

Getting Us Back to the Garden - Where There Is Dirt Even Under God's Fingernails

By: Rev. Marlin Lavanhar

A response to:
A Four Sisters Garden: Reciprocity, Generosity and Climate Resilience

By: Rev. Kim Mason

November 16, 2022 Prairie Group

INTRODUCTION

Kim Mason has written an outstanding paper and I was tempted to forgo a response to leave more time for members of Prairie Group to share our eco-biographies and to discuss the evocative questions she's raised.

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Native scholar Greg Cajete wrote "...that in indigenous ways of knowing, we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit." Do UU's teach and use all these ways of knowing? We know our 7-8 Principles with our minds. How might we come to know them with our bodies, emotions and spirits?

Building on Sallie McFague's wonderful concept of "Biocracy," Kim charges us: "...to explore what a life-giving, life-affirming UU theology looks like when it includes all beings."

Kim raises a paradox worth more examination regarding Kimmerer's call to find ways to "belong to the land" and the potential for "...complicity with ...the logics of elimination of the native people."

DECOLONIZATION

Kim began her paper with a question from a Lakota elder. “How can a group of white people talk about decolonization without an indigenous person being present? You’re the colonizers.” She continues, “I have been reflecting on this for the past month, mindful of what I was asked to present to you all today. How could I, a white woman, present on indigenous wisdom? What is respectful learning of shared expertise and what is co-opting knowledge?”

I am another white, American citizen with no indigenous roots in the Americas. I am not one to judge if Kim’s paper furthers the project of colonizing or decolonizing our minds and religion. Nevertheless, it is a vital question of justice and we must try to be mindful of how to have these conversations in ways that do not harm, further marginalize or commodify indigenous wisdom, people and cultures.

Kim’s paper intentionally lifts up the voices of indigenous people in their own words and puts those indigenous voices in the center of the discussion. She uses those voices to critique Western knowledge and paradigms. According to Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln,

“Indigenous knowledge systems are too frequently made into objects of study, treated as if they were instances of quaint folk theory held by the members of a primitive culture. Rather than comparing Indigenous knowledge systems in comparison to empirical Western values, Indigenous decolonization aims to reverse this perspective so that Western funds of knowledge are subjected to due examination and study en route to restoring Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and culture.”ⁱ

In an attempt to avoid and counter the damaging effects of western-centric, neo-colonial thinking and practices, Kim’s paper seeks to deconstruct western paradigms and assumptions with first person accounts from indigenous people. Even so, for any members of the dominant culture, having grown up with US American socialization and education, it is important to try to be aware of the filters through which we are interpreting and explaining any other tradition’s wisdom. I commend Kim for raising these issues and walking carefully and intentionally. I caution all of us to speak humbly and consciously from our own social location and to be open to feedback, particularly from those who are well acquainted with decolonization and indigenous wisdom.

AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS

The original assignment encouraged us to consider how “...postmodern Christianity might offer alternatives to a culture and theology of exploitation, without misappropriation.” As UU ministers we have an historical claim on the interpretation of the Christian Scriptures and traditions. We can make a case that these scriptures and traditions are ours to interpret, dispute, debate and even discount in a way that most other sources of religious wisdom are not. For most UU clergy, interpretation and disputations of the scriptures of other world religions and indigenous wisdom is a much more fraught and potentially harmful undertaking.

The contrasts presented in Kim’s paper, between an indigenous worldview and Christianity is rooted in a particular, dominant, interpretation of Western Christianity and the Bible. The perspective reads like the criticism of Lynn White, Jr. who describes how Western Christianity is responsible for much of the environmental destruction since the industrial age. He explains,

Christians in the modern west have read the Bible as showing that God is separate from nature (dualism), that humans are the only figures in creation made in the image of God (anthropocentrism), and that creation exists ultimately for human sake (human chauvinism). These perspectives have led to indifference, at best, and sometimes even hostility toward nature.ⁱⁱ

White rightly puts the blame on the interpretation rather than the Bible itself.

If we say that the Bible itself makes a case for human domination and devastation of the earth, then we are reinforcing a dangerous interpretation of the Bible. We are inadvertently affirming an orthodoxy. If we present the Bible and Christianity as the problem, we will have to discredit an ancient scripture and the religion of over one quarter of the world’s population in order to win people over to a more relational and reciprocal ethic and ecology.

