

Very Rev. Jeffrey Pl. Shooner, Vicar General
Colossians 1:15-20
Matthew 8:23-27

GREEN MASS FOR THE CARE OF CREATION
Epiphany Catholic Church
Louisville, KY, USA
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One of my favorite places on earth is a place called Philmont Scout Ranch in Northern New Mexico. I've been there a number of times, hiking through the mountains, observing the beauty of the wildlife, really seeing all of the amazing things - the grand landscapes, the intimate details of nature, all of those wonderful things. I've even had a hummingbird come and land on my finger and perch there, right? It was amazing. But my most powerful memory from Philmont was being away from all of the lights of society, out in the middle of nowhere, at elevation and looking up. And I saw the Milky Way. And not just individual stars, but the grand-like swath of our galaxy through the sky. And I was overwhelmed by it. I was astounded by it, and I was unexpectedly moved to tears. There wasn't anything that I could control there. It's nothing I had made. It wasn't anything really that I could even barely understand. But there was beauty. There was wonder. And there was awe.

In our care for creation, it doesn't primarily begin with guilt or even begin with responsibility. It begins with that sense of wonder and awe. The psalmist in Psalm 104 that we sang recognized that it saw in the heavens and the earth and the waters and all the living creatures a hymn of praise to God. And so, we recognize that great hymn of praise to God that is in creation. One of the images that sticks with me from when I was a child, or when I was younger anyway, is the image of our responsibility towards God's creation as being a museum curator. I've thought about it in those terms because a museum curator does not paint the masterpiece. And the museum curator does not own the masterpiece. But the museum curator has been given something beautiful, protects it, allows others to encounter its beauty, and then eventually hands it on to someone else.

That image is wonderful, but it's also incomplete because we are, you know, God is the artist, creation is his artwork, but we are part of that creation. We also are creatures. So we are part of what God has made, and our understanding of care for creation from Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* was that of... oh Jim... integral ecology, right? Was an integral ecology. And he said at the heart of that was the idea, as he

said it, that everything is connected - and that includes us. So when we think about the care for creation, it's not just a care for the natural world, it also involves human dignity. It involves the poor and the vulnerable. It involves how we leave what we have received for those who come behind us, right? It takes into aspects all these different dimensions, and it is a beautiful thing for us that we recognize that we are part of creation; and that an integral ecology, according to the church, is where all things are connected and that we must address all of those things.

Our understanding of creation may be about beauty and wonder, but the gospel reading also gives us a different image, doesn't it? It gives us a violent storm. And in the midst of that storm, the disciples, who are in the boat, are terrified. And so we may stand in awe before creation, but sometimes it can also remind us how small and vulnerable we are. And so it can be terrifying. So as Christians, we do not romanticize creation. We recognize all of its different dimensions, but we also recognize that Jesus is in the boat. And as he rises, he speaks to the wind and the sea; and they are calm, right? That Jesus is the one who is the firstborn of all creation. We hear the disciples in the boat ask that question, who is this man? What sort of man is this that even the winds and the seas obey?

And Paul tells us in Colossians, he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; that in him, all things hold together. And so our understanding of interconnectedness of this idea of everything being connected is deeper because we find in it the relationship to Jesus Christ; that in him, all things are connected, all things hold together. So it's because of him that we recognize our responsibility lies beyond just our own sphere of belief or understanding, right? So we do recognize that we're called to an ecological conversion, as the church says. And that conversion is based on wonder. It is based on contemplation. Pope Leo preached on these readings when he celebrated for the first time the Mass of the Care for Creation, which we're celebrating tonight. And so he said, a contemplative gaze can change our relationship to creation. A contemplative gaze can change our relationship to creation.

And for Catholics, contemplation is not passive. It's actively engaged, and it changes us and how we live. We allow that contemplation to affect not only our own identity, but also how we live out that identity. And in relationship to care for creation, we're called to ask those questions. What do we waste? What do we find disposable? What do we prioritize for our convenience over our responsibility to others? What kinds of things can we change in our own life about our interactions with the natural world, our consumerism, how we live each and every day? But the common good means that we look beyond ourselves as well, that we must look at the communities we build and the institutions we shape and even our responsibility

as a nation, right? Pope Francis again said in *Laudate Deum*...he said that the most effective solutions, the most effective solutions, will not come from individual efforts alone, but from major political decisions on the national and international level.

We have some responsibility as a world community. It doesn't make it a partisan issue. It makes it a communal one; that we have some challenges so great that we must address them together. And when we look at those challenges, sometimes we can maybe be tempted to despair. We can maybe be tempted that these are too big for us to make a difference about. But in the Catholic idea of integral ecology, what we know is that we are not the saviors of the world, that that job has already been taken. And so our action for the good of God's creation is not based in fear, but it's based in hope. What we hope for, how we look to the future, how we trust in God, and that that relationship to Jesus Christ, who is the firstborn of all creation, is our relationship to what he loves to one another and to himself.

So, we always connect our relationship to God, our love for God with our love for our neighbor and our love for that which he has created. It reminds me once again of being at Philmont. Being out there. And those stars in the sky, they were there long before I ever gazed up. And hopefully, long after all of us are gone, some other young person is going to walk out into that wilderness, and they are going to look up, and they will see the same stars and they will be awed by beauty.

The question entrusted to us is what will we hand on to them?