Care for Creation Commentary on the Common Lectionary

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For Lutherans Restoring Creation

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Sixth Sunday of Easter
Psalm 66:8-20

Acts 17:22-31

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21
The reading of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse continues with this Sunday’s Gospel, with its concern for how his followers will live in his absence, in anticipation of the closing of the period of his Easter appearances and his Ascension. The passage extends the discussion of the relationship between the community of believers, Jesus, and his Father, relationships with which we were engaged by the reading of the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Easter. With promises to send the Paraclete and not ever to abandon them (“I will not leave you orphaned”), Jesus invites his followers to look forward to a future in which, by the agency of the Paraclete or “Spirit of Truth,” they will know that he is in his Father, they are in him, and he is in them (14:20). This mutual indwelling is a relationship characterized throughout by love. The relationship of Jesus and the community is one of love: “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me.” They will be loved by the Father: “and those who love me will be loved by my Father.” And Jesus, loving them, will make himself known to them: “I will love them and reveal myself to them” (14:20-21). By virtue of this circular set of relationships, the believing community is to be caught up in the divine relationship of Father, Son and Spirit.

Thus is adumbrated the teaching that will be worked out in the course the Christian community’s first four centuries as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It is interesting to note that all of the issues at stake in the development of this doctrine are at least implicit in the Farewell Discourse: the question of the unity of God or monotheism that will be at issue in the church’s conflict with Judaism; the question of how best to define the relationship of the Father and the Son (Spirit or Logos?), which will shape the churches relationship with pagan thought; the status and role of the Holy Spirit, key to linkage with the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures; and the bond between redemption and creation that that church will be called on to defend against Marcion and other Gnostics (For this list, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the CatholicTradition (100-600)*, Vol.1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, p...
172). The lectionary for the remaining Sundays of the festival season—including the Seventh Sunday of Easter (following the Ascension of our Lord), Day of Pentecost, and The Holy Trinity—will provide occasion to discuss the significance of each of these issues for care of creation. But it is the last of these issues that is still our leading concern here, as we continue to explore the significance of Jesus’ teaching in the Farewell Discourse regarding his mutual indwelling between God and the community of faith with respect to the bond between redemption and creation.

From the readings of the previous two Sundays we have seen that location in place or situation is a constant feature of the experience of redemption associated with Jesus’ resurrection. The Shepherd leads the sheep out into green pastures, Jesus goes to prepare dwelling places in the house of the Lord, which we take to mean the entirety of God’s creation. The readings for this Sunday further strengthen this theme. The psalmist, for instance, describes an experience of release from a period of testing as being “brought out to a spacious place” (Psalm 66:12b). More importantly, in his speech to the Athenians on the Areopagus, Paul sketches out the works of God in terms of space and time: “The Lord of heaven and earth . . . made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and . . . allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.” It is God’s presence throughout this cosmos—“In him we live and move and have our being” — which guarantees that all nations will search for him “and perhaps grope for him and find him.” As “God’s offspring” (here Paul quotes a pagan philosopher, but perhaps has in mind the metaphor of “God’s children” that he uses in other contexts), we seem especially well-suited to this cosmic search, rather than attempting to locate God in the shrines and idols made by human hands that Paul observed through the city. With the resurrection, God calls all nations to accountability for righteousness before the one appointed as their judge (Acts 17:24-29).
The appointed Gospel might appear to ignore the cosmic, creational reach of these texts in favor of the intimate communion of the believing community, Jesus, and his Father. Within the fuller context of the Farewell Discourse, however, we see otherwise. Gail O'Day sums up her analysis of the complex relationships between the community of believers, Jesus, and the Father as follows: “When the disciples live in love, and thereby keep Jesus’ word, they experience the love of God, and it is through that love that they will also experience the indwelling of God and Jesus.” She goes on to note, significantly, that while, according to John 14:2-3, the “full communion” of the disciples “with God and Jesus” occurs (as we discussed in our comment on the readings for the Fifth Sunday of Easter) “in the Father’s ‘dwelling place,’” John 14:23 indicates that “love of Jesus leads to the same end. To love Jesus is to live with God and Jesus—that is, to enter into relationship with them (cf. 15:9-10, 12), to come home” (Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John, The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 748). Since the appointed reading ends at v. 21, preachers following this commentary may want to add it to the liturgical reading. It seems appropriate to us to add this additional insight: Those who do “come home,” are at home were the Father is, in “the Father’s house.”

