Embodying Care

The Works of Mercy and Care of Creation

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Introduction

"It all turns on affection," Wendell Berry wrote in his Jefferson Memorial Lecture. This is as true a statement as any on the relationship of humanity to the Creation. Love is at the center—not only of our role in creation, but the very fact of Creation itself. Christians cannot accept a cosmos that is an accident, without inherent meaning and purpose. We do not believe in a mere universe, but in a Creation—formed and focused by a personal God. This is the central witness of the scriptures, beginning in the theopoetics of Genesis 1 and 2 which shows God carefully crafting a world, breathing divine breath into animals and people, and on the sixth day of creation recognizing that "indeed it was very good" (Genesis 1:31a).

The proclamation that the world is "very good" means that it is not our role to give the cosmos value. God has already judged it and nowhere is that judgment revoked—the creation remains with the appraisal "very good" forever sealed upon it. That Creation has already been given its value means that our work is not to determine its goodness, but to accept it. In such acceptance we cannot see Creation solely as a collection of "natural resources"—raw materials for human ends. Our work is to cultivate our affections for the gifts of creation, which includes our own lives. When we begin to love the creation, giving our care and attention to it, we will begin to move into the life of the Creator, the community of God called Love. Love binds together all.

Love is by nature always expanding the circle of its embrace. A healthy loving community is marked by hospitality, welcome, drawing in and giving birth to new life. In the same way, the divine community of God seeks to expand the circle of its embrace in the primal and ongoing act of creation. As Norman Wirzba puts it, "in the creation the Trinity is making room." To make room for the expansion of our embrace, we must move away from the narratives and practices of scarcity that have driven the destruction of creation. To make room we must learn to live more simply and at the same time more abundantly. This is in part what the practice of charity, the practice of embodied love, must now look like.

Over the history of the Church there have been various ways Christians have come to articulate the work of love to which we are called. Among the most enduring of those expressions has been a list of Corporal Works of Mercy—seven practices, drawn largely from Matthew 25, which lay out embodied ways to show the love of God to one another. In thinking about how it is that we should put into practice the love of creation, responding to a creation given in love by Love, the authors of this pamphlet settled on exploring the love of creation through this classic formulation of how we love each other as church. Like any enumeration, it isn't a complete listing, but we hope that by exploring how love might be made manifest in and for the world these practices will serve as a good beginning point.

The voices represented here are diverse in terms of vocation and theological affiliation. The authors of these short essays come from around the country, and include Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Baptists. Our professions range from academics to field ecologists to farmers, yet even in the midst of such diversity we hope that the common call of love in and through God's Creation will ring clear. Jesus did much to trouble the distinction between loving God and loving our neighbors; we hope to be faithful to that work in blurring the distinction between loving our neighbors and loving the rest of the Creation. Where one leaves off and the other begins is not clear, nor perhaps is it all that important as we realize again that it all turns on affection.

Feed the Hungry

Nadia Stefko

Feed the hungry. It's one of the more straightforward and oft-repeated mandates in all of scripture, but also perhaps a puzzling one to bring up in a pamphlet about cultivating our affections for the good gifts of Creation.

It shouldn't be. After all, as Wendell Berry reminds us, "Eating takes place inescapably in the world . . . and how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used." Indeed, our creation narratives show God forming humans from the soil, and placing us in a garden, among many living things entrusted to our care and use *for food*. And so it seems only fitting to ask, how do we embody the love of Creation in light of Jesus' mandate to feed the hungry?

The short answer is that too often, we don't.

Too often we American Christians allow ourselves to interpret Jesus' command to feed the hungry far too narrowly. We take it to be a Robin-Hood-style directive, aimed at the wealthier and better-fed among us, taking some of our caloric abundance and giving it to the hungry poor.

Such a reading both assumes and denies too much. It assumes that unjust distribution is the root problem with the ways we produce and consume food, rather than a symptom of deeper issues. And it denies any alternative to the narratives of scarcity that prop up the sinful, industrialized food system under which we

live and eat—a system that desecrates the very Creation to which we belong, but from which we have become estranged.

Desecration and senseless suffering run deep in the dominant structures that feed us. The way we eat is toxic to our health; four of the ten leading causes of death in the U.S. are diet-related. The Department of Justice has prosecuted numerous cases of modern-day slavery in America's industrial farm fields, and every year, tens of thousands of farmworkers get seriously ill from pesticide exposure. Our eating is also toxic for the planet: the food industry emits more greenhouse gases than any other sector of the economy, and 70% of the planet's freshwater withdrawn for human use every year goes to agriculture—and this at a time when more than one third of the world's population, most of them poor, lives in water-scarce areas. It takes ten calories of nonrenewable fossil fuel energy today to produce one calorie of the food energy on our grocery store shelves. How we eat even undermines the variety and order of Creation itself: The United Nations' 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment named global agriculture as the "largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity."

The powers and principalities that dominate our agricultural economy stake their reputations and their business plans on the proposal that we eaters fit best in the role of passive consumer, and that decisions about what and how to grow, process, distribute and serve food are best left to a small handful of anonymous "experts."

But our Christian faith makes a very different proposal. To feed ourselves and one another in a way that is faithful to the witness of scripture, sacrament, and the church begins with acknowledging that all acts of eating—that is, the ways we produce, acquire, and consume food—are enactments of our covenant relationship with God.

The Hebrew Bible tells of a people whose self-understanding was rooted in the experience of living in and from land that is a pure gift from God. God delivers the Israelites out of Egypt,

through the wilderness, and into Canaan, and God continues to provide through the land—that is, the gift of food in an arid and difficult-to-cultivate terrain. These narratives tell how God is present to Israel in moments of feast and of pestilence, and the legal codes dictate how food is to be grown, harvested, distributed, and consumed. The biblical writers clearly believed that what and how God's people eat expresses who we are and reflects our relationship to our Creator.