A more effective and hopeful strategy is to deconstruct the dominant interpretation of the Bible in Western Christianity and to replace it with a more compelling and ecologically sustainable alternative interpretation. Sallie McFague spent her professional life attempting just such a project. Unfortunately, neither Kim nor I, were adequately inspired by McFague’s argument for kenosis in A New Climate for Christology. The good news is, that UU’s can do this interpretive, critical work as “insiders” to the Western Biblical traditions and therefore can more easily avoid the problems of misappropriation and exploitation.

I am inspired by Terence Fretheim's theological paper, "Creation in Community", in which he shares a compelling reading of the Biblical account of Genesis. In it he shows how God created the world in relationship and through sharing power as opposed to the idea that the Biblical God created the world alone, with exclusive control and using power over. He shows us how the God in Genesis invites the ongoing participation of humankind and the rest of the created world in creation. It is a God who exercises,

...dominion by inviting others into cooperative relationships of mutual interdependence. The process of creation itself, in fact, apparently requires that God exercise not only power but restraint, or "divine self limitation," in order that the created world might continue to participate in its own creation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Fretheim's reading offers a God who demonstrates "divine hospitality."

The creator Fretheim shows us in Genesis is not a CEO, delegating authority to human managers, who then function in authoritarian modes under divine command (anthropocentrism). Nor is the God of Genesis the clockmaker of deism, who sets the machinery of nature running and then leaves, granting to humans the right to remold creation for the sake of human interests (human chauvinism). In Fretheim's reading, God is the prime mover in ongoing processes of creation generated by and oriented around acts of divine hospitality.^{iv}

He shows us how God, in Genesis, steps-back and shares power in order to allow humans and all other life to be co-creators. Since humans were created from the soil and in the image of such a God, humans are therefore also expected to create in mutual relationship, as co-creators with all life.

In Genesis 2, ...God assumes human form and shapes the ground into a human being, getting dirt under the divine fingernails. Human beings are created out of an already existent creature. In addition, the testimony of Genesis 1 to the goodness of all forms of material reality is undergirded in Genesis 2 with respect to God's tangible and tactile engagement with creatures. Not only are finite, material realities capable of being "handled" by God (Ps 8:3; 99:5) without compromising God's Godness, they are capable of actually bearing God bodily in the life of the world, as God takes on human form and wears this very creation (see Gen 3:8). Already in Genesis 2-3, God is prone to incarnation.^v

This is a God who demonstratively values the material world and the process of creation. Moreover, we read that God did this creating in relationship as it is written, God says, "let us" create them in "our image, our likeness" (Gen 3:22; 11:7).

God specifically chooses to share the creative process with those who are not God. God, as it were, gets help. Might one even say that God needs help, not in some narrow understanding of "need," but because it is important for God and for the very nature of the human that God create communally?^{vi}

Genesis describes a Creator in dialogue rather than an individualistic, authoritarian God. And it describes humans who were created to "be like us" -- a council of those sharing power in relationships in the act of co-creating. This is a God who has "dominion" and uses it relationally through sharing power and stepping back. This is the role model humans are created in the likeness of.

The creation is not presented as "a finished product," all wrapped up with a big red bow and handed over to the creatures to preserve as it was originally created. God creates a dynamic world in which the future is open to a number of possibilities and in which creaturely activity is crucial for proper creational developments.^{vii}

In other words, we braid sweetgrass.

Since the Bible is polyvalent, and open to many equally valid interpretations, UU's might have more influence, and avoid misappropriation, by promoting an ethic of planetary stewardship through Biblical interpretation rather than by borrowing and attempting to popularize indigenous wisdom or that of religions and cultures belonging to others. If done skillfully and in partnership with indigenous people, we can likely even do it in ways that are decolonizing.

ⁱ Denzin, Norman; Lincoln, Yvonna; Smith, Linda (2008). *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

ⁱⁱ "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" 1967 (Science 155, pp. 1203-1207).

ⁱⁱⁱ Toward A Deep Christian Ecology, Stan Saunders, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA for Creation on the Cross theological conference.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Creation in Community: Faith and the Environment, Dr. Terence E. Fretheim, Professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota for Creation on the Cross theological conference.

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Ibid