

Bonding Church to Creation

[Kilian McDonnell's poem "Cosmic Lazarus" is read prior to both scripture and sermon. See "Endnotes."]

It is a matter of daily experience for Fr. Kilian that Church is bonded to Creation. In his poem "Cosmic Lazarus" both realism and hope express that bonding. His *realism* asks "Is this it?" then sniffs "new rain before it falls on dying wheat and barley." Kilian's *hope* envisions "one irresistible resurrection glory" in all creation.

Likewise the Apostle Paul's realism and hope saw Church bonded to all her fellow creatures, indeed to the Creation entire. On one hand, Paul's *realism* (8:18-23) is signaled in his words: "sufferings," "futility," "bondage to decay," and "groaning" in labor pains. On the other hand, "*hope*" is forefront in expectant "waiting" (vv 19,23,25), in the image of labor pains producing new life (v 22), and in the prospect of "a large family," "the firstborn" of which was Christ the Son.(v 29).

Paul's realism and hope form the catalyst for our question: what realism and hope would help to re-bond Church to Creation?

First, the Church bonds to the creation by coming to terms, as Paul did, with the "sufferings of this present time" (8:18). The cup of sufferings in *Paul's* time ran over with both fear and terrorizing apocalyptic. Within the newborn Church there had developed the antithesis of Paul's hope, a fear-filled apocalyptic of terrorist Armageddon wreaking retributive "justice." Within the Roman Empire terror ruled, as any witness to a crucifixion saw. It was not the last time that Super-Power would rule by using terror to magnify fear.

Our time, the *first* time of "planetary emergency," also is pervasively apocalyptic and fear-filled. Apocalyptic images telecast the frightful collage of our time's sufferings: a headline saying "climate resets doomsday clock," collapsing twin towers on 9/11/01, retributive arrogant "shock and awe" war of choice, novel doctrine of preemptive war against a nation that did not attack us, solitary tortured soul standing hooded with arms outstretched inside Abu Ghraib, citizens of New Orleans hit by Katrina and abandoned by their own country, extraordinary renditions, waterboarding, warmed oceans engulfing lowlands from Bangladesh to great cities, grain-fields used to feed SUVs instead of people, Himalayan ice cap melting tomorrow's water for one fourth of humanity.

Those images of apocalyptic Eco-INjustice form one huge anti-ecology of humanity run riot against the creation and itself. The holistic reality portrayed there proclaims our identity: who we are among ourselves is who we are among all creatures. Those who are most greedy and violent against one another bring the worst violence and materialism against creation. A Super-power that sweeps aside justice and humane conventions between nations is consistent, very consistent, when it cares little (or not at all) about eco-justice for poor lands and impoverished laborers. Our violence against creation is inseparable from the violence that pervades our country and projects outward from it. One wonders: where are "the better angels of our nature"?

The point is this: any effective effort to restore creation must challenge the fear and violence that feed ecological crisis. Realism about international networks of Eco-INjustice discloses what minefields we must cross if we would re-bond Church to Creation. Realism could also motivate us to make some changes. Forty years ago Martin Luther King, Jr. warned: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." Today Super-Power choice of greed and

militarism against social justice has “globalized” Eco-INjustice, and God knows how much spiritual death in its wake.

Naiveté about globalized Eco-INjustice cannot contribute to the restoration of creation. Neither can naiveté about Church life and thought. Our beliefs are not innocent. They have consequences, and we need to see what difference they make in real life. We cannot restore Creation by selling out our social gospel and Eco-Justice to: *political* attempts to “privatize” faith (while “privatizing” everything else); or *ecclesial* pressures to rob the gospel of its political, economic, and social insights; or *federal* efforts to widen the immoral growing chasm between the ultra-rich and the ultra-poor. Essential to the renewal of creation is a Church that breaks her silence about such matters, and challenges the “well-funded machine” of “global-warming deniers” that Sharon Begley unveiled in *Newsweek* (8-13-07). A Church bonded in faithfulness to Creation cannot allow that machine of denial to reframe the gospel or reject the scientific consensus on human causes of global warming.

Others elsewhere see (and why should not the Church see?) the magnitude of Eco-INjustice. Van Jones, founder of the new group “Green for All,” argues that we must “fundamentally restructure the US economy.” “Reversing global warming will require a WWII level of mobilization. It is the work of tens of millions, not hundreds of thousands.” [*Common Ground*, April 2007] From Scotland in 2004, Michael Northcott contrasts “the changes in consciousness that the [ecological] crisis calls forth” with, on the other hand, “the tragic fact that millions of conservative Christians in America support social and environmental policies [that trash] environmental protection and international environmental treaties.” [*Expository Times*, 7/04, 339] Realism and theology both require the Church to become a safe compassionate community for all people and for all creation.