In the Christian tradition, this narrative of food as a primary communicator of covenant is most vividly and powerfully enacted in the Eucharist. In it, God comes to us as food, and we pray that through our partaking in the meal we might continually be transformed into God's body. As Saint Augustine put it, we "behold what we are, and become what we receive."

While the Communion table is our fullest expression of covenant eating, it is not meant to be the only Eucharistic eating that we do. Rather, the sacramental encounter must infuse and inform all of our eating throughout the weeks of our lives. The early church knew this well. The book of Acts tells how the first believers broke bread together daily in their homes, eating their meals "with glad and generous hearts," and Paul frequently reminds his fellow Christians that the way they ate meals together was a primary mark of their identity as followers of Christ, knit together in community (1 Cor. 11:17-34).

And so, we are left to wonder how we, in our day and time, might remain faithful to this conviction that how we eat is fundamentally an expression of our Christian identity, an enactment of our covenant relationship with God. Or, to return to the question as posed earlier, how do we embody our love of creation in light of Jesus' mandate to feed the hungry?

A good first step, as we seek a broader interpretation of this biblical mandate, is to ask who all is included in "the hungry." Is it just about those who experience food insecurity? From a theological perspective, we can only answer "no." For God created us all

as beings with appetites and needs, as creatures who are not self-sufficient, but require sustenance from outside ourselves. We need to eat to live. Unequal access to food is a grave moral issue—and a tragic one in a world that grows more than enough food to feed everybody. But while some bellies go empty and others are fed, at another level hunger itself characterizes *all* God's people. So when we talk about how best to feed the hungry, we are talking about how best to feed *all* of us—about how we humans take our life from the life of the world around us. This includes questions of the justice of food distribution, but it neither starts nor stops there.

An article in a pamphlet can hardly scratch the surface of how we might reform our eating to better reflect what we profess about our identity among God's good creation. Here are just a few concrete suggestions for how an individual, household, or community might start to turn in that direction.

First, you must learn. Learn as much as you can about the systems that sustain you. Learn where the food you eat comes from. Learn about what's in it, and what went into its production. Learn about the workers and communities who were involved along the way. When you don't like what you've learned, learn what alternatives are available. Learn about the foods you choose not to eat but others do, either by choice or for lack of better options.

Second, you must resist the insidious invitation to remain a passive consumer in the agricultural economy. Plug yourself in wherever you can along food's journey from field to fork. Prepare meals from scratch, from ingredients you recognize as food. Volunteer at a farm. Set up a visit to a local food production facility. Prepare and serve food to those in need at a hot meals program or pantry. Participate in hunger relief efforts locally or globally; and ask why they are necessary in a world that produces plenty.

Third, you should eat where you live. Center your diet on foods that were produced in your region. This is the freshest, tastiest, and most secure food available to you. Eat what's in season. For the foods you'd rather not go several months without, preserve some yourself for off-season use.

Fourth, go out of your way to interact with others around food, which is precisely what Jesus did. Meet your local famers, and buy directly from them. Eat your meals with others, especially people who are different from you. Cook together. Share stories, recipes, and memories. In addition to being fun, this is an act of resistance against the behemoths of the industrial food system, which would prefer to see us sit alone and eat "anonymous" food.

Fifth, you need to acknowledge your limits. The first letter of John reminds us that "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." This is an important reminder for those of us who have begun the transformation to more sustainable ways of eating. Despite what some labels or grocery chains would have us believe, no food is brought forth without some suffering, and no producer or consumer is sinless. The temptation to believe that we can achieve a morally pure diet is as dangerous to our souls as not thinking at all about what we eat. To eat honestly involves a constant call to repent, and seek reconciliation with the sources of our food, human and otherwise.

Sixth, remember always to say grace. Giving thanks for food is a countercultural act in two ways: It speaks against the commodification of food by naming it as gift, rather than mere commodity, and it articulates gratitude for what is present before us, over against the fear about what is absent—the fear that fuels the myth of scarcity that is embedded in our dominant food systems.

Feed the hungry. It's a straightforward and oft-repeated biblical mandate, and it should be. For we are hungry creatures, created by a God who loves a whole world into existence, beginning with a garden; who loved this Creation enough to take on flesh and walk among it for a while, pausing frequently for meals and to teach us about eating; and who continues to animate our communities and gather at our tables.

Clothe the Naked

Brent Laytham

"I was naked and you clothed me." The human child Jesus could have said this to Mary and Joseph at the hour of his birth, as they wrapped him in swaddling clothes. The Human One, the Son of Man, will say this to all the 'sheep' who have loved him in the form of history's poor ones: "I was naked and you clothed me" (Matthew 25:36). Juxtaposing Jesus' nativity (his incarnate birth) with his *parousia* (his incarnate coming again) can be a reminder to most of us that loving care begins at home, that our "sheep-like" fulfillment of the command to neighbor love has its roots in mundane practices like changing diapers, dressing children, or clothing an injured or incapacitated parent.

This practice of clothing our loved ones already is Creation care, because bodies, our fleshy personhood, are the beautiful form of creatureliness we have been given by a loving creator to train us in the affectionate care that expands to 'tilling and keeping' this very good Creation. Our children train us to care lovingly for fragile yet resilient human skin. The infant cries with the news "I'm lying in excrement; it's not fun." And we learn to recognize that cry, to clean effectively, and to re-clothe regularly. Parents don't necessarily feel love in this process, but it is definitely love in action. The parent who leaves a child sitting in poop for hours is negligent, or callous, or cruel.

At a parabolic level we might ask whether the globe has been crying for some time "I'm lying in excrement; it's not fun" and whether our response is better characterized as caring or callous. But that jump to the symbolic is one that only the already convinced are willing to make. So instead, let's simply consider the expanding memberships that constitute and complicate diaper changing. In the 20th century, clothing a naked baby transitioned from a reusable, natural, ultimately biodegradable product—the cotton diaper, to a disposable, synthetic, ultimately polluting product—the disposable diaper. In that transition, we effectively transformed ourselves from ecological sheep to merciless goats, soiling the earth's body for the sake of convenience. A first fitting practice for a very good Creation, then, is to clothe our children in diapers made of natural fibers.

