

## The Lord's Prayer for Earth Community

[A brief version of this sermon was first preached by DTH in March, 2001 while leading a Savannah (Georgia) Presbytery Conference on “Preaching the Stewardship of Creation.” The text was expanded and revised for publication in David Rhoads, ed., *Earth and Word* (Continuum, 2007), a book of sermons on “saving the planet.” It was revised again for this posting. The crisis of ecological destruction and social injustice has local and global impact. This sermon proposes that the Lord’s Prayer illumines the path to a faithful response.]

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever, who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. (Psalm 146: 5-8)

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one.’” (Matthew 6: 7-13)

The prayer Jesus taught his disciples—the prayer that Christians around the world repeat during worship—deserves fresh interpretation as a guide to living faithfully in earth community. Biblical scholars, theologians, and pastors throughout church history have offered helpful commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer as a model for our *praying*. Building on that heritage and in response to our era’s global crisis of ecology and justice, my purpose is to highlight resonant meanings of this spiritual treasure for our way of *living*.

The crisis of ecological destruction and social injustice looms very large in our time because it has become global, not merely local, and because it threatens the well-being of Earth as well as ecosystems and communities. A faithful worldview and consistent path of behavior to meet this challenge can be discerned as we become environmentally and socially mindful of what key phrases in the Lord’s Prayer mean for being Christian in our time.

We should reread Jesus' prayer in light of the whole biblical story that calls us to love and to treat justly both neighbor and nature. To summarize all too briefly, the creation narratives in Genesis and the sabbath ethic embodied in covenant law enjoin us not only to protect the orphans, widows, and strangers, but also to care for the land, to respect other creatures, and to protect their habitats, because the natural order and its many species possess inherent worth as the Creator's handiwork. Various Psalms rejoice in the natural order as a place of divine presence for the common good. Analogies from nature are prominent in the Wisdom literature (and in parables that Jesus taught in that tradition). Also, the Prophets highlight a causal links between social injustice and environmental degradation. E.g., Hosea declares that if we disregard covenant obligations to live rightly, "even the birds will die." The New Testament certainly shows Jesus' love for nature, and the apostle Paul proclaims that God in Jesus Christ redeems the whole creation, not just those who believe in him. The biblical story definitely calls us to restore creation for ecology and justice. And the Lord's Prayer reinforces this orientation.

Still, many Christians who claim to love the Bible have not "heard" this message nor recognized its eco-justice emphasis. A world-denying posture (expressed in some theologies and hymns) has led quite a few Christians to devalue Earth and to ignore the health of both nature and society, while focusing narrowly on their own salvation. They are not thinking in terms of "***Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.***" Expecting this world to end soon, they care little and do little for the well-being of this planet, including all of Earth's impoverished people, threatened species, and deteriorating ecosystems.

What Christians pray for, including the future they expect, does make a real public difference, as can be seen in the contrast between two late twentieth-century United States

Secretaries of the Interior. One was James Watt, Interior Secretary in the Reagan Administration, who espoused the world-denying view. The Fundamentalist theology that shaped his thinking assumes that Christ is coming again soon. Consequently, we do not need to worry about the limits of renewable and nonrenewable resources; they were put here for human benefit on the way to eternal life. Standing the concept of stewardship on its head, this view implies that we may use natural resources rapidly since the end of the world is near. Influenced by this worldview (and by lobbyists for extractive enterprises), Interior Department policies during Secretary Watt's tenure favored exploitive use for today over preservation for tomorrow. I saw some of the results while touring Washington's Olympic Peninsula in the late 1980s, encountering one horrendous old-growth clear cut after another (just behind thin screens of trees left next to the highway). In some of those devastated places, signs were posted—with mid-1980s dates and James Watt's signature—announcing in a misleading way that the abandoned clear-cut was now an effective Department of the Interior "reclamation" project.

The other Interior Secretary, with a sharply contrasting view of environmental responsibility, was Bruce Babbitt, who provided positive leadership during the Clinton Administration to show respect for the created order, particularly for wilderness areas, and to restore ecosystem integrity in endangered places such as the Everglades. As a child, Bruce attended a Catholic church in Flagstaff, Arizona, where he learned to appreciate the Psalms and was fascinated by the Noah story, which permeated his consciousness to the extent that as Secretary of the Interior, I heard him refer to Noah bringing animals onto the ark as the first Endangered Species Act. Babbitt noted, however, that inside the church building he attended as a boy, the blue and snowy San Francisco Peaks dominating the Flagstaff skyline did not seem to exist; those mountains never came up in the priest's homilies. Instinctively, Bruce

knew that grand peaks reflect the sacred (in Hebrew, *El Shaddai* means “God of the mountains”). But it was left to his Hopi Indian friends to introduce him to sacred places in the San Francisco Mountains. Years later, as Secretary of the Interior he showed great respect for many wild places and advocated policies to protect fragile ecosystems, as well as the rights of surrounding indigenous people.

