

Worship and Ecology Response

Sr. Linda Gibler's Response to Fr. David Power's presentation

Monday, November 9, 2009

Well what do you say after a talk like that that covered pretty much the entire cosmos and all of Christian tradition? I'd invite all of you to take a moment of quiet just to pull your own thoughts together before I add my own. For just a moment think about what you just heard. Where did it pull you? How are you feeling? Give that just a moment to settle. You are going to be brought into the conversation later, so this will give you a moment to collect your thoughts and give me a moment to organize my many thoughts as well.

I am going to start by telling you a brief story. In 1996, the Hubble Deep Field picture was released by NASA. It is the first picture we have of Deep Space. Astronomers took a picture of a small region in the darkest part of the Northern night. They trained the Hubble telescope on a tiny point of darkness the size of a grain of rice held at arms length and they expected to find—not much: a couple of galaxies, maybe a few quasars, maybe something far out there. What they found, however, was 1500 galaxies and each galaxy with billions and billions of stars. I don't know what that does for you, because this is kind of old news now, but then astronomers were astonished. They had no idea that God was so busy with so many things.

Astronomers may not generally make that connection with God, but I do. When this picture was released I was beginning to study science. My preconceived notions of God (which by the way were all true, but now challenged me to understand them differently) shattered as if they were a glass ornament that fell and crashed on the floor. What broke in on me looking at that picture of space was that God's project wasn't just about Earth. It certainly wasn't only about Catholics or a particular privileged way of being Catholic; it wasn't about being a Dominican sister, or seminarians learning to be priests. All of a sudden, I realized everything I

knew about God had to grow up in a different way. I spent my next several years rather joyfully picking up the shards of that glass ornament, ordering them into something more beautiful, something that corresponded to both what I knew about God from our Catholic Tradition and what was being revealed through science. This is one insight science is giving to our theology: God's project can't be only about humans. How could it be when humans are just one species on one planet and we know there are billions and billions and billions and billions of stars and probably planets? God cares about so much: all of creation, everything in the expanse of space, all beings on this planet, and the life of every single human here, including the Catholic Christians.

So what makes us unique? Well, what makes humans unique on the planet? As far as we know, we are the only species in the Universe that can say a sacramental thank you to God. The *Catechism* tells us that God blesses. God is constantly blessing, and our job as human beings is to say thank you. Fr. Keenan Osborne, a Franciscan theologian, says that when a human says thank you to God, it is a sacramental moment. This is an act of gratitude that, as far as we know, only humans can do. We can appreciate God as the source of blessing. We are also the only ones who can care about other species. Jane Goodall, an anthropologist who works extensively with chimpanzees, says that she has never seen a baboon give a chimp a banana. We want to have this wonderful feeling about how animals take care of each other – and in a sense they do by sustaining their role in their environment – but they don't care for each other across species. (Domestic animals do at times show care to other species, but animals don't seem to in their natural environments.) Humans are the only ones who care for other species; we are the only ones who know about all the other species. We are the beings **who** somehow God created and evolved in such a way that we can extend God's love not only to our neighbors, (and we ask, who are they?), but we can extend our love, God's love, to humans all around the planet and we can care about all species on the planet. We are the only beings who can do that and we can thank God for that. We can rejoice, not in the joy of our

human neighbors only, but in all of our neighbors. We are the only beings who can carry God's presence, God's love, to the children of every single species; and that's our job. That's our job, to carry God's blessing to the ends of the Earth – to the humans for sure, out of a sense of love and justice that Earth is there for the substance and joy of all humanity; and also for the children of all species. This is our uniquely human and perhaps uniquely Christian call. We have a cosmos so big that we know God's project must be about more than just humans, but what project does God have with the humans? We carry God's blessing to the ends of the Earth for the sake of all God's creation. This is our call.