Far more perplexing is clothing the potty trained—you and me—in ways that love creation. Our perplexity begins with our near wholesale ignorance about the story of the clothing we buy. While a garment label will indicate the material composition and country of assembly, "100% Cotton" really tells us nothing about whether the plant grew from genetically modified seeds (90% of U.S. cotton does) or was treated with fertilizer and pesticides (more pesticides are used on cotton than on food), how many petroleum miles the garment has logged from field to closet (20,000 or more is common), or what levels of energy and water consumption are involved in processing the yarn (the textile industry is "the #1 industrial polluter of fresh water on the planet"[1]). To tear away the veil: in general, synthetic fabrics require twice the energy to produce as natural fibers do; synthetics often engender additional greenhouse gases as byproducts; natural fibers are biodegradable, while synthetics are not; and synthetics often emit heavy metals as they "decompose." Because a "natural" fiber can be grown in

1. Accessed on 9/22/14 at http://oecotextiles.wordpress.com/2011/01/19/estimating-the-carbon-footprint-of-a-fabric/ citing Cooper, Peter, "Clearer Communication," Ecotextile News, May 2007.

the context of industrial agriculture (a soil depleting, air polluting, pesticide and GMO dependent, gas guzzling enterprise), the ideal would be fibers rooted in organic agriculture and animal husbandry.

A second fitting practice for a very good Creation, then, is to clothe yourself in garments made locally of local organic natural fiber, as much as possible. And when you do, consider washing them less and drying them never. Three quarters of the carbon footprint of that pair of socks is laundering—if you use a clothes dryer. So the multiple wearings and clotheslines of our grandparents are a third fitting practice of good Creation care.

But a walk-in closet bursting with organic cotton shirts and wool slacks is hardly a fitting practice of Creation care. A fourth practice, therefore, is to recognize the emblematic nature of the fashion industry itself, forming us in patterns of endless consumption whereby we acquire more than we need, own more than we use, and still continually want more than we have. Here creation care begins with the cultivation of the capacity to recognize sufficiency, the willingness to steward abundance, and the development of ascetical practices of refusal. Perhaps one such ascetical practice would be thrift—a willingness to darn socks and mend sleeves and repair rather than discarding our garments. One practice that stewards abundance is the 'communism of clothing' that parents practice, handing down clothing from growing child to growing child . . .. Perhaps the capacity to recognize sufficiency begins with disciplining our purchases. One Ekklesia Project congregation practices a discipline of buying two garments, one for the self and one for another, as a way of disciplining the endless desire of consumerism.

A step beyond mending is to return to the do it yourself culture of making our own clothes. Most of us know someone who used to make some or even most of their own clothes. (Admittedly, few of us know anyone who used to make any of their own fabric; in that, we remain dependent on larger, usually industrial pro-

cesses and markets.) While sewing our own clothes or knitting our own hat may not have a significantly quantifiable positive impact, it will change our relation to Creation's materiality in qualitatively powerful ways. How? Precisely by drawing us into the intimate knowledge of what good work can do with good materials.

Many of us also 'dress' our churches in vestments and paraments that are subject to all these same considerations. A fitting practice is to use the church's best artisans and the best local fabrics to clothe both clergy and sanctuary in garments indigenous and cherished.

As those who have been clothed in Christ (Galatians 3:27), we can sing "he has clothed me with garments of salvation" (Isaiah 61:10). That singing will only be as beautiful and harmonious, to some extent, as the fittingness, the integrity and fidelity, of our actual clothing. For where our garments scar and soil the world, they belie the Psalmist's hymn to a gracious Creator gifting Creation: The grasslands of the wilderness overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness (Psalm 65:12).

Give Drink to the Thirsty

Jeffrey Reed

It is indisputable that fresh water is essential for life; every human being, every created being in every ecosystem is dependent on fresh water for its existence. There is no substitute for fresh water. And yet fresh water represents less than 2.5% of all the water present on earth, most of which is currently frozen in Antarctica. Despite its relative global scarcity, demand for fresh water is continually increasing to the point that current demand is unsustainable. This increased demand in the form of consumption and extraction, particularly from ancient, deep, non-renewable aquifers, has created a global water crisis. While the notion of a water crisis may seem foreign to most Americans, who simply turn on the tap or purchase a bottle of the latest "designer" water, in most of the world it is all too real. In many areas, traveling to a community well the same way the Samaritan women did is a real, daily, and often dangerous journey, where more often than not, the water is contaminated.

However, the water crisis is not only something that happens in far off places. While North Americans are likely aware of the ongoing drought in California and its devastating effects on streams, rivers, and drinking water supplies, less well-known is the fact that lakes and streams in Wisconsin are being dewatered by unrestrained irrigation. At the same time, much of the ground water in southern Minnesota and most of Iowa and the rest of the

"corn belt" is so polluted by nitrates that residents are forced to purchase bottled water for drinking and cooking. The summer of 2014 saw several municipalities that draw their drinking water from Lake Erie forced to truck in drinking water for residents due to dangerous levels of toxic algae, the result of excessive amounts of nutrients flowing from farm fields, lawns, and parking lots. Our unsustainable appetite for cheap food, our overreliance on fossil fuels, and our general disregard for protecting Creation has brought the water crisis home.

The question before us, a dispersed group of Christians, is why does this matter? When we ask this in light of Matthew 25, it is clear that Jesus uses the provision of water to the thirsty to illustrate his understanding of discipleship. Furthermore, he identifies himself with these least among his thirsty brothers and sisters. Providing those who thirst with water is undoubtedly part of Jesus' vision of discipleship. Discipleship thus requires a deep sense of hospitality toward those we meet. If we consider hospitality as described in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which requires "guests to be treated as Christ," we open ourselves to the possibility that such hospitality is not only Christ-like, but that also to that of Christ being in our very midst.

