

Exploring Progressive Christianity 7
September 1, 2024
Rev. Anna Hubbard

In the book of Genesis we hear – “In the beginning.....” The Book of Genesis begins with a “once upon a time” kind of story, back when the universe was primordial ooze and was without form or substance. God breathed her Spirit over the face of the chaos and brought order. And it was good. So good that God declared it good. In Genesis 1, we see God creating in joy and love, taking what was once formless void and creating light, sky, land, sun, moon, creepy crawly things, birds, cows, and even people. All Good. God took delight in every element and called them good. The fact that the hedgehog and the platypus and the penguin exist show me that God finds joy and delight in the creative process. On Twitter a number of years ago, people imagined God’s conversations as God created animals.

“God creating snakes: *How about a sock that’s angry all the time*”.

“God creating horses: *Take a donkey, and make it sexy*”.

God creating parrots: *“How about a tie dye chicken that screams actual words at you?”*

God creating dogs: *“Oh, these turned out great. I’m gonna want all these back at some point”*.

I’m not sure that’s a verbatim transcription of the 5th and 6th day of creation, but I’m sure it’s at least partly right. God’s work in the creation story is imaginative, delightful, and collaborative. I think these are important things to remember. Because as humans entrusted to care for the good of creation, we are called to be partners in this creative and joyful work. It isn’t hard to look around and see where humanity has continued on as God began, creating art, music, literature, antibiotics, vaccines, pizza, and the comedy of Monty Python and Schitts Creek.

However, somewhere along the way, the goodness of all these different elements of life and their interactions together got overshadowed by another verse, another focus, and another way of being in the world. The cultural Christian narrative for too long hasn’t been centered on “it is good” which is mentioned again and again, so much as it placed all of the primary focus on, “fill the Earth and subdue it, and have dominion” which is not mentioned seven times but actually only once. And yet, Christianity has had a somewhat ugly history justifying the dominance of humanity over the Earth.

A colleague told me a story once about his wife’s uncle, a devout evangelical Christian. He tells it that, he was as evangelical about geothermal heating as he was about Jesus. He even made a late-career switch, into digging geothermal wells and it was his business well into his 80s. His wife wrongly assumed he was an environmentalist. She was wrong. He was only interested in it because it could save people money. “I’m not some tree-hugging, environmentalist whacko,” he had said. He explained that Genesis 1 says we have dominion over the earth and can do with it as we please; plus, Jesus is coming back soon, so what difference does it make. You think it’s a mess now? Wait until you see what God is doing to do to it!”

We all have our own stories we could share, or news articles about the lack of care for creation, that tell the narrative, that for so many dominion and stewardship is the correct narrative. But I wonder, what if the narrative was about partnering with God in the spirit of creativity to imagine a world that is good. And to be about fostering the ways in which it is good/ What if instead of being given dominion we have been entrusted with the continuation of caring for the earth with wonder, and joy, and creativity?

Our native siblings have a lot to teach us about how to approach our care of the Earth from an angle of appreciation instead of dominion. Indigenous traditions have long practiced a different form of relating to Earth – one in which humanity has a great deal to learn from other life forms rather than understanding humanity as the holders of the highest knowledge.

This last year, as many of you know, we started a new group for children in 3rd – 5th grades called Joyful Path. It is named after the curriculum we use. We chose this curriculum specifically because of the ways it follows so many of the core values of progressive Christianity that we have talked about during this series. But also, because it offers our kids so much exposure to beliefs and values that might be different from our own. A Joyful Path leads with a focus that explores the interdependence of all things. Each lesson provides spiritual tools and practices to remind us we cannot separate ourselves from Earth, Her creatures, the elements, or one another and that our attempts to live “independently” create the separations that lead to suffering, division and destruction, all of which runs counter to the sacred teachings present in all the World Religions, Earth-centered spiritualities, and Indigenous ways of life.

There are lots of things I want to equip our children and youth with before they leave the DCC nest, but being kind humans who can foster relationships and value the worth of every person they meet is probably at the very top of my list because both the Hebrew bible and the new testament are filled with examples of how we belong to one another and how we are supposed to take care of each other. Relationship, for my own theology, is how we attend to the ways and create of the kingdom of God here and now. Relationship is how we share love and equity. Relationship, is the way people feel known and valued. And that focus on relationship plays out not just in our relationships to one another, and our relationship to the earth. And that reminded me of the very first lesson I taught last fall when we kicked off the program.

In that lesson we learned about The Thanksgiving Address, also known as Words Before All Else, which is a practice of the Haudenosuane (Hawdi-naw-SHOW-knee) People, a collection of First Nations tribes, whose home reaches from Michigan, to upstate New York and Canada. The Thanksgiving Address is the first thing that happens anytime the people gather for council meetings or ceremony celebrations. It is a time to express gratitude to all that exists and supports our existence on Earth. Native teachers are clear to say the address is not a prayer but rather the practice that brings us into the space where we can pray or do other sacred work (i.e., resolve conflicts, make important decisions, be present for difficult conversations) with a clear mind, a clear heart, and greater connectivity with self, one another, all Creation,

and the Source of all Creation. I would like this morning to share that address with you in a condensed version. The original is written by Chief Jake Swamp.

These words before all else. Today we have gathered, and we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now, we bring our minds together as one as we give greetings and thanks to each other as people. We give thanks for our family, friends, and fellow human beings...now our minds are one.

