

**May 10, 2020**

Psalm 104: 13-34

Ephesians 4: 1-16

***Unity Flourishing***  
**The Reverend Amy Ruhf**

A happy Mother's Day to all those who have nurtured us throughout our lifetimes. It is fitting that on this Mother's Day we come to the week in our series where we will talk about the creation of living things, because in the creation of those living things, we find God's abundance and nurturing for all of creation.

Have you ever meandered through a quiet wood or meadow? No plans, no cares, just you and the natural world? A few years ago, I heard a lecture on the practice of Shinrin Yoku – a Japanese term translated as forest bathing. At first it struck me as a very strange concept – you go out into nature and slowly walk or even sit in the woods or fields or wherever it is you are engaging the practice. The point is not to accomplish anything other than being present with the created order. The whole thing sounded a bit strange to my very western ears. I love to hike and I love spending time outside, but this idea of just sitting outside, or meandering through a forest or field just sounded strange... but of course, I'm not the type of person to just discount something because it sounds strange... in fact the strangeness is probably what drew me to that particular lecture in the first place. So, I thought, I'd try it. I took a Saturday and drove to the mountains in northern New Jersey, to a place that I knew would be secluded, having backpacked there before, and spent the next several hours just being in the forest.

We humans and especially western humans have lost much of our connection to the created order. In many ways, we have things too easy. We go to big box stores and can find anything that we might want for food or provision, and in-so-doing, we miss out on seeing some of God's abundance. In our Psalm today, we hear the psalmist praising God for God's creations for all of them: from the beasts of the field, to the trees and plants, to the smallest of insects. God created this beautiful Mother Earth; this planet of abundance that contains all that we could need for survival and all that we could want for beauty, and such variety as to never become stale or boring. God created a world of flourishing!

And yet, many of us never experience this flourishing. In fact, the things we humans do are often responsible for the degradation of the flourishing world. We live in a world where technology and productivity are prominent and of utmost value. But in the creation account, our productivity was meant to look much different than it does today. Productivity and human flourishing meant two things, procreation and caring for the created order – all of the created order. We were given food from the plants of the garden or forest that God planted; food enough for our sustenance as well as that of our fellow creatures. "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth". This was the command given by God to not only humans but also to the animals.

Human flourishing was to take place within the garden, within the garden among the trees and plants of the field; a garden of provision and symbiotic relationship. The forest does not see humans as separate from it, but as a part of it, an indweller of it. The trees are the great protectors of the creatures, providing shelter as well as

sustenance. And all this God fashioned for the flourishing of all creation. One thing that strikes me in this psalm is the rhythm of creature life that the psalmist describes. The going in and coming out of the creatures, Humans at work by day, animals of prey by night, and each creature calling to God to supply for its need.

Our disconnection from nature also alienates us from ourselves. We become insular and our life-force is diminished. Our senses dulled. When we return to nature, to the forest, we recover our senses, we hear sounds, smell the earthy heavy air, and feel the ground beneath our feet, and the breeze through the trees. All of our senses are heightened. We come alive to the world around us.

At first my experience with Shinrin Yoku was a little weird. I had a lot of trouble slowing my pace and clearing my mind of clutter. But after an hour or two, something happened. I became aware of the soul of the forest. Two weeks ago, Rev. McGowan spoke about the spirit of God being in everything and he was right. The spirit of God is in absolutely everything, even the rocks of the field and the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, and the trees of the forest. As I sat in those woods, touching leaves and picking up handfuls of soil, listening to the rustling of trees and scurrying of the animals, I was overwhelmed with a sense that the forest was speaking; speaking not to me, but to God. The forest was praying.

Our relationships with creation are relationships in which nature forms and transforms us. What does it mean to partner with the more-than human world? As we begin to think about that question, I turn to our second reading for the day from Ephesians 4.