Yet, the seemingly simple task of providing a cup of water to someone who thirsts is complicated by the global water crisis. How hospitable would it be to offer a stranger who thirsts a glass of water from a tap that draws its source from Lake Erie? How hospitable is it to *sell* someone who thirsts a bottle of water? If we are to take discipleship seriously, we need to take hospitality seriously, as well. For this reason as much as any other, when water is polluted, either through industrial discharge, agricultural run-off, hydraulic fracturing, or any other reason, we as Christians should be offended.

Furthermore, and perhaps just as importantly is the fact that water binds us together as Christians. It is through God's actions in baptism that we are first bound into the Body of Christ. We die

with and are reborn as members of the resurrected Christ. We are washed and cleansed into his body. But if we are forced to subvert the symbolism of the baptismal ritual by using polluted water such that we are endangering the wellbeing of the candidate, then we are in danger of doing more harm than good. If that is the case, if we are forced to use water that contains toxins or is pea-green in color, we have to ask just how holy the water, and in turn our ritual, really is? Again, as Christians, we should find even the idea of water so polluted that it cannot cleanse offensive.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, all life needs fresh water for survival. There is no question that we are intended to be co-workers, tillers, and keepers of God's Creation (Genesis 2). Good stewardship requires that we provide healthy ecosystems, which includes supplies of fresh water, for all of God's creatures. We need to extend our hospitality for others to all of God's Creation, from the vegetation to the birds to the great creatures that fill the seas to those that move along the ground, for they all thirst as we do.

As we acknowledge our need for fresh water and our responsibilities as Christian communities to help assure as adequate supply, the question before us shifts from why to how. To be sure, the complexity of the water crisis can at first be overwhelming, so much so that it is far easier to be complacent or even deny there is a problem. Or, we can act to make a difference because we are people of faith who believe in the One who is the Living Water of Life.

First, and perhaps foremost, we need to ensure access to clean water for everyone; water for all creation is a life issue and needs to be treated as such. Christians should be holding agencies responsible for protecting water resources at all levels accountable for providing clean, safe water to God's creation. We should also be aware of where our water comes from, whether a municipal well, a lake or river, or our own private well. Ecologist Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac* that "There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that

breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace." We can apply the same reasoning to acknowledging the source of our water; knowing these things encourages us to protect those local sources of water, as well as allowing us to recall that water doesn't come from a bottle.

We can speak out against and refuse to participate in the commodification of water resources, particularly bottled water. Bottled water is problematic on a number of levels, including its fostering a continued dependence on fossil fuels, both for bottle production and product transportation. This commodification makes water available only to those who can afford the latest designer trend. Additionally, bottled water promotes a sense that we can just go to the local convenience store for water, allowing us to abdicate our responsibility to maintain healthy water sources. Finally, bottled water cuts against the grain of community by feeding our tendencies toward private, individualized consumption. Drawing our water from a communal source promotes the need for the entire community to protect these life-giving places. From that perspective, churches should avoid the use of bottled water for events, drawing it instead from local sources.

What we put on our table also affects our water resources. Nearly 70% of fresh water used around the world is used in industrial agriculture for irrigation and processing. Eating food we have grown ourselves or which has been otherwise produced locally and being aware of where the rest of our food comes from directly affects our ability to provide clean water to our neighbors.

Finally, I believe it befits us to "remember our baptisms and be grateful." The early Christians believed that Christ's baptism in the Jordan purified all the waters of the world. When we recall that event, and our own immersion into this radical new life, we are all but required to maintain those purified waters, not only for ourselves, but for those generations who will come after us, as well.

Visit the Prisoner

Kyle Childress

Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that on Judgment Day we will be asked whether we visited the "least of these" in prison. Earlier in his ministry he preached the release of the prisoners from jail. For those of us accustomed to believing that only threatening criminals are behind bars, these are scary words from the Lord. But across the centuries, one of the bottom-line marks of the church is our visiting those behind bars, no matter who they are and regardless of why they're there.

It so happens that in the Bible it was not uncommon that those in prison were also sisters and brothers in Christ. In Acts 16 Paul and Silas were not visiting those in jail; they were *in* jail. And they were in jail for upsetting the money-making schemes of the Powers. They were in jail for freeing a slave girl from being exploited by the ruling Powers. They called her to Christ, she was freed, her angry owners started a riot claiming that these "outside agitators" were upsetting their way of life and customs and that the law was on their side against Paul and Silas. Hence, the Apostles of the church were in jail.

We point to Christ and we live in Christ, but sometimes that pointing to and living in threatens the social order, is a menace to the political order, disrupts the economic order and challenges the conventional order. There are times when being a witness of Jesus and proclaiming "Yes" to Christ means also saying "No" to the way

things are; to injustice, exploitation, and the Powers. Sometimes that might mean civil disobedience and possibly jail. The church has a long memory of such matters, not only of Paul and Silas, but all the way back to Exodus 1, when old Pharaoh commanded that all Hebrew boy babies were to be killed upon birth, and the Bible says that the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, "feared God; they did not do as Pharaoh commanded, but they let the boys live" (Exodus 1: 17).

Today, part of the witness of the church is caring for God's Creation. For us to say, "The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1) implies that it does not belong to others, especially those who would destroy it, diminish it, exploit it, and otherwise claim ownership of it. And in the face of climate change, many in the church are saying we're no longer going to cooperate with the destruction of God's Earth. We are learning to transition away from dependence on fossil fuels and learning to rely on sustainable energy sources and live together in ways that care for creation and embody the Way of Jesus. We recycle; we're learning to walk and bicycle or carpool instead of driving; we're developing local food infrastructures; we're transitioning to wind and solar power; we're educating ourselves and others; and we're nurturing communities that are living in these ways together. Sometimes when we make a stand that challenges the Powers of Exploitation of Creation, it puts us in jail. We do so nonviolently and in humility, and even in fear and trembling, but we say we will no longer be silent and we will no longer cooperate.

