

For Love of the World

Session 4: "For God so Loved the World" (Jn 2:15)

Linda Chapman

Gospel = John 3.14-21

Pattern = Fear and Resentment

Practice = Love

Discipline = Contemplation



One morning, as I was swimming in calm ocean waters, I noticed a dark shape ahead of me. Supposing it to be a clump of seaweed, I continued to swim in its direction. Then I realized that it was moving towards me quite rapidly. It was not until it was almost under me that I saw that it was an enormous stingray with whom I had come face to face. In those few seconds I saw it very clearly. I stopped swimming forward and very slowly and gently began moving back slightly in a kind of backward breaststroke motion. At the same time the stingray gracefully slid under and to the side of me moving away. I swam back to shore with a sense of wonder.

What struck me was that, possibly because I had only realized at the last moment that it was a very big stingray, I did not have time to feel afraid. In fact I was left with a sense of awe and privilege that I had come so close to this ray. It felt like a moment of intimacy with one of God's 'other' creatures. The silent, graceful, movement of the ray filled me with a sense of respect and gratitude for its presence in this world.

Often when we encounter something quite foreign or 'other' to us we move towards fear. We know that fear usually results in the flight or fight mechanism. This is an essential evolutionary mechanism for survival. Yet it seems there is a human **pattern of fear** of nature that may be destructive. The 'otherness' of the natural world and its wildness is something that we human beings have set out to tame and conquer for our own purposes. Of course we have always relied upon the Earth's resources to meet our needs; everything exists interdependently. Yet there is also a sense in which our pattern of fear of that which we cannot ultimately control causes us to want to defend against it by destroying it.

However our over-exploitation of nature, our plundering of her bounty, has become a real problem. We need to look at how we relate with the non-human creation. Do we feel threatened by and fearful of the creation that is so 'other' to us? Fear often lies behind violence. And what or whom we fear we can also resent. This has profound consequences for the way we are in relationship with those others whether human, animal or some other form of creation such as ocean, forest and so on. As well, we are now faced with the very real fear of the consequences of global warming. It is frightening to consider the reality of a planet that may experience a rise in temperature beyond 2°C. The people of the Maldives and some Pacific nations are presently living with the fear and reality of their island homes being submerged. We will all have to deal with the fact of environmental refugees. Will we react fearfully and resentfully? Or can we allow our fear to be transformed by love? Through this transformation we can learn

to relate with each other and the Earth in a more creative way. How are we as Christians called to be in relationship with God's creation?

In the beginning God called his creation very good (Gen. 1.31) and he so loved the world that he sent his only Son into the world not to condemn it but in order that the world might be saved through him (Jn 3.17). Clearly a Christian way of relating to this world is the **practice of love**. To believe in Jesus Christ is to believe in the One who so loved the world that he gave his life for it. Jesus of Nazareth was a threat to many and became the innocent scapegoat for all who feared and resented him and his subversive message of the Kingdom of God. Yet through Him the world is saved. His great commandment was to love one another. Today we might extend that love to all including our 'non-human' neighbours.

But how do we love? Many people love nature in a general way. We enjoy the natural beauty of the world and even understand it as a way to God. We resonate with Gerard Manley Hopkins words that the "world is charged with the grandeur of God". Indeed, nature can be seen as one of the privileged places, together with the Scriptures and the Eucharist, to which we go to put ourselves in the Lord's way. Yet nature is not simply the backdrop to human salvation history. We are called to love in the way that God loves and to give ourselves in service to the other. God's non-human creation is implicitly valued in and of itself by the Creator (Gen. 1.31).

As Christians, we understand that God is incarnational; the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us (Jn 1.14). Ours is an embodied faith through which we can love people and the natural world for their intrinsic worth, loving them in all their difference, detail, otherness. To love in this way we must practice paying attention to the actual reality of the other in an I-Thou stance as compared to an I-It attitude. The other, the Thou, is our neighbour whom we are called to love. The other deserves our attention. When we give our full attention to another, when we are fully present, we are in an attitude of prayer (Simone Weil). I wonder how often when we look at something do we really see it. We need to take the time to stop and really look; to pay attention in order to truly love. This is **the discipline of contemplation**—a long, loving look at the real. Contemplation begins when we stop being totally preoccupied with our own concerns, including our own fears and resentments, and allow an 'other' to take our attention. We cannot love another without coming to know them and we cannot know another without being fully present and attentive.

The discipline of contemplation* is particularly important in the season of Lent, as it calls us to the self-emptying or *kenosis* of Christ on the cross. To practice love by giving our full attention to the other we must die to self. Contemplation calls for time and patience to become still and quiet enough to truly see the 'other' as a beloved creature of God. As we begin to see in this way so we begin to love and to act on that love for the good of our little corner of creation and therefore the whole of it. Contemplative looking ultimately opens us to see the reality of God in creation.

Eternal life (Jn 3.16) is about the fullness of the presence of God in any given moment. This is the experience of contemplation in which there is no space for fear and resentment. Jesus' relationship with the Father was one of the greatest intimacy, love and knowledge. He gave his complete attention to his Abba in prayer, not least of all in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus gave himself for the whole world. We are indeed one body beloved by the Lord of life who gave his life that we might live.

* The discipline of contemplation is the simple practice of the presence of God. It is a way

of silent prayer that does not use words but rather requires that we focus our whole attention on one thing during a given time.

Group reflection

1. Spend some time considering the above and the Gospel passage. Discuss the Gospel passage first. What words and phrases in both stood out for you?
2. Look at the photo below. What thoughts come to mind as you look at it?



3. Recall a time when you have felt afraid in the face of nature. How have you reacted out of that fear? What did you feel towards that natural event or creature? What do you feel now reflecting upon it?
4. Spend some time sitting quietly contemplating the reality of some part of the natural world that you would not necessarily consider beautiful or attractive to you. It might even be some creature or place that you do not feel very comfortable about. (Make sure you are safe!) Or it might be something very small and insignificant such as the needle of a she-oak. Try to simply give this little bit of creation your full attention. Look at it noticing its detail. Do not make up a story about it or recall facts about it but simply be present to it. Notice what happens. Share this with the group or journal it later.

Personal exercises

1. Each day of this week of Lent give yourself to some aspect of creation by being simply present to it. As you begin each session of this way of prayer ask that the Lord will reveal himself to you. Each time you notice that you are thinking of yourself, your work, family, etc., gently return your attention to the flower, tree, animal ... that you have felt drawn to giving your loving attention.
2. To close this session of prayer, share with the Lord what has happened—what you noticed, how you felt. Finish with a prayer of gratitude for God's good creation.