

“Inheriting the Wind: HOH as a Spiritual Ecosystem”

Psalm 85:8-13

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Years ago, when I was in Rochester, I attended two clergy groups; one with the Presbyterian pastors from across the lower part of our Presbytery, or what they refer to as ‘the southern kingdom,’ and the other, a much larger gathering of clergy throughout Rochester, including Mayo and hospice chaplains. The local rabbi came to the second group and when we went around to introduce ourselves, he said that he was the leader of the ‘frozen Chosen’; chosen, of course, coming from the capital ‘C’ Chosen people of God and frozen because they lived in Minnesota. I was not planning to introduce myself using those words – but still had the thought – hey, that’s my line; Presbyterians being more famously (in my experience) known as the ‘frozen chosen,’ chosen coming from our doctrine of predestination and ‘frozen’ having nothing to do with geography or meteorology but from our – formality and certainly, our intellectual bent. It’s in my blood and bones; one of you reminded me this morning that we now include folks with backgrounds in many denominations, seeding us with new energies!

When J. Herbert Nelson, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church USA, was here on Palm Sunday a year ago; he said that he believes we are in the midst of another Reformation. And that makes sense to me. The world is changing at an incredibly rapid rate – we have been heading into this time of transformation – or renovation– or revolution (take your pick) for decades and now we’ve traveled far so far down the road of change that we can see the old structures are not going to hold, and even thought the new structures and systems have not become clear, we cannot stay the same and certainly cannot go back.

This is a time when great faith is needed – this is the time we have been preparing for; we are the leaven in the flour, the planters of the mustard seed, and of course the people of the resurrection. But in all honesty, as Presbyterians, we are not known for being overly demonstrative in our faith, so I wonder, when we come to a text that calls for out-right public displays of affection, are we willing and ready to go there?

As preparation for my next class at Luther a week from tomorrow, I’ve been reading about the history of mission since Calvin and getting a picture of the ways some of the secularism and even atheism that is blossoming in our time has grown out of the Protestant Reformation. The proximity in time to the Enlightenment has entangled the two and as religious people began to live into the Industrial Revolution sky scrapers, and a car in every drive, a stream of atheism entered into theology manifesting itself, if not as an actual worship of progress, certainly a sense that our accomplishments as human beings were so stunning and remarkable that we ourselves could were bringing God’s kingdom. So, for many in this and recent generations, God became the ‘God of the

gaps,' meaning that God was a reason or rationalization for whatever we could not yet understand or explain. Therefore, as each new scientific understanding, or medical treatment, or engineering feat or technological advance came into being, there was just that much less need for God, and much less of God.

In a paper delivered to the Church and Society Conference in Geneva in 1966, Emmanuel Mesthene, a professor of philosophy from Rutgers shared this:

We are the first ... to have enough (of that) power actually at hand to create new possibilities almost at will. By massive physical changes deliberately induced, we can literally pry new alternatives from nature. The ancient tyranny of matter has been broken, and we know it. ... We can change [the physical world] and shape it to suit our purposes. ... By creating new possibilities, we give ourselves more choices. With more choices, we have more opportunities. With more opportunities, we can have more freedom, and with more freedom we can be more human. That, I think, is what is new about our age. ... We are recognizing that our technical prowess literally bursts with the promise of new freedom, enhanced human dignity, and unfettered aspiration (1967:484f)" (Bosch, 270-271).

I suspect these words were inspiring at the time but it's not a stretch to see the seeds of our environmental crisis in what he said.

None of this is about intended evil – science, technology, philosophy, psychiatrics, medicine, to name a few, are bringing many, many good things to humanity but what is missing is an awareness of sin or the snake at the base of the brain and an ethic of love.

Today's Psalm is one of the many older testament versions of Jesus' Great Commandment, that we might love one another as he loved us. Except this one is more intimate. And true to its Hebrew roots, it is grounded in including the natural world.

