

A Global Crisis of Belonging

A Homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

Delivered at Katfish Katy Campground, Huntsdale, MO

On Sunday, June 2, 2013 at our annual Down By the Riverside Service

We are told that we were made in God's image.

Sometimes I think that means that we started out as trees.

We are told that God is nearer to us than our breath.

Sometimes I think that means that God was the soil that nurtured our roots and the rain that showered upon our leaves and the sun toward which we turned our branches.

Maybe, once upon a time, God was lonely in her rich earthen home, so she grew us up and trimmed our leaves down to reveal hands and shoulders and hips and faces, and maybe our hair was like weeping willow and holly and short needles of spruce.

She held us in the dark safety of her earth and we bathed our faces in the drenching light of her sun. Perhaps we talked with her in great rustling sighs and soft raspy whispers. And swayed in the wind and delighted together with God in the movement.

Then, maybe we longed to move more freely. Especially when the autumn came and our leaves began to fall and tumble away from us. Perhaps we wanted nothing more than to go with them.

One of us figured it out first-- that we could be pulled up out of the ground, roots and all. One by one we gently eased our roots

up out of the soil. We delighted in walking and leaping and swimming and running and God delighted in watching us.

But then maybe when we rested, roots and tendrils would begin growing from our feet back down into the ground, and we would be afraid of getting stuck; afraid of watching our leaves drift away, unable to follow.

So we made shoes and carpets and cars and planes to protect ourselves from the earth. We wandered the sky and the seas and the earth, as lonely as clouds. We forgot what it was to be held by the earth, cradled in God's embrace.

Only sometimes... babies remember, when they eat the dirt. Mourners remember, when they fall to hug the ground and sob. Lovers remember, when they lie on their backs in the grass and stare up at the stars.

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The 18th century German philosopher and poet Novalis once said "Philosophy is essentially homesickness – the universal impulse to be home."

We might say the same of the Western religious tradition. Many of us are religious descendents in one way or another from a people that wandered the desert, found a home and lost it, and sat down in exile by the river Babylon and wept in memory of the place they once belonged.

Perhaps many of us have sat down by running waters or in the grass and wept as well with the sweet pain of nostalgia... homesick for some time or place in our memory; homesick for the universal embrace that lives in us beyond memory.

I love walking and leaping and swimming and running, but I want to remember what it is to be cradled by the divine, held by the earth.

Perhaps this is why even in our transitory age we work to grow roots where we can and where we are.

This is why we seek the people in our lives that can hold us in the way we once were held and why we must nourish our relationships with them.

Yes, we must dwell here on earth, and not only for our own sake... For our human rootless-ness is not just a spiritual impoverishment. It is also a global crisis. A global crisis of belonging.

You don't need me to reiterate to you the extent of the climate crisis and other forms of environmental degradation. What I do want to suggest is that we have helped to create these problems out of our rootless-ness. Mistakenly believing that we live *upon* the earth instead of *arising from it*, we tend to float about its surface, loathe to claim it as the home of our souls.

As a result we have ignored its concerns just as we casually fail to notice strangers on the street. We treat the earth as a stranger instead of giving it the deep love and reverence that belonging fosters.

It is time to come home.

Theologian Gordon Kaufman posits that that which is ultimate in our universe, what he would call God, is creativity. He points out that this creativity was the origin of our universe with the big bang, and that this creativity is the force most evident in the continuing development of life through evolution. Thus it is that earthly creativity from which all of creation, including the human, has come.

He further states that the exact same creativity that birthed us now bubbles up in us and makes itself known in the human capacity for ideas and art and invention and love.

I find this theological system resonant in part because of the way that it plants human beings in the earth. We arose from it, and now even those things that arise through us- that we might ascribe solely to ourselves- are a part of that same abundant ground of earthly creativity.

Of course, with the advent of invention and ideas simultaneously arises the human call to responsibility. We are fully capable of thinking ourselves separate from our earthly origins. Indeed, much of our western theological and intellectual history does just that. We are also capable of inventing ourselves into oblivion. We have come close to that as well. This is where our inborn capacity for responsibility becomes necessary. This is where we must know that we are deeply responsible to the earth because we *belong* on it, to it, in relationship with it.

Instead, our culture seems to have decided somewhere along the way that we do *not* belong to the earth or each other, but rather to ourselves and our imaginations alone. Our disembodiment has reached startling proportions. At one extreme, some people live out their lives virtually online.

At a more common level, all of us too often forget that our bodies and the greater terrestrial body to which we belong *are our home*, are the only things that we have to inhabit. We have forgotten what it was to have roots reaching deep into the soil, to sway and rustle with the rhythms of the earth.

In doing so we have devalued bodies, the human body and the earthly one, and we have created the toxic situation in which we now find ourselves.

This forgetting of our earthly roots has become an acute and global crisis of religious proportions.

The Reverend Katherine Jesch gives perspective to the religious urgency of the problem when she says: “Global climate change, resource depletion, pollution, and species extinction together may be the greatest moral challenge facing humankind in the twenty-first century.” She goes on to suggest that “religions may be the only human institutions still able to respond to the challenge.”

Religions are suited to this work because they look at the world with the same breadth and magnitude that this global crisis requires and because they, too, take *belonging* as a primary concern.

This is where our religious desire and our ecological responsibility collide to create a new calling, where the answer to our existential homesickness may turn out to be just the answer to the global climate crisis. It is the call to create among us a *culture of belonging* to God and to the earth.

Cultural critic bell hooks describes just such a culture like this: “it is an intimate connection with the land to which one belongs, empathic relationship to animals, self-restraint, balance, mutuality, generosity, playfulness, inclusiveness, and openness to spirit” (hooks 2008: 13).

If we are to restore our souls and restore our earthly home, these are the qualities we must live.

Balance.

Mutuality.

Generosity.

Playfulness.

Openness to spirit.

These things, this culture of belonging, make up the deepest calling of our prophetic faith, which at its best feeds the soul *and* heals the world. And this why we need each other as a community of faith. A church is a dark, rich soil for building home. This is a place to belong to the earth and to each other and in doing so, to find healing.

So start here. Dwell here. Together.

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Our story is not finished, but this is how I hope it ends.

Eventually we remembered that we were once babies who ate the dirt, once mourners who hugged the ground, once lovers who lay on our backs in the grass.

One of us remembered first the joy of deep roots and tall swaying branches, and took off her shoes, and felt the tendrils grow down from her feet into the earth.

And then more of us began to remember the embrace of the earth. And we grew ourselves roots again. We grew them in green pastures. Grew them beside still waters. And our souls were restored

Still sometimes we would pull them up, for there is a need to dance and walk and run and swim. But always we would find a place again to belong, to stay and sway in the wind and have rustling conversations with God.

May it be so.