Second, a Church that bonds herself to the creation not only develops true-to-life insight into the sufferings of our fear-laden age. That Church will also match her realism with hope – often hope against all tangible evidence. Bill Coffin put it this way: “It’s hope that helps us keep the faith, despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing.” [*Credo*, p. 19] James Hansen, the NASA scientist who makes some of the darkest forecasts on global warming, says “I am always surprised when people get depressed rather than energized to do something. I am not about to give up,” he said, remarking that he owes it to his grandchildren. [*AP*, 9-23-07] You may have heard the story about two persons who were discussing the grim prospects for civilization just before WWII broke out. One remarked: “The situation is so serious that it is hopeless.” The other replied with a hope focused beyond their horizon of sight: “The situation is hopeless, yes, but not serious.”

Hope is indispensable for moving on. We cannot even start a restoration project, much less sustain it, unless we hope that it can be done. Notice just two of the many ways that hope transforms both the Church and her relations to the Creation:

A Church that answers realism with hope will move beyond “the idolatry of proven fact” [*Joseph Sittler, Gravity and Grace* (Augustine, 1986), 38f.], and beyond the lure (for some) of sound-byte certitudes. She will open her mind to the abiding ambiguities and unrelenting uncertainties of knowing “only in part.” [1 Cor. 13:12]. “For who hopes for what is seen?” [Rom. 8:24] It is late already for our Church to discover, as Catherine Keller once wrote, that “Faith is the opposite of fundamentalism” [*God and Power*, p. 149]. Her claim is accurate, for the gospel is progressive and liberating (Rom. 8:6, 15f, 21, 37; cf. 2 Cor. 3:17f.), and faith is, as she wrote, “the trustful courage that we require precisely *because* we cannot have certainty.” Perhaps for the first time ever, here we

put Catherine Keller and Gracie Allen in the same paragraph (Gracie Allen was a famous sitcom actor years ago). Gracie Allen said, “Never put a period where God has put a comma.” [Credo, 14] Fundamentals frozen in place a century and more ago do not produce hope for God’s creation.

Hope longs for “open horizons” (title of a book by the great environmentalist from Minnesota Sigurd F. Olson: Knopf, 1969) and “the threshold of the unknown” [Olson, *Listening Point* (Knopf, 1958), p. 240]. When our Church lives with God beyond God’s commas, we are then in the region of things not seen yet hoped for. We are then in proximity of what we have prayed for, that God’s will be done “on earth as in heaven.” In the area beyond God’s commas there is “a large family” that, according to ancient hope, is being shaped into “the image of his Son” (8:29). There, in that region, God will help us become ecological entrepreneurs.

Such a Church, such “a large family,” moves beyond confining ideology. She moves even further beyond self-centered views of salvation. Let the Church rejoice that the gospel is not confined to “I, me, myself” and the blood of the Lamb, as if it were shed for me alone. “There is no smaller package in all the world,” remarked Bill Coffin, “than that of a [person] all wrapped up in [self].” [Credo, 24] What is set free from bondage to decay is not just us, but “the creation itself,” and God wants it to experience the “freedom” that has been promised to us (8:21). Let the Church rejoice about *that*.

The more the Church leans forward into the cosmic breadth and depth of God’s love, the more she rediscovers her solidarity with all Creation. The more we hope in God, the more realistic we can dare to become. There are, after all, providential reversals of usual outcomes. In Pauline language: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (II Cor. 4:8-10) The Church is bonded to Creation when she prays and acts in hope that Jesus’ life shall be made visible in her embodied self.

Such a Church, such “a large family,” serves one indivisible mission that she both affirms theologically and supports with her resources without exception: keeping peace, restoring creation, reducing poverty, eliminating hunger, and evangelizing human structures no less than human souls. It is all one mission, all illuminating the significance of Jesus’ words and deeds for today’s world.

In short, the Creation “longs for” restoration of the Church – both to realism about “the sufferings of this time,” and to action-oriented hope in the God whose love initiated and sustains the cosmos. What is at stake is not that light-bulbs be changed, but that we and our Church be changed. This we count on at the threshold of unknown change: not even a subatomic particle, not one nanosecond, nothing will ever separate us and our fellow creatures from the love of God. That ultimate reality bonds Church to “all Creation.”

John G. Gibbs for the 2007 Eco-Justice Conference of
Presbyterians for Restoring Creation
Mo-Ranch near Hunt, TX

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Endnotes

Apocalypse

Catherine Keller, God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys (Fortress, 2005) quite rightly, in my judgment, critiques those features of apocalyptic in the book of Revelation that major in Armageddon, bloody catastrophes, and the collapse of ethical seriousness under the expectation of divine intervention. I very much agree with her assessment of the adverse effects of this kind of apocalyptic thinking on American foreign policy, especially as evidenced in the Middle East.

