direction.
 Practice resurrection.

And for us here at BUC, I would add: scatter daffodils extravagantly, abundantly, in all the places it makes no sense to have daffodils. Like stories of resurrection and liberation, our daffodils insist that there is enough—enough room for all kinds, enough love for all people—more than enough to go around.

