Notes on Discussion 3

People considered Jerry’s emphasis on creation as a continuing process important. The earth constantly is being created. Genesis makes it clear that the Earth is to bring forth plants – a self-sustaining reproducing cycle. So is the idea important that the Earth is response-able, that “nature” can respond.

In human reconciliation there usually is fault on both sides. In the environmental context we think the fault is all human. Can the nonhuman creation ever do bad? What about natural disasters? Although nature may not choose to hurt us, it does. We need to come to grips with this entity that hurts us. Even with people who hurt us, there’s often some underlying cause. That could be the same with “nature.”

Douglas Burton Christie, editor of Spiritus, has done deep work on the need for the human species to repent of its effect on other species. He has proposed liturgies for this. We might want to explore this, maybe have him come speak to us.

We need to consider how suffering is part of the evolution of the world. De Chardin has a lot to say about this. For him the earth is the body of Christ from a sacramental perspective. It’s not just the incarnate body but the resurrected body. There is a great divide in Christianity between those believing that at end of world the world will be destroyed vs. those who see it as being transformed. Nothing gets “left behind” in the latter view. Matter matters in this view. Suffering and resurrection are critical to keep in mind in this view.

How do we ask forgiveness of other species, of places for what we have done? Do we have an obligation to ask forgiveness? People tend to think this is crazy, but it makes sense. It is a popular thing to have blessings for the animals. What is the equivalent action for asking forgiveness?

If flowers can forgive us, can tornadoes willfully harm us in retribution for our sins? Some people say that the sinfulness of Japan or New Orleans brought about their destruction. Response: The sin that “causes” Katrina, etc. is the systemic sin of humans, not individual sins; e.g., the way we change climate, destroy marshes. Also, creation has sin that needs redeeming – look at e.g., the competitiveness of hummingbirds over a feeder. We don’t want to overestimate nature, but the bigger danger is to underestimate it. Is it too far a stretch to consider the personhood of creation? But the only people who seem to deal with this are pagan groups. So, should we be wary about wandering in this direction?

Response: we need to make a distinction. Trees and rocks are not free moral agents, though they are able to respond. They do clap their hands, etc. in response to God like the Bible says. We can over- and under-anthropomorphize creation. There is a lot in many traditions about how we can communicate with nature; i.e., there’s lots of “data” out there to that effect. For instance, George Washington Carver talked to plants, and took this information into his lab where he did his science. He also was a devout Evangelical. What do we do with this?
We need respect for the other kinds of knowing and sentience of other creatures. Just like we write off other cultures as being crude or primitive, or declare that native peoples aren’t really human, by analogy we write off the “culture”, and “intelligence” of trees and other creatures that “know” things and behave in ways different from us. If one assumes communication with someone or something isn’t possible, it isn’t. And the opposite is true.

Ellen Davis said Jeremiah was called to face the devastation of his community and not look away – his whole world was being destroyed and he needed to face this and speak about it. We are called to do the same.

A suggestion: we might want to start with the Socratic oath as healers: do no harm. This is very hard in our society/economy. But creatures do harm one another in nature; we have no choice but to harm others, too, in this broken world. When animals do harm, however, they are in sync with natural cycles. We are not. Therefore, we must choose how to affect others.

One person shared that the only way she can deal with the brokenness of the world is through the Resurrection. It gives her hope. The way things are now, we can’t not do harm. We need to face this reality and with hope do the best we can.

Response: from a Buddhist perspective if we take our interdependence dead seriously, that nothing is separate, this implies we can act and change a curse. If we know and see, we must act to the best of our ability. So, she herself doesn’t lean on hope, but rather on a spirit of generosity with detachment from the results. She looks to her own responsibility and tries to see clearly and do next best thing. We need to be intentional to act rightly.

In a recorded talk by Wendell Berry someone asked him whether or not we have time to figure all this out. Berry replied that we no right to ask this question. Rather, we need to discern the right thing and do it. This is related to faithfulness and love. We love for the sake of loving, not because it is going to solve a problem.

In Becca Stevens’ talk she described what happens when we choose to love. We don’t know what this may result in. We just do it. But, what is the loving thing to do? We need eyes wide open. Christian faith says that if we love, redemption comes. This gives hope. But we do what we do because we love, not because it brings hope. It’s both and.

Stevens said that we all have gifts, and that at a given moment one of us may perceive something to be wrong. Then we need to act on it. A person may be an environmentalist but weak on urban rights, for instance. That doesn’t mean he’s deficient – it’s just not his gift. To try to do no wrong can be paralyzing. There are too many wrongs out there. This brings to mine The Body of Christ – together we accomplish what we can’t singly. If each of us responds to what we perceive as wrong and then love, together we can respond to all of the world’s ills.
According to the wonderful book, N. T. Wright’s *Surprised by Hope*, Easter changes the game, but we’re still in the game. The Kingdom is here, but not fully here. Loving is part of this process. It may even change the evolutionary process. We don’t know where evolution is going, but love has an impact. This resembles the story of the Buddhist monks and the tree spirits from a forum or two ago – there is power when we go out lovingly.

Apathy is opposite of loving. We are hardened to suffering, we are not open. Apathy means turning a blind eye. We need to feel sorrow to be open.

Perhaps we need a yearly day of mourning, of atonement like the Hebrews. The 10 days before Yom Kippur you are supposed to go ask forgiveness of everyone you have harmed in the previous year. You don’t ask God’s forgiveness before you’ve exhausted the possibilities of reconciliation. But our culture doesn’t want to see anything bad. We also don’t know how to ask forgiveness or to give it. It makes both of us uncomfortable on both sides when we look someone in the eye and say we are sorry. We don’t know how to deal with our emotions. We feel that something is wrong if we are sad.