Barbara R. Rossing, The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation (Basic Books, 2004), on the other hand, emphasizes the cosmic/apocalyptic theme of hope. Rossing effectively shows the unbiblical nature of the Left Behind series of novels co-authored by LaHaye and Jenkins, and of dispensationalism generally. See also the Q & A with Rossing in The Christian Century, 11-14-06, pp. 22-25, “End Game: Living joyfully in an apocalyptic time.”

M. Eugene Boring, Revelation (in the Interpretation commentary series; John Knox, 1989), pp.30-62 has a concise discussion of apocalyptic thought. Cf. “Interpreting Revelation’s Violent Imagery” on pp. 112-19.

J. Christiaan Beker, Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel (Fortress, 1982). He wrote with the conviction that “the cosmic implications of Paul’s gospel drive us out of our cultural ghettos – to the larger concerns of our interdependent and pluralistic world” (120).

On Faith and Uncertainty

Keller (God and Power): “A counter-apocalyptic truth is all the more truthful because it does not cease to question itself. But it will be a truth in the making, a risk-taking creativity rather than a reckless absolute” (150). Further: “In a faith free of the fantasy of certainty, we build lives and politics and perhaps a new planet on the firmest ground we can find – but in sight of the shoreline, the edge of chaos, where the next big certainty is being washed out at this very moment. ...A constructive theology of becoming deconstructs the delusions of a simple answer, a simple self, a simple God. But it does not leave a mere rubble of relativism” (150-51). “...the wisdom of uncertainty releases the courage of faith” (151). Her constructive theology proceeds along “the flowing shoreline, where the waves refract the interplay of darkness and dazzle” (152).

Anselm of Canterbury’s formula “faith seeking understanding” includes uncertainty and doubt..

On Evangelism of human structures

Keller (God and Power): “Theology always means – whatever else it means – theopolitics. However deeply faith may retreat into privacy, God-talk begins and ends among the *res publica*, the ‘public things.’ So when it is mobilized as a power ploy, not only democracy but religion is wounded” (135). [Cf. “The Great Ends of the Church,” PC(USA)’s Book of Order, G-1.0200; also “Theological Declaration of Barmen” (1934) in Arthur C. Cochrane, The Church’s Confession Under Hitler (Westminster, 1962), pp. 237-42; also “The Confession of 1967” in PC(USA)’s Book of Confessions, 9.25, 9.43-46, 9.53.]

On Church in Romans 8

Though the word “church” does not occur in Romans 8, the many plural nouns and pronouns clearly address a community. [8:1, 4-5, 9-21, 23-39; cf. a “house church” and Gentile churches, 16:4-5] Paul addresses the letter “to all God’s beloved in Rome,” gathered in many “house churches.”

See also: R. C. Austin, Environmental Theology, 4 vols (Creekside Press, Box 331, Abingdon, VA 24210); Carol Johnston, And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations (PDS #72433-06-001).

“Cosmic Lazarus”

We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. .

I ask the dead “Is this it?”
each time we walk down
the cemetery tarmac, like a dolt
who cannot pass grade four.
We tread on dirty snow

into the oak woods
beside the dirty frozen lake,
acid soot from chimneys.
The pastor always says
“no,” with that maddening collared

certitude he gets from talking
long to God. “No,
there’s more. Creation
screams labor and blood
as the Spirit brings forth one

irresistible resurrection glory,
one undivided splendor
in the risen Lord, in risen us,
and in the risen universe.
Chains forged before the clocks

began to tick bind the three.
The damaged Savior pours
his treasures like some mad god
blows up the dike, lets flow
ungovernable waters.

Our preposterous God
with a preposterous love
will not take us unless nebulae,
sequoias, kangaroos, whales,
the four rivers of paradise

and the Mississippi come with.”
And even as the dirty snow
beneath my feet crunches,
and the dirty ice cracks,
I smell hope as year after year

a farmer sniffs new rain before it falls
on dying wheat and barley.

Kilian McDonnell,osb

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McDonnell, a professional theologian, writes biblical poetry. Homiletics professors [Ellsworth Kalas (Asbury), Paul Wilson (U of Toronto), Cheryl Bridges-Johns (Cleveland)] recommend for use in preaching his two books of poetry: *Swift, Lord, You are Not* (St. John’s University Press, 2003), and *Yahweh’s Other Shoe* (SJU, 2006). SJU Press, Collegeville, MN 56321

