

An Earthy Word

John 1:1-14

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First Central Congregational UCC

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This week the United Church of Christ launched Mission 4/1 Earth, which is being described as “One United Church on a shared resurrection witness for Planet Earth during 50 great days of greening up, powering down, and shouting out.” As part of this global campaign, the UCC and its partners are committing three things: to offer more than one million hours of earth care, to plant more than 100,000 trees, and to write more than 100,000 advocacy letters on environmental concerns to elected officials and local media.

We first heard about this initiative last spring at the Nebraska Conference Annual Meeting, and were very excited about it. Rick Brenneman, in particular, has been working since last year to organize our involvement here at First Central. The biggest event we are planning is on Saturday, May 4, when we will travel to Macy, Nebraska to plant trees at the senior center of the Omaha Tribe. Other churches in the local association have been invited to join us. Be sure to set aside that day and plan to participate. It will be a lot of fun.

Besides the tree planting day in Macy, we’ve scheduled educational activities in First Forum, an environmental emphasis to our all-church retreat, and this year the Nebraska Conference Annual Gathering will be held at Lied Lodge in Nebraska City. The Arbor Day Foundation is partnering with the UCC for Mission 4/1 Earth and our local conference will emphasize that partnership in our annual gathering. I’m hoping to organize a bus trip down to Nebraska City on Saturday, June 1 for those who want to attend some of the activities of the conference’s annual gathering.

During this Easter Season our worship will also highlight our relationship with nature. As I preached last week, one of the themes of Easter and the resurrection is that God is restoring the world, creating a new heavens and a new earth. We will explore how our faith and spirituality intersect with creation.

This Sunday I want to focus on our relationship with the Planet Earth – the connection between spirit, flesh, and dirt. What Nebraska poet John Neihardt called “the giving earth.”

And I want to do that by exploring part of this wonderful passage, the prologue to John’s Gospel. It’s a rich passage, full of profound meaning, but today I want to draw our attention to verse 14 where we are told that the Word, the eternal Logos, the Divine Wisdom became flesh and dwelt among us. This is “An Earthy Word.”

Flesh in the Greek is “sarx.” Its most literal meaning is the stuff that covers our bones. A little more abstractly, it means the body. Even more abstractly it can mean a human being, mortal nature, physical limitations.

And in our tradition, this idea of flesh is connected to the ground, to dirt. At a Christian burial we recall that we are dirt, dust, and ashes. In Genesis we are told that God fashioned

humanity from the dirt of the ground. The great American poet James Weldon Johnson described it this way:

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

Johnson's poetry is so powerful. You can imagine God, creator of the stars, stooping on a muddy bank, forming the human body from clay. Mud, clay, dust, dirt, ashes, muscle, skin, tendons, ligaments, blood vessels – it is this stuff that the Gospel of John tells us that God became. The Word, who was God, became this flesh. "The Creator becomes clay."

The theological resources at the website [Season of Creation](#), describes it as follows:

Jesus breathes the same air as all the living creatures on Earth, eats food grown from the same ground and drinks water from the same raindrops. The natural biological processes of human flesh are true of the man Jesus. Jesus smells, tastes and feels in the same way that all humans do. In Jesus, God joins the web of life, becomes part of Earth's biology. . . . Embodied in that piece of Earth called Jesus Christ, God bonds with Earth.

Let's reflect for a moment on the human body, because doing so will teach us something important about the incarnation of God. We conceive our individual bodies to be distinct physical objects – distinct from one another and distinct from the world in which we move. However, this is a misconception. Our bodies are not distinct from one another or from the wider world. Instead our bodies are intimately interrelated. Listen to this idea from the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead:

Consider one definite molecule. It is part of nature. It has moved about for millions of years. Perhaps it started from a distant nebula. It enters the body; it may be as a factor in some edible vegetable; or it passes into the lungs as part of the air. At

what exact point as it enters the mouth, or as it is absorbed through the skin, is it part of the body? At what exact moment, later on, does it cease to be part of the body? Exactness [he writes] is out of the question. It can only be obtained by some trivial convention.

Whitehead writes, "We cannot define where a body begins and where external nature ends." Instead, "the human body is that region of the world which is the primary field of human expression." The body is not a distinct object, but only a field of the wider world.

And if you think about it, you realize that this is right. Our bodies are continuously in flux. Our physical aspect is continuously interacting with everything around it. We are all constantly breathing in molecules that only moments before were part of someone else's body.

This week I was contemplating Whitehead's image of the one molecule, and I realized that any one of us might currently possess a molecule that once was part of Jesus' body. A molecule that once participated in the incarnation of God in human form may now be part of your right elbow.

Theologians speak of "deep incarnation." It is the idea that God is present in the Earth; "Earth is a sanctuary where God's glory dwells," as one theologian put it. "It is this God, . . . immersed in our biology, . . . that we know as Jesus Christ."

Christianity proclaims an Earthy Word.

Yet, our tradition has often ignored this deep truth of our faith. Christianity has too often been otherworldly, to the expense of Earth. Even some New Testament writers used the word flesh as a metaphor for lust and sinfulness, which led to dualistic thinking. Things of the flesh were to be avoided, and we should instead focus on things of the spirit. Bodies became things to be ashamed of; their needs and desires disciplined for supposed higher aims. Nor did we develop powerful theologies of the land. When new technologies arrived, we simply used up the land and natural resources. Some even seem to believe that the more quickly we destroy this planet, then Christ will come again, ushering us all into heaven.

There were voices who spoke of a different way, a more sustainable way, that drew on the deep incarnation theology of the Christian faith. People like Hildegard of Bingen, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Meister Eckhart, or Francis of Assisi. But Christian powers continued this anti-body, anti-Earth trajectory.

It was these anti-body and anti-Earth views that enabled colonialism, slavery, the abuse and oppression of women, the genocide of Native Americans, and the ecological damage of the modern world. Christianity has been guilty of much, because it has failed to grasp the significance of this powerful phrase from John 1:14 – "the Word became flesh."

But there is hope, if we renew our theology of incarnation, embrace our bodies, and restore our relationship with Planet Earth. The Season of Creation website proclaims:

Embodied in that piece of Earth called Jesus Christ, God bonds with Earth in the battle against those forces of sin and evil that destroy peace and perpetuate alienation. In Christ, then, Earth too suffers and bears the cross. The land too is crucified with the incarnate God. God thereby liberates Earth.

The sin that Christ overcomes is not merely the personal wrong of individual humans, but the massive corporate sin and environmental injustice perpetrated against our planet. Christ is the 'lamb of God' who not only takes away my sins, but as our liturgy says, 'the sins of the whole world'. And those sins include our crimes against creation. In short, God incarnate also dies for Earth.

We believe that the creator became clay, an Earthy Word. The Earth is the sanctuary of God's glory. Therefore, if we are to be in relationship with God, then we must be in relationship with the Earth.

The motto of the United Church of Christ is a quote from Jesus – "That they may all be one." Why should we limit that goal to the unity of the organized Christian churches or even to all humanity? Do you suppose that God's dream is that all creation lives sustainably in unity?

I believe we can make such a claim. So, during these 50 days of Easter greening, I invite you to join me and your sisters and brothers on a Mission 4/1 Earth.