

Mother Earth

- Lendrum, October 9, 2016

Dear friends, sisters and brothers:

We have come together this morning for a special celebration: we want to, we are giving thanks. This particular celebration is so important to us, we have made one complete and inclusive word out of it: we celebrate **THANKSGIVING**. It's even on every calendar.

In fact, it has been a Canada-wide holiday since 1879. Centuries before that, in 1621 the English settlers at Plymouth on the eastern edge of our continent celebrated 3 days of "Thanksgiving" after their first bountiful harvest; they were especially thankful that the Wampanoag People, in whose territory they landed, had shown them how to grow good, healthy food in what was to them a very strange land. But of course, such thanksgivings, such festivals of gratitude for gifts received, for gifts without which we could not live, have been celebrated since before memory.

And today, we want to celebrate and give thanks especially for the earth. As we do that, I would ask you to think in particular about this place on earth where we are gathered, this territory where Treaty Six was signed 140 years ago, the earth of the Cree People, the Saulteaux, the Blackfoot, the Dene, the Assiniboine; this earth: where we now can live, and move, and have our being. The earth: which is our home.

And, whenever we give such thanks for earth, we cannot help but think of the Creator, who made the cosmos which contains our tiny earth, a cosmos enormous and intricate beyond comprehension; both so bizarre, and

so beautiful. And then, again, the majestic opening words of The Book of Genesis speak to us:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
 And the earth was formless, void, with darkness upon the face of
 the deep;
 and the Spirit, (the Wind) of God was moving over the face of the
 waters.

Many of us have known this magnificent Genesis story since we were held warm and laughing in our mother's arms: how, on the day that God speaks the light into existence, the beauty of the gradually ordered earth grows, and grows, day after day, until on the sixth day of creation God speaks one last time (1: 26-7): God says:

“Let us make humankind in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, to have dominion over ... the sea ... the air ... the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
 in the image of God he created him.
 Male and female he created them.

Did you hear? God says, “Let **us** make ...” and then a complex 3-line poem follows; listen again:

So God created man in his own image:
 In the image of God he created him,
 Male and female he created them.

Hearing this, the first question that confronts us is “What does that mean, humans being made ‘in God’s own image’?” What is “God’s image”? Well ... very wise people have been discussing that for over 2500 years! I can’t get into that this morning – we want to talk about the earth! – so let me

just give you a hint you can explore further for yourself: what Paul writes about “our Lord Jesus Christ” (in Colossians 1:15):

[Our Lord Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation

So, if we want to know what “the image of God” is, we must contemplate Jesus Christ.

But for us, this morning, for our thanksgiving consideration of the earth, I want to look at a different question. The Genesis text first says, “Let **us** make...” “ and then

So God created man in his own image ...

Male and female he created them.

Did you hear that? The introduction makes clear that God is not a singular “I” – no, God is spoken of as a plural, “us.” And furthermore, in the last line of the poem it is clear that God is not only male. God is not only female. No, God is both of “them”. God’s image is both male and female.

I find that lovely, and deeply satisfying. When we talk about God, human language is inadequate: you come at it from one side, “him”, then from another, “them;” you use poetry and grammatical contradictions, and still the words are not logically clear. That’s because English (like Hebrew and Greek – or French or German) is structured on the basis of Gender: every single entity we talk about -- every thing -- every noun in English is grammatically either a masculine “he” or a feminine “she” or a neutral “it”.

[Note: not all languages are built on gender. In Cree, for example, nouns have no gender – no “he” or “she” or “it”. Instead, Cree nouns are either animate (alive) or inanimate (not alive). So, in Cree the Creator cannot get mixed up with being a male – isn’t that good! -- but we haven’t got time to explore that language difference either!]

Because we, we talk to each other in English, and this Genesis text shows quite clearly that the Creator of All That Is – as we say, **God** – is beyond gender categorization. We could say, “God is,” or “God contains all genders”, -- and probably much more of which we have no conception, yet. How then are we to talk about God in English, which is completely genderized?

I say, let’s try story; let’s try a story in poetry to grapple with this powerful, evocative idea of “God beyond all gender.” If you had had the great blessing of learning Grade 12 literature with Peter Bergen (Neil’s father) as I did, you would have studied the poem, “Creation” by James Weldon Johnson. Johnson wrote this poem in the 1920s; his parents had been slaves. The poem combines the creation accounts of both Genesis 1 & 2, and I have added a few gender changes to help us see the story a bit differently. Don’t let the changes disturb you. Just remember that, in English, we can only speak in gender terms, and remember also that God, our Creator, contains every possible gender.

James Weldon Johnson: CREATION

And God stepped out on space,
 And She looked around, and She said,
 “I’m lonely —
 I’ll make me a world.”

And far as the eye of God could see
 Darkness covered everything,
 Blacker than a hundred midnights
 Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said, "That's good!"

