

Date: Sunday, May 19, 2013

Title: “From Objectification to Relationship”

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Scripture Reading(s): Acts 2:1-21

Off the coast of Tanzania rests the beautiful Island of Zanzibar. On that island, there is an old city called Stone Town, and Stone Town has a history. In Stone Town in the 19th century, Arabs conspired with Europeans to conduct a massive slave trade. It is also said that some tribal leaders also made money selling their fellow tribe members to the slave traders. The slave trade grew out of a First World mindset which sought to shape others in the image of Europeans and Arabs. For some, Christianizing the world meant exploiting natural resources of distant lands or exploiting non-western people for profit. It was a way to glorify a Christ which was to reign throughout world. To be sure, Christian missionaries often brought health and education to an impoverished non-western people and improved their lot, and so many in the church sought to work against the slave trade.

When I visited Zanzibar, the Anglican cathedral of Christ Church was a site to behold. Built at the end of the 19th century for Edward Steere, third bishop of Zanzibar, the cathedral is located in a large area in the center of Stone Town where the slave marketplace was. The location for the cathedral was deliberately chosen to celebrate the end of slavery. Indeed, the altar was in the exact spot where the main whipping post of the slave market used to be.

But even for those who strenuously objected to slavery, colonialism gave a tacit blessing to Christian theology which often regarded non-western people and their lands as objects to be used for profit or to be converted to western ways seen as synonymous with Christianity. Colonialism and the slave trade were supported by a theological world view which held westernizers in the dominant position. People and natural resources were objects to be manipulated and used and converted.

The emphasis was not on a spirit of mutuality but on one group dominating another.

The emphasis was not on stewardship but exploitation.

This image of this imperial theology stands in contrast to another Christian story where people from so many different cultures gathered in one place to understand each other for the very first time. This fantastic picture of diversity found in the Book of Acts was made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit which broke down every barrier and gave birth to the Christian church which did not favor one culture or theological system over another. Peter offered a picture where people would dream dreams of a new heaven and a new earth. The story of Pentecost puts the stress on mutual respect and relationship enlivened by wind and tongues of fire.

Pentecost tears down walls and dry theological systems which make sense to one group but make little sense to so many others.

Pentecost creates a language of mutual understanding rather than domination and teaches us to look on the world with a loving eye.

Now, over these last few weeks, we have been engaged in a global effort sponsored by the United Church of Christ to be wise stewards of our earth and the people who dwell on it. We have planted trees, we have written letters to those in power who make decisions, and we have volunteered many hours to care for the earth. This has not been an exercise in political correctness. Such efforts are based on a serious theological premise that Christianity is not about using people and resources for our own selfish ends. Instead, we embrace a more Pentecostal theology which regards the natural world and the people who dwell on it as things to be respected, nurtured and cared for rather than exploited in service of profit or narrow political ends.

So often when we take care of our earth's natural resources it gives us some clues of how it is we should take care of one another. A creation based theology leads us to regard trees, plants and animals with the same reverence that we should accord to our fellow human beings. A theology based on relationship rather than objectification, leads us to think more about how we care for those things which are truly created in the image of God. A theology based on relationship might be typified in the words of the great naturalist John Muir who said "Tug on anything at all and you'll find it connected to everything else in the universe."

Of course, there can be an inequality that emerges from the environmental movement itself. This movement sometimes, in my view, does not take seriously the poverty of others. If you leave Zanzibar and go across the bay to the city of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, that city is not a pristine place. I remember getting stuck behind an automobile which was spewing smoke, polluting the atmosphere of the city. The car has been stripped of its catalytic converter. Many of these automobiles have been rejected by more industrialized countries and are often purchased from used car traders at a cheap price. It's easy to be judgmental of such an automobile and the person driving it. But in Tanzania, with some of the lowest incomes in the world, if people want to purchase a car, they must settle for cheap set of wheels which pollutes.

In Haiti, we look askance on a country which has stripped its land of its trees largely because they were needed for cooking. Replanting trees in Haiti is an effort that must be accompanied with helping people find alternative sources of fuel which they can afford and are accessible.

In our own country, we make much of growing healthy vegetable and raising organic food, and yet such healthy food is so often out of the financial reach of many. Boutique grocery stores, declaring their progressive and liberal devotion to sustaining the environment, offer food which is unaffordable to many on limited incomes, who have little choice but to nourish themselves with cheaper junk food and other food products that are not produced in environmentally sound ways. Healthy living becomes synonymous with wealthy living which only reinforces the divide between the rich and poor.

While many can heat their home with solar, the poor live in poorly insulated buildings which they cannot afford to make more energy efficient.

In some ways, environmentalism can turn into a new sort of classicism which becomes a luxury that only the privileged can afford. The challenge before us as a world community is, I think, how to take care of each other and the earth while giving people of all incomes a path and a realistic way to be wise stewards of the earth and one another. Driving fuel efficient cars, planting trees, using alternative energy sources, and eating health food in the long run is healthier for us all and probably more economical. But we need to help each other get there while not being overly judgmental of those who find the economic pressure to live a healthier life to be overwhelming.

As we dine on our 5-dollar-a-pound organic tomatoes and overpriced hormone-free steak we must not look with scorn on those who cannot afford such things. As we create a community based on relationship and mutual care, I think God calls us to creatively think about a healthy and sustainable life for all people and not just some.

If we plant trees in Haiti, can we also introduce technologies which create fuel from other vegetation which does not require the use of wood? I heard about a company which is working on such a technology.

As we advocate for affordable housing, why not create economic incentives strong enough to make old and new housing more energy efficient?

In third world countries, with an abundance of sun light, solar could help bring energy to communities which previously found it inaccessible.

How can we do more using CSA's and other efforts to make fresh food more affordable even than what can be found in a supermarket?

I guess what I am saying is that if Christian theology is about building relationships, then we need to shape an environmental movement that does not divide us but brings us closer together as a world community. Environmentalism mustn't simply replace one class structure with a new class structure that also divides the haves from have-nots.

The holy task for us as Christians in our time is to embrace a spirit-filled, relationship-oriented and Pentecostal theology which brings us closer together. May the work before us help better see the sacredness of the earth and one another and then act to create a world community where the Pentecostal fire burns and the wind blows. May we dream of a world where the barriers drop and we inspired to hear each other and see each other in a fresh way to be wise stewards and bring about a new creation.