Our own congregation had long had a creation care mission group. They led the way in educating the wider congregation in everything from giving up Styrofoam to nature education and church-wide family campouts to showing films on creation care and local food to helping reorganize our local farmers' market. A few years ago, while sponsoring and viewing a film on climate change and sustainable energy at the nearby university, four young tree-sitters showed up; they were part of a growing effort

to block the TransCanada Keystone XL tar sands pipeline as it was beginning construction in East Texas. They had been invited by our creation care mission group and were curious about a church showing hospitality to them. They were accustomed to criticism, suspicion, and outright hostility; instead, we welcomed them and fed them and found them places to sleep. The next morning they were in church. A week later fifteen were in church and a week after that twenty. For over the next year, we averaged a dozen or more pipeline blockaders in church every Sunday while the pipeline was being constructed down through East Texas toward Gulf Coast refineries.

The blockaders made our church their home. For the most part, these young people—ranging in age from their early twenties to their mid-thirties—had little experience with church unless it was negative. They came to East Texas from all over the country and from various backgrounds. What united all of them was their opposition to the tar sands pipeline and the ramifications of using oil from tar sands in hastening climate change. These young people knew that if they were going to have a future, the use of fossil fuels had to stop and there was no dirtier fossil fuel than tar sands.

As our congregation offered them hospitality, we learned from each other. They taught us about the need for non-violent civil disobedience and direct action to fight this while we taught them about community and how rooting our lives together in the love of God gives us hope and sustains us over the long haul. Together we helped form a movement of resistance to tar sands and the pipeline while creating awareness of a cluster of issues surrounding safety and emergency training for local first responders in dealing with pipeline leaks and tar sands toxicity.

We also learned about visiting the prisoners. Many of the pipeline blockaders were arrested while committing direct actions of non-violent civil disobedience. They chained themselves to heavy construction equipment, or sat in platforms built in trees some sixty feet above the path of the pipeline, therefore blocking

its construction. In response, law enforcement pepper sprayed them, arrested them, and hauled them off to jail. In many cases, they were given extraordinarily stiff penalties for the charges of trespassing and resisting arrest—apparently TransCanada and the authorities did not like having their power questioned. And while the blockaders were in jail, we visited them, went to court with them, testified on their behalf, prayed for them, and sent them cards and letters of love and support.

Working alongside the young blockaders, visiting them in jail, and standing against the tar sands pipeline took commitment. But it also taught us humility, because it's scary to oppose legal authority, an act of last resort and desperation.

It's also hard. It's hard because always we are to love our enemies no matter how wrong we believe they are. The Powers destroying God's Creation are larger than individual people. All of us are enmeshed in webs of power and exploitation and sin. Our calling is to make a witness. We can't force the way things turn out or control things; we can only point to the Way of Jesus, showing that there is another Way. And we want to embody the Way so that those in opposition might be converted or change their minds.

It is humble, hard, and scary because in the short-term we feel like what we do may be useless. We are outnumbered, overwhelmed, and under-funded. Most of the time we will lose.

But we lose only in the short-term. It is essential that we learn to see the long haul. We do not have undue optimism when it looks like we're winning because we know that this is a long haul battle and things shift and can change. But we also learn to hope when it looks like there is no reason for hope. This is why it is so important to have a spiritual life rooted in the God who sustains us over the long haul. We are here to stand – and to stand when everyone else gives up and goes home.

Wendell Berry tells of an occasion back in 1966 when he attended a hearing in the Kentucky state capital over strip mining for coal. There were perhaps 15 people present whose homes and land

were damaged or threatened by the coal mining. That day there was no "demonstrating" but those folks were there in protest nonetheless. One man in the group was dressed neatly in a summer suit. Wendell eventually introduced himself to the man, who he discovered was a lawyer over in Eastern Kentucky. The lawyer was not there representing anyone but himself. Wendell said, "Then why are you here?" He replied, "I want to be on the side of right."

Sometimes we must stand up and be on the side of right. And there are times when that might mean imprisonment. Caring for God's creation in the face of climate change is one of those times.

Care for the Sick

Joel Shuman

The fifth corporal work of mercy, which like the others has its origins in Matthew 25, is one that Christians have—admittedly by fits and starts—practiced from very early on. The scriptures of both Testaments portray a God and a people deeply concerned with every aspect of human well-being, and the healing ministry of Jesus of Nazareth is widely regarded as a definitive sign of the irruption into history of God's reign, the aim of which is the restoration of the original *shalom* of God's good Creation. As early as the third century, Byzantine Christians founded institutions devoted to the care of the sick, and their Benedictine confreres in the West followed their example soon thereafter by opening their monasteries to those suffering illness. These institutions proved to be forerunners to the modern hospital, many of the first of which were founded by Christians both Catholic and Protestant. And yet, it is legitimate to ask what any of this has to do with so-called "Creation care," the responsibility of Christians to live faithfully, gently, and peaceably as members of God's good Creation. The connection is admittedly complex, but no less real for its complexity. And it begins, interestingly enough, by pointing to the limits, if not the failures, of modern biomedicine.

The more one learns about modern biomedicine, the more she realizes precisely how *little* it has to do with health. In a 2014 update of a report entitled "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall," sponsored

by the Commonwealth Fund, the United States, with purportedly the most sophisticated and definitively the most costly medicine in the world, ranked dead last—eleventh of the eleven national health care systems studied—in overall performance. Conspicuous among the factors examined was American performance on "healthy lives measures," where the United States ranked tenth or eleventh on each of the metrics considered. The report attributes much of the poor performance of the American system to its failure to grant sufficient access to medical care to many members of American society, and this is certainly correct—but only to a point. In reality, the situation is more complex—and considerably direr—than the authors of the report admit. Why then *are* we Americans so sick, even to the point that certain sectors of the population have recently been identified as having *decreased* healthy life expectancy?