Then God reached out and took the light in Her hands,
And God rolled the light around in Her hands
Until She made the sun;
And She set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
She hurled the earth;
And God said, "That's good!"

Then God Herself stepped down —
And the sun was on Her right hand,
And the moon was on Her left;
The stars were clustered about Her head,
And the earth was under Her feet.
And God walked, and where She trod
Her footsteps hollowed the valleys out
And bulged the mountains up.

Then She stopped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren.
So God stepped over to the edge of the world
And She spat out the seven seas;
She batted Her eyes, and the lightnings flashed;
She clapped Her hands, and the thunders rolled;
And the waters above the earth came down,
The cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed her finger to the sky,
And the oak spread out her arms,
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared,
And curled itself around Her shoulder.

Then God raised Her arm and She waved Her hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And She said, "Bring forth! Bring forth!"
And quicker than God could drop Her hand,
Fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,

And split the air with their wings.
And God said, "That's good!"

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that She had made.
She looked at Her sun,
And She looked at Her moon,
And She looked at Her little stars;
She looked on Her earth
With all its living things,
And God said, "I'm lonely still."

Then God sat down
On the side of a hill where She could think;
By a deep, wide river She sat down;
With Her head in Her hands,
God thought and thought,
Till She thought, "I'll make me a woman!"

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
She kneeled Her down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of Her hand;

This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till She shaped it in Her own image;

Then into it She blew the breath of life,
And woman became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

You and I, we women and men, are made out of the mud of the earth and the breath – the spirit-- of God. Divine breath, earthly dust. And we know that, in a scientific sense, the “earthly dust” statement is, quite literally, true. When we say “Mother Earth”, we are speaking more than a poetic metaphor: we are honoring a magnificent, living, physical truth. The earth is our Mother – we are born of her, and by her we are fed every day of our life.

To underline that, let me conclude with a personal word. I was born on a homestead in northern Saskatchewan, the last of 7 children. Treaty 6 land; generations upon generations of peoples had hunted and gathered there, but no one had tried to farm that forest before us. But our immigrant homestead community raised most of the food we ate from that land, and some years ago, when I was writing my autobiography, I had a vivid visual memory of my brother there, working that land. Here is that memory, as it stands in my book Of This Earth: a Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest:

Along the bush on the far side of the huge garden [plot that surrounds our log house, my big brother] Dan is plowing with four horses, seated on our two-share plow. His big arm works the depth lever, threading the plowshares between shallow grey-wooded soil and the underlying clay. I [am ten years old; [I walk the furrow he plows, bent low, nudge the seed potatoes into the soil tight as I my mother taught me years ago, so that the next round of the plow will cover them to an exact depth and then we will mark each long row with pegs and rake the surface smooth. A winter's worth of family food [will grow here], to be eaten in all the ways Mennonites prepare potatoes, but best they are sliced and fried in Jreewe Schmolt, rendered pork fat with bits of red meat, nothing can taste better after a day outside in February than these potatoes browned deep and fat between your teeth.

In the plowed ground my bare toes bump into stones, curl in tiny pockets of sand scattered like bits of antediluvial beach in the tan clay, sand so moist you can shape it momentarily between your toes -- actually in the sunlight the varied earth feels more intriguing than any book [you can read]. That was one stupid thing about winter: the early darkness is good for reading, but your feet and hands are always wrapped in something heavy -- but in bright May like this your bare feet and hands can know things too, feet and hands are the four corners of your always inquiring body, and they can know things far beyond your hard head.

In this garden our food begins. And in our farmyard, where the chickens graze; in the swampy sloughs where cattle forage along the edge of mossy water; in the boreal bush where saskatoons and cranberries and chokecherries grow, wild strawberries on deserted fields; and north of Speedwell School, beyond the fire cutline where forest fires ... burned years before I was born, over the sandy jack pine and poplar hills grow wild

blueberries, square miles of them bunched in drops bluer than sky, which we pick in August to fill five-gallon cream cans, and Mam boils them in the hot summer kitchen and I carry them down the ladder into the cellar below the house and set the preserves in rows of purple, red, blue sealers: winter jam for bread, and berries for Plautz and for delicious whipped cream dessert with just a sprinkle of sugar.

Standing barefoot in the turned soil behind our house, I know: Of this earth -- this bush, this garden -- of this earth I am made.

Indeed. We human beings are of the earth: from it we are born, by it we are fed, on it we live, and move, and have our being.

Let us pray: God of All Creation, we worship you, and give you thanks.

We would praise you forever, o God, for your goodness to us is unending.

We thank you for your mercy, your compassion, your care which is boundless, day after day.

O loving God, today we especially praise and thank you for the good earth, which is our mother and our home.

And we pray, in your mercy, grant us the love to share your goodness with everyone we meet.

Bless the Lord, o my soul!

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Oct, 2016.