We are all thankful to our Mother, the Earth, for she gives us all that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she continues to care for us as she has from the beginning of time. To our mother, we send greetings and thanks. - Now our minds are one.

We give thanks to all the waters of the world for quenching our thirst and providing us with strength. Water is life. We know its power in many forms—waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to the spirit of Water. Now our minds are one.

We turn our minds to the all the Fish life in the water. They were instructed to cleanse and purify the water. They also give themselves to us as food. We are grateful that we can still find pure water. So, we turn now to the Fish and send our greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

Now we turn toward the vast fields of Plant life. As far as the eye can see, the Plants grow, working many wonders. They sustain many life forms. With our minds gathered together, we give thanks and look forward to seeing Plant life for many generations to come. Now our minds are one.

With one mind, we turn to honor and thank all the Food Plants we harvest from the garden. Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans and berries have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them too. We gather all the Plant Foods together as one and send them a greeting of thanks. Now our minds are one.

Now we turn to all the Medicine herbs of the world. From the beginning they were instructed to take away sickness. They are always waiting and ready to heal us. We are happy there are still among us those special few who remember how to use these plants for healing. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to the Medicines and to the keepers of the Medicines. Now our minds are one.

We gather our minds together to send greetings and thanks to all the Animal life in the world. They have many things to teach us as people. We are honored by them when they give up their lives so we may use their bodies as food for our people. We see them near our homes and in the deep forests. We are glad they are still here, and we hope that it will always be so. Now our minds are one.

We now turn our thoughts to the Trees. The Earth has many families of Trees who have their own instructions and uses. Some provide us with shelter and shade, others with fruit, beauty and other useful things. Many people of the world use a Tree as a symbol of peace and strength. With one mind, we greet and thank the Tree life. Now our minds are one.

We put our minds together as one and thank all the Birds who move and fly about over our heads. The Creator gave them beautiful songs. Each day they remind us to enjoy and appreciate life. The Eagle was chosen to be their leader. To all the Birds—from the smallest to the largest—we send our joyful greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

We are all thankful to the powers we know as the Four Winds. We hear their voices in the moving air as they refresh us and purify the air we breathe. They help us to bring the change of seasons. From the four directions they come, bringing us messages and giving us strength. With one mind, we send our greetings and thanks to the Four Winds. Now our minds are one.

Now we turn to the west where our grandfathers, the Thunder Beings, live. With lightning and thundering voices, they bring with them the water that renews life. We bring our minds together as one to send greetings and thanks to our Grandfathers, the Thunderers. Now our minds are one.

We now send greetings and thanks to our eldest Brother, the Sun. Each day without fail he travels the sky from east to west, bringing the light of a new day. He is the source of all the fires of life. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to our Brother, the Sun. Now our minds are one.

We put our minds together to give thanks to our oldest Grandmother, the Moon, who lights the night-time sky. She is the leader of women all over the world, and she governs the movement of the ocean tides. By her changing face we measure time, and it is the Moon who watches over the arrival of children here on Earth. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to our Grandmother, the Moon. Now our minds are one.

We give thanks to the Stars who are spread across the sky like jewelry. We see them in the night, helping the Moon to light the darkness and bringing dew to the gardens and growing things. When we travel at night, they guide us home. With our minds gathered together as one, we send greetings and thanks to the Stars. Now our minds are one.

We gather our minds to greet and thank the Teachers who have come to help throughout the ages. When we forget how to live in harmony, they remind us of the way we were instructed to live as people. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to these caring teachers. Now our minds are one.

Now we turn our thoughts to the creator, or Great Spirit, and send greetings and thanks for all the gifts of Creation. Everything we need to live a good life is here on Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greetings and thanks to the Creator. Now our minds are one.

We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. Of all the things we have named, it was not our intention to leave anything out. If something was forgotten, we leave it to each individual to send such greetings and thanks in their own way. Now our minds are one.

Friends, part of caring for the earth is noticing the ways in which she serves us. Part of caring for creation is practicing, like our native siblings, standing in a posture of gratitude. Maybe just adjusting our posture is enough to remind our hearts and

minds of our place in the world and our call to help care for it. And part of caring for creation is being willing to risk being creative just as God was in the creating. It is through our own imaginations of creation that we might be able to be better stewards of the earth and come up with solutions that might remedy some of the climate problems we have.

This work is already happening. The World Economic forum tells us of satellites that are better equipped to sense and send warning about climate crisis in the world. An example of this is that in Bangladesh in the 1970s only had two coastal radar warning systems and so suffered major casualties when tropical storms would kick up. Today with the help of satellites and balloons the death rate is near zero as the receive early and correct warning for weather events that could prove fatal.

Climate Resolve, tells of a technology being used on roofs and pavements to help reflect and send the most harmful rays back into space. Our use of dark-pigmented materials converts sunlight into heat, much of which is then captured by greenhouse gases and re-radiated back to earth. Which is the main mechanism of climate change. This technology helps to combat the earth radiating those rays at all.

We see new technologies all the time about transportation and using less gas which produce let greenhouse gas emissions. And this list is just the beginning of the technologies being used to imagine new ways to make the world a better place for all of creation. Our creative work is not the same as God's of course, but when we join in creation to make the world better, to bring beauty and joy to the world, we continue as God began. And God declares that good too. May we continue to be about the work of noticing the good all around us and being co-creators of the good. May it be so.

Amen.