One of my Luther's professors used a new word for the Christian Church that attracted my attention and my energy – and that word was 'ecosystem.' An ecosystem is 'a biological community' that includes air, water, soil, plants and animals, as well as weather and landscapes. National Geographic says it is an area that 'works together to form a bubble of life" (Website). The area can be small like a fallen tree trunk or it can be as large as the Boundary Waters or the planet itself. The difference between an ecosystem and a community is the inclusion of environment. I put to you, the two blocks at 797 Summit and Portland Avenues is the House of Hope ecosystem – and realistically, it stretches out from here to the places you live, to your neighbors, and your work colleagues. It extends as far as each of our vacation destinations. Ecosystem is an energizing vision because it is about an environment in which all – and not just some – can thrive.

Sitting in the park earlier this summer, one of you asked me, "How do we get what we have in there, out here?" Our Community Garden is an actual ecosystem – as well as an outward symbol of our passion for justice; it has gotten us out there and been an invitation to some of our neighbors to stop and take part in that justice. Add to that, Carillon concerts, Popsicles in the Park and National Night

Out all of which demonstrate that we are already acting like an ecosystem. And there are things we haven't yet imagined. The answer as to how we get what we have in here – out there – is in each one of you.

For several decades, churches have been tweaking programs to try to attract members from other congregations or to lure in and teach those God-in-the-gaps thinkers, in part, this is our habit.. We did it because our lives have been so meaningful in this model.

But now we find we have so much in common with this Psalm; it is believed to have been written after the exile, after they returned home and yet they do not have a sense of home; they have returned to a place of the past but it is still new space. The whole world has changed – it has been re-formed and first they have to find acceptance of the new normal and then they have to find and gain some understanding of what God is up to so they can once again live into the salvation they've been given. We have always had the invitation to embody the new life in Christ which is based in the power of love, exemplifies the very hard work of right relationship, and is a constant labor of peace. This is an eschatological vision which means it is God's long range plan for us.

We are not the Creator, we are not God; this is a part of Calvin's wisdom that we've carried for five hundred years. We do not need to do God's work, God is doing that – today I would say the kind of thing stated by Emmanuel Mesthene is God's work, and it turns out to be something we are really not very good at. Our work is listening for God's guidance on how to make our ecosystem as life-sustaining as possible for as many people and creatures as well as the environment as possible. This is done when "steadfast love and faithfulness meet, when righteousness and peace kiss one another" right out in public in a metaphorical body to body embrace with neighbors and nature; can you see how important it is to open our doors and move out of our comfort zone toward conversation with religious neighbors and neighbor neighbors and whomever else we meet.

And if we go out, not with the tenets of our faith to teach but with a curiosity and acceptance, I think we will find there was a backdoor created by the very entwining of the Reformation and the Enlightenment; many people who do not claim religion – or who claim to be spiritual but not religious – have in fact absorbed a spiritual life from that intertwining. I know some of you are bewildered and hurt that you raised your children in the church and yet they are not here. God is, none the less, at work in them because God is God – everything and anything is at God's disposal for that work. It may not look or sound like what we've done in the past but then what we do hasn't looked or sounded like first century house churches or the Christendom of the Holy Roman Empire.

For many reasons, there are a growing number of atheists and human secularists, living alongside some formed in and practicing a kind of civil religion that is embedded in the Enlightenment driven culture, and all of it alongside the stream of moralistic, therapeutic deism that has sprung up and been nurtured by the progress of the last century. Some believe Christians have inherited the wind which is okay because wind is Spirit; I hope and believe the same for them! Spirit will always guide and enable us toward an embracing righteousness and peace with and for us all.

Salvation will not come as knowledge, technology or power – it comes as compassion shown when we put the needs of another ahead of our own, it's in the peace we find through prayer, it's in the wisdom we learn through Spirit; it is in cultivating an ecosystem with love at the center. If God is to be seen as more than just a gap, in the way you wrestle with the ethics at work or in the vulnerability we feel in trying something new, and it is in the beauty of your faith.

While some have been wounded by the church or cannot find comfort and meaning here, I believe everyone needs a spiritual ecosystem. If we want to take what we have in here and bring it out there, which is the invitation from God's long range plan, then each one of you is invited to let your light shine like the Son/sun. And it does go out in each one of you in the beauty of your faith. For that, I give thanks to God. Amen.