That is to say, in accordance with our discussion for the Fifth Sunday, they are at home in the fullness of God’s creation. Thus it is precisely the believing community’s communion with God and Jesus, generated through the love of Jesus, which brings them home in relationship to the creation. They are at home with God in God’s creation.

The significance of this insight is developed more fully in reference to contemporary evolutionary thought by Christopher Southgate in his discussion of “the human animal and its ‘selving’” in his *Groaning of Creation, God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil*. “Graced by the continual outpouring of divine love” in the course of human evolution, Southgate writes, the human animal enjoys “possibilities for a ‘yes’ to God that goes beyond mere selving—a usage Southgate adapts from Gerard Manley Hopkins, meaning the dynamic moment when a creature perfectly expresses its ‘identity, the pattern and particularity of its existence to their full potential,’” i.e. “when it is perfectly itself, both in terms of the species to which it belongs and in
its own individuality (Southgate, pp.63-64). The human animal’s “yes to God” is “based on a sharing of resources with the weak and the non-kin, on reproductive processes accompanied by self-giving love and sustained companionship, on a recognizing of all humans as one’s neighbor, and on sacrificial actions.” But as with all other creatures, humans never “selve” in any fulfilled way. The ambiguous character of the creation as evolutionary process makes that perfection impossible.

The character of created selves is typically not that of self-giving but of self-assertion, for that, in a Darwinian world, is the only way biological selves can survive and flourish” (ibid, p. 5). Evolutionary strategies “almost always involve the overproduction of offspring, and necessarily imply the existence of ‘frustrated’ organisms is a precondition of other organisms ‘growing toward fulfillment’ and ‘fulfilled.’” (ibid, pp. 64-5). Thus, in human consciousness, “old imperatives with regard to resources, reproduction, relatives, and reciprocity” develop “an addictive power.”

Consciousness seems to amplify the potential of humans for evil as well as good. Both our yes and our no to God take on formidable force; our no becomes ecologically the force to become a “plague species,” economically to perpetuate and exacerbate extremes of wealth and poverty, militarily and socially to ghettoize and ultimately to undertake genocide, religiously to crucify the Prince of Peace and Lord of Glory (Ibid., p. 72).

Our cognitive and emotional resources combine with these biological imperatives to foster “greed, lust, rape, and exploitation of the weak, of the poor, or other species.” Thus,
With our emergent faculties comes a greater and greater need of God—a need not just to receive from God but to dwell within the life of the Trinity, to live within and from the patterns of the triune love. It is the Incarnation, finally, that opens up the being of God in a new way, offering us both the most profound of examples, and a new possibility of being at home within the life of a God who has taken human experience into Godself (Ibid).

It isn’t that Jesus himself was “at home,” within either the life of God or the creation. On the contrary, Southgate observes, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke have Jesus confess that while “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt.8:20; Luke 9:5). The Christian conviction is instead “that Jesus gives us the example of what it is to keep one’s orientation firmly and wholly on God, and to derive all one’s strength from that. . . The human being has no true home, but only a direction of journeying, into the heart of God in Godself.” What Jesus goes to prepare for his disciple, we might say, he goes also to prepare for himself. And as he said, “where I am, there you may be also (14:3).

The model is Trinitarian and, indeed, is more than mere model. It is “not just that a human being fully alive has a quality of life that is like the quality of life that is within God, not just, in the famous saying of Irenaeus of Lyons, that the glory of God is a human being fully alive, but also that a human person living in free, loving, undistorted relationship with others has been drawn
up into the life of the Trinity, and participates in that life” (Ibid., p. 73). But this is finally the human animal’s true “selving” as image of God or, more fully expressed, as image of the divine Trinity. As Southgate concludes, “On this model the *imago Dei* is the *imago Trinitatis*, the capacity to give love, in the power of the Spirit, to the radically other, and by that same Spirit to receive love from that other, selflessly. But we only grow into that image as we grow into God, as we learn to dwell within the triune love. We never possess the imago independently of that indwelling, that journeying toward God’s offer of ultimate love (Ibid., pp. 72-73). And *thus* there emerges within human beings that “possibility of a larger ‘yes’”—of a sharing of resources with the weak and the non-kin, of reproductive processes accompanied by self-giving love and sustained companionship, of recognizing all humans as one’s neighbor, and of self-sacrificial actions.” This possibility will be realized within the web of relationships in the creation, as humans’ grow into the life of divine fellowship and participation in the divine transformation of the biosphere, the relief of nature’s’ groaning” (Ibid, p. 115).

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