One need not attend too carefully to the news to gather that there is in the United States an emergent epidemic of so-called "lifestyle diseases," including, most remarkably, morbid obesity, type-II diabetes, and childhood asthma. What is somewhat less well known is that these diseases disproportionately affect the poor and members of certain minority groups. It turns out that where you live—and where you can *afford* to live, along with what you eat—and what you can *afford* to eat have a huge impact on your prospects for good health. These are of course matters of economic justice. But they are also matters of *ecological* justice. A significant part of taking care of the sick, it turns out, is a matter of taking care of the places they live and those from which they get their food.

Take, for example, type-II diabetes, which is acquired most frequently in association both with particular "lifestyle choices" like diet and exercise. It's likely that our first response to this news will be to assert that these people are sick because they are fat and lazy and have made lots of poor decisions, and that what they really need is to turn off the television, get off the couch and start moving, and switch from fried brown stuff to leafy greens. This is

correct, but only in part and only in some cases. For most people suffering these maladies, getting better is just not that simple.

It's often been said that we can't pick our parents, which means we have no control over their role in predisposing us to certain illnesses. There is an emerging body of evidence that our ancestors' diets and ways of life (what are called "epigenetic factors") have potentially significant effects on our own health, which is to say that health is a lot like poverty, in that it tends to be intergenerational and chronically intractable.

Moreover, the link between poverty and poor health runs a good bit deeper than this analogy. Poorer people have unhealthy diets in large measure because that's often all they can *afford*, and sometimes because that's all they can *find*. There are relatively fewer supermarkets selling fresh produce in poor neighborhoods. Fast food hamburgers and sugary soft drinks are cheaper—considerably so—than fresh vegetables, whole grains, and lean cuts of poultry and fish. This is far from accidental; rather, it's a matter of national agricultural policy. Fast food is less expensive than fresh, healthy food in large part because it is built on a corn-and-soybean foundation. Corn and soybean based foods, including most processed foods and the beef in fast food hamburgers, which is brought to slaughter weight by way of a diet consisting almost exclusively of corn, are less expensive because they are heavily subsidized by the federal government. Decisions about agricultural subsidies are to a significant extent political, and the production of commodities like corn and soybeans is controlled by a handful of corporations, all of which wield considerable influence in Washington.

This is where we can begin to see some of the connections between taking care of the sick and taking care of the rest of Creation. The same corporations that wield the political power sufficient to acquire and maintain huge government subsidies tend as well to stand against the kinds of legislation that might improve ecological health by reforming, among other things, the very agricultural practices by which these commodities are pro-

duced. Modern agricultural practices are mostly industrialized. Commodities like corn and soybeans are planted "fencerow to fencerow" on huge tracts of land. They are planted, cultivated, and harvested using heavy mechanical traction and typically treated with massive quantities of petrochemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. All of these practices lead to unhappy ecological phenomena, including soil erosion, chemical runoff (such as has created the massive "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico), episodes of dangerous *E. coli* contamination in corn fed beef, and who knows what deleterious long term effects on the health of those of us who consume the traces of agricultural chemicals remaining in these products when they come to market.

A similar observation can be made with respect to childhood asthma, which has increased especially among poor urban children, who tend to live in buildings with poor indoor air quality, or who otherwise live in close proximity to places where a lot of fossil fuels are burned and, consequently, a lot of hydrocarbons and other chemicals, including heavy metals, are pumped into the atmosphere. In combination with the decrease in overall air quality occurring in the wake of climate change, it's little wonder that there are so many children among the urban poor who struggle to breathe.

These problems are obviously vast and deeply entrenched, and it is easy to despair over the possibility of "fixing" them simply by making incremental changes among our local churches. Yet in our moments of despair we need especially to be reminded of two things: First, no large scale policy changes of the sort that will make healthy food and fresh air widely available to the poor are likely to be forthcoming anytime soon. The Powers keeping things as they are too rich and too thoroughly insinuated in positions of influence for that to happen. This is not to say we should stop praying, lobbying, and protesting for changes on a policy level, but rather that we should not expect Caesar to rush to the side of the powerless. Second, we need to keep in mind that we are not called to *fix*

anything, but only to be faithful—to pray, speak truth to power, and especially love and care for our neighbors and the places they inhabit. God remains sovereign, and is at work bringing about the healing of Creation despite all appearances to the contrary.

What then might be some practices our congregations can adopt as expressions of the love and care to which we are called? Well, the first thing that comes to mind is education. Most of the folks who attend our churches are oblivious to the machinations of those who run our food system and its effect on their own lives, much less on the lives of their marginalized neighbors. People need to hear—from the pulpit, in their Sunday School classes and small groups, and in church sponsored Teach-ins—about how their food is produced, its potential effects on their health and the health of their neighbors, and the availability of healthy alternatives to the products of the food industry.

A second practice in which we need to engage is short and long term hospitality. In the short term, the "church potluck," long a significant part of congregational life, offers lots of opportunities for welcoming our marginalized neighbors and introducing them to good, healthy food. This will of course take some work, for most of us don't know our neighbors very well, especially those occupying different rungs on the social ladder than we do. This needs to change, and will change only as we screw up the courage to open our tables and our lives to them. In the longer term, we—especially those of us living in small town, exurban, or rural places—might involve ourselves in some of the many programs that match inner city children with families in the suburbs or smaller towns, offering those children a place to live away from the hazards of their everyday lives and exposing them to healthier ways of life for periods ranging from a few days to several weeks.

Finally, it is absolutely essential that we involve ourselves in food production on a local scale. In addition to supporting local farmers' markets ourselves, we need to do all we can to see that the laws of our respective states permit the poor to use their food

stamps or EBT accounts to purchase food at these markets. And just as importantly, we need to involve ourselves in growing our own food and helping the marginalized do the same. Community gardens have proven wildly successful in many parts of the country, and there is a relatively new trend toward starting such gardens on vacant inner city lots. Our churches need to get involved in these programs, not only as sponsors, but as participants, working alongside our neighbors at one of the oldest and most basic of human activities.