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God endures forever.*

Now when the writer penned this letter, he or she was concerned with both right doctrine and right practice... Very Presbyterian sounding in a lot of ways. The first half of Ephesians is concerned with doctrine – the right beliefs. Where we begin our reading today, the writer of the letter is turning to how we live as Christians. This passage is all about unity. What does it mean to be the church? How do we live together? The writer speaks not only of our individual callings as Christians, but also the corporate calling of the church.

The church, in its diversity, is to use all of its diverse gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. There are two verses in particular that I want to focus on today. “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.”

The writer of Ephesians is telling us to wake up, to pay attention! We are not our own but belong to something greater than ourselves. Therefore, we have a responsibility to the church to grow up in every way into him who is the head – into Christ who equips the church for the church's work. That means taking our faith seriously, a faith built upon the foundation that we are the beloved creatures of God tasked with the stewardship of the earth.

For too long we have read the genesis passage about having dominion over the earth to mean that the earth is ours to exploit; to use for our pleasure in whatever way we want. But I think part of what Ephesians is calling us to; part of the truth we are to speak; is the truth that we are called to be the caretakers of the world that God created in love, that to love God is also to love the things that God made, to see and hear the spirit of God in all of God's creatures. What if unity in the body means more than just unity within First Pres Ann Arbor or unity in the church universal but what if it actually means unity with creation, unity with the creatures that God created, unity with a world full of divisions that often times we cause. What would it look like to live in unity with all of the created order? But maybe unity with all of creation means that whatever we take from the earth we give back in equal measure, maybe it means that when we build, we also plant, maybe it means that when we reap, we also sow? Maybe it means that when we take for food, we ensure that we are not taking more than our fair share.

Does unity in the body also mean that our fellow humans have equal share in the creation, in the created order? That those resources need not be held for the wealthiest that those resources are meant to be shared among all people, all creatures, that everyone has enough. Our low-income places in this country our third world countries always have lack, there's not enough food, there's not enough clean water, but God made an abundant world where those things are plentiful, available and abundant and yet the vast majority of resources go to the wealthiest, while the poor suffer. What would it look like for us to be the church in the world where we shared God's abundance, not just among ourselves but among all people and creatures? What would it look like seek justice for people in less wealthy areas like Ypsi or Detroit? What would it look like to partner, truly partner – literally get our hands dirty with our neighbors to create community gardens that could provide for the needs of all? What would it be like to share the wealth of the abundance of God's creation in the world? So much of the time we look at the world around us and think, I'm one person, what can I do? These issues are too big, too daunting, to depressing. All of those are valid statements... but we are part of something bigger than ourselves. As the writer of Ephesians reminds us, we are called to be a community of mutuality. A community where all of our gifts and abilities come together for the building up of God's kingdom here on earth. When we think things are beyond us as individuals, we have a whole body of believers who are joined together in Christ. We are not alone in our work to be stewards and caretakers of God's good earth. And together we can reconnect with the earth and our calling to be both nurturers of it and be nurtured by it.

When I took notice of the soul of that forest what I felt, was grief. When that forest was crying out to God, it cried out in pain for all that was being inflicted upon it. Logging operations polluted water, zinc strip-mining that poisoned the soil. The soul of the forest brought me to my knees as I was confronted with how humanity had harmed it, and yet there was new growth. There were young saplings breaking through the forest floor, there were ferns covering the ground with a beautiful green blanket. Amid sorrow and hopelessness, there was new life. The two were held in tension. And that gave me hope. It gave me hope that even though I couldn't stop the strip mining, even though I couldn't stop the logging, I could plant new life. I could seek the good of the forest in which I was sitting, but not straying too far from the path, by picking up litter as I saw it, by going home and planting native plants rather than non-native species. I could compost and reintroduce nutrients to barren soil. I could go and build a community that after reconnecting with the earth, could bring about change, one small step at a time as we re-learn that God, who appointed all things and creates all things, is not done with this earth. We humans can learn once again to love God's creation, care for it, and seek its welfare. Friends, we are an Easter

people; a people that see that from death, there is new life. That is the world of resurrection that we profess, that is the world that we as the united Body of Christ can live today and every day in love.

May it be so. Amen.

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