This brings me, with eyes oriented to ecology and justice, to consider some fresh meanings of the prayer Jesus taught us. What guidance for living do we receive from this prayer, which addresses God and then offers both “You” petitions (concerning God’s glory) and “We/Us” petitions (concerning human needs)?

***Our Father.*** By addressing God this way, Jesus dared to name God in a culture that assumed God was too holy to be addressed directly. By using the familiar and personal name Abba (Mk 14:36), Jesus presented God as loving parent who knows our names. We can count on being heard by the One who knows, much better than we ourselves do, what we need (as distinct from God granting whatever we want), throughout the vicissitudes of life. Personal relationship to a loving, just God is profoundly important to each of us as fragile, limited human beings in a vast, expanding universe and a highly conflicted world.

Addressing God as “Father” is two-sided: we know God both as a loving parent and as the Creator of heaven and earth who originates, sustains, and completes the whole of reality. Theologian Paul Tillich cautioned that if we expect God to satisfy our wants and to forgive all for which we want to be forgiven, then our faith relationship will no longer be with the God who shows power, justice, love, and mercy throughout the whole creation. The “Our Father”

situates us in the vast cosmos and the whole earth community where we encounter the mysterious divine ground of being. In this prayer, we are addressing the Birther and the Breathing Life of all.

Jesus spoke in native Middle Eastern Aramaic, not the Greek language in which the Gospels were later written. Neil Douglas-Klotz, author of *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*, points out that the root ab-, which refers to the cosmic birthing of all creation, came to be used in Aramaic for one's personal father—abba. But the word still echoes its ungendered root meaning as “divine parent.” “Our Father in heaven,” which richly connects us with our Creator and all the rest of creation, also says, “O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos, you create all that moves in light.” That image can be reinforced by slowly saying the Aramaic *Ah-bw-oo-n* as a meditative discipline. If the twelfth century Medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen was correct in defining prayer as “breathing in and breathing out the one breath of the universe,” then the “Body Prayer” suggested here is quite appropriate.

In the Lord's Prayer we address and praise God who creates, sustains and, redeems. With that firm knowledge, we then petition God to meet our basic needs.

***Your kingdom come.*** This petition anticipates the fulfillment of God's Commonwealth expected by the prophets and inaugurated by Jesus. But, what does that petition ask for? The prophets and Jesus projected harmonious peace among humans and the creatures. They also assumed that the Commonwealth of God involves more than faithful believers; it encompasses the whole of biodiverse nature along with all of humanity. Plants and animals belong in the Kingdom, “the society for all under God's reign,” as Daniel Day Williams defined it. All creatures are our kin; together we are a kin-dom. Signs of the divine commonwealth can be

seen, therefore, wherever people care for creation and build sustainable community based on right relations.

Meanwhile, the world seems to be going in the opposite direction, violating creature kinship and postponing healthy earth community. Annual reports about the *State of the World* issued by the Worldwatch Institute show that we are experiencing rapid environmental deterioration along with huge and widening social disparities. At the end of the 1990s, despite a global surge in economic growth and significant gains in health and education, there were still at least 1.2 billion people trying to survive on less than 1\$ of income per day. There are more now. Most of these people are malnourished, do not have access to clean water or health care, and bear the brunt of AIDS. Another 2.5 billion people survive on an income of less than \$2 per day. Alongside this horrendous social failure is a much-touted story of economic success marked by a boom in global consumption and improvements in living standards. But in the process, humanity's ecological footprints have become more extensive and destructive, making a mockery of the rainbow covenant God made after the flood with "you [Noah] and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations" (Genesis 9:12).

Agricultural lands are stressed on every continent. The world's oceans are in decline. Many fisheries are under threat. Coastal areas, including wetlands and beaches, are being eroded, and populations along coastlines are more vulnerable to intensifying storms. Coral reefs, which support many species, are being destroyed by direct human action or are sickened by toxic sediment washed into the sea. In the last fifty years, humans have removed half of the planet's original forest cover—which absorbs carbon dioxide, produces oxygen, anchors soils, regulates the water cycle, protects against erosion, and provides a habitat for millions of species. Increased burning of fossil fuels brings with it global warming and climate instability,

a circumstance that poses serious threats to the well-being of earth community.

Yet, in this deepening eco-justice crisis, we remain hopeful, knowing that Jesus announced the Commonwealth of God in a bleak situation of oppression and hopelessness. In occupied Palestine, he called people to look for and live into the promised future. Now it is our turn to embody the petition, “Your Kingdom come.”

Our actions will not deliver the kingdom, but we can point to or show signs of it. Bill Webber, a leader of the East Harlem Protestant Parish and later President of New York Theological Seminary, tells a delightful story in this regard. He was brought up in an Iowa Congregational Church where, every Sunday, the pastor prayed, “Help us to bring in the Kingdom.” Later at Union Seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr taught Bill that faithful humans do not actually bring in God’s kingdom, though here and there humans offer signs of it. Webber knew that Niebuhr was right, but in his heart he continued to repeat the prayer of his Iowa pastor, because we are all called to show others the implications of the kingdom promise. In the words of theologian Sallie McFague, “If we want to say reality is good, we must help to make it so.”