These practices admittedly don't sound like much, but they are certainly places to start. More, they are all things to do that draw us out of ourselves and direct our attention toward others who suffer. To care for the sick still involves being at their bedside or accompanying them to their next appointment. Now, however, it involves offering them alternatives to the ways of life that helped make them sick in the first place.

Harbor the Harborless

Kelly Johnson

We often talk as though Creation is "outside." What, then, is "inside"? With stone, clay, wood, metals, cloth, and straw, human creatures construct shelters that are themselves part of God's good Creation. From earthly elements, on land marked by geological history, in the midst of non-human animals, we make interiors that offer protection for our fragile bodies. They are spaces that hold human life on a human scale. We seek out defined spaces to comfort us and to draw us together near warmth, food, and the sound of each other's voices.

But shelter is not only a place of comfort. Close to each other's bodies, we notice each other's weakness. In intimacy we become vulnerable. That's what makes offering shelter to another so difficult. Limited space means we cannot get away from each other. On close terms—whether that means a shared room, a shared house, a shared floor of a building, a shared building or block of a street—humans are about details: muddy shoes, sneezing, loud laughs and curses, crumbs from a sandwich, small talk and temper tantrums. When we share shelter, we see and are seen, not just when we choose it, but in bleary morning and in tired evening. Being observed by someone else makes me aware of myself as an object in her world. It is not *my* world anymore, because I am an object as well as a subject.

It is as "my world" that shelter most goes wrong. Shelter turns into a place in which the dominant resident can be God. We can lock out whomever and whatever disturbs us. We can hurt each other in privacy. We can build houses so large that we manage to "live together" without any contact with fellow residents. We can augment our shelter with toxins, poisons that kill the creation we are trying to exclude. Shelter becomes not a part of our creatureliness, but a way to deny that we are part of creation.

Christians hold that the God who made us shelter-seekers became, in Jesus, one who needed sheltering. Stories of his childhood say his first shelter was a barn and that his family had to flee for their lives to a distant land. In his adulthood, he 'had no place to lay his head,' and he died utterly exposed, outside even the protection of the city walls. This is God's way. We are surrounded with generous gifts which we twist, and so God takes on human sin and overcomes it with excessive patience and generosity—or in this case, with hospitality.

In fact, Christian hospitality is all about recognizing that even when we provide shelter for others, we are not hosts. We are guests, invited to be in God's Creation, among God's many creatures. Our homes are not castles where we can be God; they are campsites where God makes room for us during the great unfolding of the world. God has not been locked out. God is our shelter.

The practice of hospitality returns shelter to its rightful place in Creation. Human creatures need protection, comfort, and intimacy within, not apart from, the wondrous, alarming whole of God's world. Hospitality is about creating an interior that is a place for welcome of Creation and Creator, a place where we face the truth: we do not live here alone nor are we able to control all things. We are here to receive gifts, some of which are, like some of our guests, our weather, and our non-human fellow creatures, easier to love than others.

Close up, in shared space, human life is about details. But hospitality is not just agreeing to wait for the bathroom, to take

up less space in the refrigerator, to tolerate someone else's dishes in the drainer, or to compromise on noise levels—although it is those. But within all of those details, hospitality is dismantling the material practices that allow us to think that our lives do not affect anyone else, that hers does not affect mine, to think that we are not creatures in God's world but little gods ourselves, that we can escape creation and creatureliness and . . . God.

Facing this truth is more necessary now than ever. Climate change means that not only do we need to think about hospitality for children, the elderly, and the disabled; not only for people who become homeless because of lost jobs, low wages, or health crises; and not only about refugees displaced by violence. We now need to prepare to welcome or perhaps even to become climate refugees. Even more, it means we have to think about a permanent state of living more closely together, without a world of individual cars to carry us on twenty-mile commutes. Even more, it means living without certainty that the good Creation God has made will remain unchanged and hospitable as it has been. As seas rise and storms strengthen, we will either raise higher walls or learn to make room for others.

All things work for the good of those who love God. We who are so accustomed to privacy and control can in this moment discover the gifts of creatureliness: knowing ourselves to be one among many creatures; practicing the patience, trust, and truthfulness required to share space; not only giving but also receiving mercy. We will learn again what it is to know that God is our shelter. The house built on stone is obedience to his commands to welcome, to forgive, to bear with one another.

Bury the Dead

Ragan Sutterfield

When I was young, growing up in the woods of Texas and Arkansas, I would occasionally come upon the dead. Their states and kinds varied—squirrels and birds, frogs and lizards and snakes, they all had reached their common mortal end. Even at eight years old, perhaps feeling the latent call toward ordained ministry, I would often bury these dead. The caskets were simple—biodegradable boxes that would allow decay. The flowers were native and local, and the service a short reading of scripture and a prayer. Dust to dust—I'd cover them over and then I'd wait.

A few weeks would pass and all sense of decency would give way to curiosity. I'd carefully dig up the grave, remove the shoebox lid, and see what had become of the body. I'd do this repeatedly over the coming weeks, watching the body move from a stinking mess teaming with worms to the final clean bones that would take years to slowly seep their phosphorous into the ground.

These were my first experiences with death and bodies in decay; they set the pattern with which I would view the other deaths that would come into my life—human and otherwise. From them I learned that the moment of burial is a pivot and transition in a journey that is both beginning and return.

The early Christians, following the Jewish custom, buried their dead bodily and whole, not participating in the cremation that many pagans practiced. Eventually cremation became accept-

ed in the church, but still the symbolic language of the act is one of full bodily return to the earth. In Genesis 3, after being banished from the eternal life of a complete and flourishing ecology of the garden, Adam and Eve are told:

> By the sweat of your face
> you shall eat bread
> until you return to the ground,
> for out of it you were taken;
> you are dust,
> and to dust you shall return." (v.19; NRSV)

In this passage both common Hebrew words for soil are used, *adamah* here translated as "ground" refers to healthy life giving soil and *aphar*, which refers to "dust" or dry soil—soil whose life has left it. This verse from Genesis reflects the essential connection of our bodies from birth to death to the soil: we are formed from *adamah* and we return as *aphar* which can be renewed to *adamah* once again.