As Fr. David showed us, throughout our tradition we have been called to love and care for all creation. It is just recently that we have come to know better the intricacies of creation from the tiny microscopic beings that our lives depend upon, to the great apes and the whales, to our own ecosystem here in San Antonio. These are all part of the God's project that we are called to care for. How do we bring this to the liturgy? Fr. David had so many rich things to talk about that I have to discipline myself because I've only been given 15 minutes. First I want to tell you, and some of you may already know, that we've just passed one of these cross-quarter days Fr. David mentioned. We are halfway between the Autumn Equinox, which marks the beginning of autumn, and the Winter Solstice, the first day of winter. Do you know when the cross-quarter day was? November 6th. So we're celebrating mid-Autumn right now. Now what does that mean? What that would mean in a traditional agrarian society is that it would be time for migrant laborers to go home – so they could celebrate Christmas with family for one thing, but also to be safe from winter weather. It's time to be home. **It is homecoming. And you know what?** You'd better be about there by now because it's mid-autumn and we are no longer preparing for the dark, it *is* dark. So the idea is, you have finished the harvest. You have its bounty, you have God's blessing, and now it's time to gather your blessing and go home. The first celebration after this is Christmas. It is the solstice time and the full darkness of winter. The celebration after Christmas is Candlemas. Then candles are blessed in the hope that they will

last until spring. But today, this week, we celebrate mid-autumn. It's homecoming, a time of returning home, of celebration, and **Thanksgiving**.

Another piece I want to share with you is that we have to understand Jesus, as Fr. David said, as a Jew, as a Galilean, and as a being on this planet, an Earth being. Jesus got here the same way all of us did through a very long chain of evolution. It started with the very first critter that twitched itself to life in the ocean. Now, was God part of that? Of course. Do I deny the divinity of Christ? Not at all. I don't understand the complexity of the divinity and humanity of Jesus; theologians will have more insight into that than I do. But we do know that Jesus in his humanity is a product of evolution just like we are – and that makes us nervous. We want Jesus to be better than that, and different. But in fact, Jesus isn't. The iron in Jesus' blood that brought oxygen to all his veins was made in the very same stars as the iron in your blood – the very same process. Jesus is made of stardust and the dust of the Earth, just as we are. So Jesus is a Galilean, Jesus is a Jew, and Jesus is an Earth being.

I really love when someone hands me something to work with that is just at the heart of my own work. When we bring ecology to liturgy, how do we talk about the fruit of the vine and work of human hands? How do we talk about the bread and the wine and remember that it is Earth? We are now challenged by the Pope to bring a recognition of our dependence on Earth and our care of Earth to every single liturgy and into every day of our lives. Some of you heard this just recently, so maybe I'll say it a little bit differently. Wheat and grapes: why is it that we use those two things in our celebrations? I don't know if Jewish farmers in Biblical days knew this, but grapes are designed to be eaten in order to propagate; for their own good, grapes must be eaten. Grapes are designed to be eaten. All fruits -- not vegetables, but fruits -- are designed to feed others. They flower, birds or insects come, drink their nectar, and pollinate them. The flower gives away some of its energy in order to be fertilized, and then the flower matures into a fruit and it is eaten by another animal. This critter takes a bite, then flies or scampers away. The seeds within the fruit pass through the animal's digestive tract where the seed case is soften

enough to germinate when the time is right. The animal then deposits the seeds at a distance from the parent plant where they can sprout. The wine we drink at mass and at our dinner tables is the produce of self-sacrifice for the sake of the whole, for the sake of the Kingdom, for the sake of the grapes and for all of us. Grapes don't flourish in the wild without animals to eat them. If a farmer wants to propagate grapes himself, he has to graft grapes onto one another.

Wheat is not quite the same; wheat is a grain. Grain does not necessarily want to be eaten because the seeds themselves don't need to go through an animal's system to sprout. The seeds want to drop onto the ground. Absolutely right, but what do we know about wheat? Wheat is a grass. Grains are sophisticated grasses, and when grass is snipped at the top by a lawn mower or a grazing animal, the roots become stronger. They get thicker and then they produce even more grain. So if you want to help your wheat grow well, you cut it. You cut it. Grains, long before humans came onto the planet, learned how to adapt themselves by giving themselves away, by feeding others. It is a self sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom. Not a sacrifice for nothing nor simply a sacrifice that offers itself only once, like vegetables do. If I pull up a carrot, the plant dies. The carrot does not benefit by being eaten. The grains do; fruits do. In a wild environment, when the critters that eat a fruit go extinct, so will the fruit trees. So when we eat bread and we drink wine, wherever we do it, we are participating in a cosmic liturgy, offering sacrifice for the good of the entire kingdom.

There is so much more I could respond to in Fr. David's talk, but I am going to stop and open it up to you now.