Entering the kingdom here and now opens up a way of living faithfully that is embodied in the “We/Us” petitions of the Lord’s Prayer.

***Give us this day our daily bread.*** Here we are asking only for the bread we need today and tomorrow, not for a lot of extra sustenance or exotic foods. As manna-gathering Israelites learned long ago, hoarding stinks. “Sufficiency is the standard . . . equality is the presumption, and sharing is the direction,” Christian ethicist Larry Rasmussen reminds us. Any society that has the resources to meet basic needs—food, shelter, clothing, health care, education, work, and festivity—and does not meet them, fails the test of justice.

A just and sustainable society collectively restrains production, consumption, and reproduction so that every person and every kind can have sufficient sustenance, shelter, and space. Movement in that direction links us with the trans-generational and trans-national community of those who do likewise.

***Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*** We who accept undeserved forgiveness from God gratefully should reciprocate by forgiving others. This is an important guide for interpersonal relations. But this petition also points to collective and corporate responsibility, because we are all indebted to unfamiliar places, workers, and organizations, not just the persons we know who have helped us. We also have a large ecological debt to places, communities, and countries (many now poor) whose natural resources were extracted for the benefit of rich corporations and affluent consumers like us. How do we acknowledge and cancel those less obvious debts?

This “forgive” petition in the Lord’s Prayer conveys a powerful image from the Jubilee tradition. As summarized in Leviticus 25, each seventh (sabbatical) year, and then again each forty ninth (seven times seven) year, brings a social obligation to cancel accumulated debts on loans and to let the land lie fallow. In other words, the Lord’s Prayer anticipates an economy that is forgiving—not exactly what we are used to! Commenting on this Jubilee image in the Lord’s Prayer, New Testament scholar Sharon Ringe observes that the advent of God’s reign is an event of liberation at the most basic level.

Between the human present and God’s future comes a proclamation of release. Those who would hear this petition as ‘good news’ are those for whom ‘debts’, whether before God or to other persons, result in a captivity that denies fullness of life. Among them would surely be the people considered outcasts by their neighbors, with whom Jesus so often enjoyed table community. Among them too would be those ensnared in the vicious

cycle of literal indebtedness in the struggle to make of less-than-subsistence wages an adequate livelihood. Those for whom such a word would be bad news are those . . . who profit from the patterns of indebtedness that characterize business as usual . . . In other words, the privileged people would have their pretense to status confronted and their self-made security threatened.”<sup>1</sup>

What can we twenty-first century residents do to “forgive” oppressive debt? Each of us can make a difference locally in ways that acknowledge our own debt to the land by supporting sustainable farming and contributing to a land trust to preserve open space or special places. And we can become active in environmental and social justice organizations that advocate and embody conservation, preservation, worker rights, and animal protection. We can also join our denomination’s voluntary organization working for environmental wholeness with social justice, such as the Presbyterians for Earth Care (aka Presbyterians for Restoring Creation).

And we can make a difference internationally by supporting debt relief, development assistance, and fair trade that are so essential to the human and ecological health of poor countries. For many years, this has been a prominent objective of Bread for the World, an ecumenical legislative advocacy organization based in Washington, DC. Poor countries especially are caught in the vicious cycle of ever-higher loan payments that force their governments to drive subsistence farmers off the land in favor of export commodity growers, even as these same governments discontinue basic education, health, and social security programs. They need immediate debt relief from onerous loans that rich country governments like the U.S. can arrange to forgive.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology*,

*Lead us not into Temptation, but Deliver us from Evil.* These final petitions of the Lord’s Prayer bring to mind quite a list of temptations faced daily at home, at work, at play, in politics, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, contemporary history makes us all too aware of the threat of violent evil in a world of militarism and terrorism. These are complex subjects deserving careful discussion in other sermons. Here I would just highlight our temptation to believe that we can and should have it all—more income, investments, creature comforts, energy consumption, family happiness, friendships, and vocational fulfillment. And, of course, bigger houses and cars. But such expectations make us acquisitive, anxious, and self-driven, in search of what one magazine calls “Fine Living”—with obvious disregard for the common good.

Christianity at its best has a different posture. Reformation leader John Calvin proposed “frugality,” or what others call sufficiency or simplicity, as the norm for living faithfully. It features moderation, thrift, efficient usage, liberal sharing, and satisfaction with having enough, so that there is more for others—in order to build community and serve the common good. To seek “enough” rather than to demand “more” for ourselves places us in a better future for creation’s sake. In that spirit we are enabled to welcome human existence situated in the matrix of nature and to reduce our ecological footprint while enjoying life, with good effects for ourselves and every kind.

The prayer Jesus taught us charts a path of individual and collective living that cares for Earth and people. The Lord’s Prayer becomes good news for earth community to the extent that those who say the prayer also try to embody its vision and values. With that intention, after taking a contemplative breath, let us affirmatively repeat the prayer together.

---