In Job we find this relationship to the earth reflected through the language of motherhood. In 1:21 Job says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there." The mother is not Job's biological mother but his ecological one, the earth that was his source and the place of his return. The idea of "mother earth" is in fact biblical and not merely a pagan concept. We live from the life giving power of the earth and we also return to it.

To bury the dead is then to act like a reverse midwife; we cannot come into the world by ourselves, and neither can we leave it without others. Our bodies must be helped on either side. But as with a child born into the world, there are alternatives to how we enter and how we leave. We can come in systems of nurture that reflect our given creatureliness, or we can come with all of the mechanical help of drugs and surgeries, not so much because of real concern for health, but more because of schedules, priorities and time tables that have nothing to do with the body and its rhythms.

To act with bodily charity, embodying love by burying the dead, we must seek to tell the truth of who we are. We must reflect the idea that we find our life's source from God's breath mixed up with the soil and that we return to the soil once that breath has been withdrawn. This is perhaps no better expressed than in Psalm 104:29 when the poet speaks of the reality of all animal life: "when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust." But in our act of burial we must also reflect the truth of our hope of resurrection, the complete renewal and restoration of all being, as the Psalm goes on to reflect in verse 30, "When you send forth your breath, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground." Both in our death and our hope for resurrection, the human position is one of humility and dependence. It is to God we must look for our hope and to the soil we must turn to find the truth of our existence as creatures.

The reality is that most burials do not reflect the truth of who we are. Instead, we continue in our deaths to deny our connections to the earth as the source of our life and the site of our return. From metal caskets that promise protection from the earth to concrete vaults that separate the bodies of the dead from the corrosive influence of soil, the modern funeral hardly reflects the "return to earth" of Genesis 3. Liturgist Ben Stewart writes that even "the physical bodies of the deceased have increasingly been absent from their own funerals and the committal of the body to the earth at the grave has come to be treated as an optional private ceremony."

Stewart finds hope for a return to a truthful practice of burial in a movement arising mostly outside of the church: the green or natural burial movement. "The natural burial movement," writes Stewart, "has focused on three areas of practice: care for the body of the deceased, attention to the materials of the burial vessel, and the committal of the body to the earth." We will look at each in turn.

To bury the dead is foremost a matter of the body and the first step of this is of course caring for the body of the dead. Modern burial practices carry this out with plastics, formaldehydes, and other toxins seeking to keep the body from showing its natural end. The natural burial movement, however, turns away from such practices and seeks a quick burial with few chemical preservatives. Dry ice or other means of refrigeration might be used to preserve the body until the family can gather. The beautiful Japanese movie, *Departures*, shows such artful care of the body in traditional burial practices. In the film, a jobless cellist finds work with a mortician, going to the homes of families and helping them ritually care for and "encoffin" their dead. It is a profound picture of attention, mourning, and the great love that can be shown by how we take care of the physical body of those who have died. In this the mortician isn't shielding the family from the truth of death, but rather lovingly helping the family live into the reality of this "departure."

The second aspect of natural burial is the matter of the burial vessel. We've already noted that many modern burial vessels are made from industrial materials such as steel and concrete rather than those that will allow the body to return to the earth. The natural burial movement seeks to utilize wood, baskets, and even quilts to hold the dead as they are returned to the earth. Some religious orders practice this work of mercy through providing wooden coffins for such funerals. Ben Stewart offers the example of the Trappist monks of New Melleray Abbey, who make "coffins from the woods of their own sustainable managed forest, and for every coffin they construct, they plant a tree in their woodlands."

The last aspect of a green burial is the committal. Natural burials most often utilize a simple hole in the ground with no vault. These burials can take place in more traditional cemeteries, some of which offer green burial sections. But most the most promising form of natural burials take place in specific sites that are meant to be preserves for local ecosystems. In these cemetery preserves burial sites are marked with simple gravestones or a spe-

cial planted tree. In some instances there is no marking and the site is simply recorded using GPS coordinates. Good examples of these cemetery preserves are the Penn Forrest Natural Burial Park and Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve.

Burying the dead as a work of embodied mercy is a critical activity of the church, and as Stanley Hauerwas has so often reminded us, so is telling the truth. The natural or green burial movement is a way to enact our care for bodies of the dead in a way that tells the truth of who we are—humus-beings who live from the earth and return to it. It would be a great ministry of the church to encourage natural burial practices and even begin to provide the space and resources for such burials to take place. I have always loved church yard cemeteries and I marvel at the idea of churches surrounded by flourishing landscapes filled with the saints who have gone before, all whispering from the grave "you are but dust and to dust you shall return."

Afterword

These reflections are not intended to be conclusive words or fodder for abstract discussion; they are meant to be provocations for an embodied and lived response. Just as Christians have always found the best expressions of the works of mercy to be their work living out those acts of charity, so too we hope that these reflections will spark new ideas for action and new forms of life for Christ's body in the world.

One truth of embodiment is that while it is always ecological it is also always local. The Body of Christ is made up of the bodies of Christ, all living out his life in their particular places. We don't propose to know how the works of mercy should fit in each particular context. Water is a different thing in New Mexico and North Carolina; local food economies look different in Florida and Vermont; housing is different in rural contexts and urban ones; yet in each place we can live out Christ's love in a way that is every bit as incarnate as another.

To this end it is our hope that this pamphlet will be used as an impetus for congregations to create their own concrete action guides for living into these works of mercy and caring for Creation. Like a monastic rule of life, we hope that these local action guides will help form concrete disciplines that are not ends in themselves, but rather ways to respond to God's call to love each other and the whole of creation toward our common flourishing. The works of mercy call us to just that—work. Let's join our local churches and begin it.