

"The Earth Community as the Source of Christian Unity"

The Sermon Preached By

The Reverend Thomas Berry

at

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It's a delight to be here with you today to talk about unity. This has been a major theme of the Christian Story for some centuries now; first the story of the differentiation within the Christian context, and now the story of our interaction with each other in a creative manner. Our sense of unity needs to be placed in a more comprehensive context. All human affairs in this particular period will in the future be governed principally not by human groups facing each other, but by human groups facing the planet on which we live. History will be made from here on, not as nation history, not exactly as inter-nation history; history will be made principally in terms of human-earth relations. It will be inter-species history. It will be the story not exactly of the human community, but of the earth community entire, including all the living and non-living components of the planet earth. This is the only reality.

When we talk about human affairs separate from the planet context we are talking about an abstraction; we are not talking about the reality of things. Any study of society that treats merely of the human is concerned with an abstraction. There is no human society except as a component of the larger society of the planet earth and, back to that, the society of the universe itself. In all affairs at the present time we must take the earth community as our concern. The earth within the cosmos is the primary healer. There is no healing, there is no revelation, there is no education, there is no valid government but what is grounded in the constitution of the earth itself. So with economics I often wonder when I see commercial corporations trying to remain solvent by making the earth bankrupt since the earth is the primary corporation upon which all other corporation depend. To speak more personally the earth itself is the larger extent of each individual's being. Indeed, the earth and the universe entire is the macrophase of the being of each one of us. How old are we? We are as old as the universe. Our being carries within its structure the story of the universe. Our personal story and the story of the universe have a basic identity. Each person, each phase of the universe articulates an irreplaceable mode of earth being. The earth without each particular mode of being is that much more deficient. That is why it's so important for each person to realize and to articulate the great depth of reality that lies within each of us. Our responsibility is not simply to ourselves, nor simply to our nation, or even to our religion. Our responsibility is to that larger numinous reality which is the universe itself, and more immediately, the planet earth.

This grand cathedral is made of the rocks of the earth. It is oriented according to the directions of the planet. Its liturgies are carried out in accord with the seasons. Its prayers are effective exactly in so far as it makes conscious the prayers of the planet itself. The universe, the planet, as St. John tells us in his prologue, is itself manifestation of the divine Word. It is itself the

basic incarnational experience.

One of the difficulties of Christianity is our excessive redemption orientation. Our concern for redemption processes have overwhelmed our sense of the creation dynamics of the planet. We've lost a background without which redemption processes cannot be fully effective or even understood. As the primary presentation of the divine the earth and the universe in which it exists is the primary object of redemption. In the totality of the universe the divine image exists most fully. Plato, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas, all tell us that the reason for diversity in the universe is to enable the universe to mirror the divine perfection. Therefore, since no one creature could reflect the divine image adequately the divine brought forth the grand variety of creatures in order that in the splendor of each and in their inter-relations with each other the gorgeous image of the divine would be made manifest. God would be present and in full communion with Himself in His creation.

Not long ago there was a book written called The Fate of the Earth. It was a book that described what happens when a nuclear bomb is exploded. What would happen in this area if a nuclear bomb were exploded? The very thought has struck a certain terror into our lives. For the first time we have the capacity to assault ourselves, to assault the earth and to assault the divine on the planet earth in such an order of magnitude. But even beyond the question of the nuclear bomb itself there is the question of what we are doing to the divine image in creation through our industrial assault upon the planet. It's estimated that fifteen to twenty percent of the species on the planet earth could be eliminated by the end of this century. Except for specimens in zoos many of the most wonderful animals on the planet almost certainly will be extinguished, never again to exist. Extinction of species is an absolute act beyond remedy from heaven or earth.

The Passion of the Earth is taking place in our time and very few voices, almost no official voice of Christianity, is raised in protest. There is no papal encyclical. There is a concern by many bishops as regards the nuclear bomb. But there is very little protest as regard to what is happening by the industrial bomb which has already gone off and which is working its devastation a little more slowly but just as inevitably. Recently I looked through an anthology of Christian writings, a massive two volume anthology. In looking through it with a certain rapidity, I found nothing on the natural world. Everything was redemption oriented. Here in this Cathedral more notice has been taken of the ecological issue and more efforts made to alliviate the passion of the earth than in any other such religious or ecclesiastical establishment that I know of. One of the glories of this Cathedral is the extent to which it has brought before our society spokespersons for the planetary process; spokespersons who could unveil for us the grandeur and beauty and spiritual splendor of the earth, our bio-spiritual planet.

Returning now to the question of Christian unity, it's my conviction that the only way in which we are going to come together is by our attention to the planet, and with a certain horror of what might happen if we do not come together. The salvation of the planet has to be the primary concern. If you're in a lifeboat and something happens to the boat, there may be problems of distribution of the food aboard, there may be people hurt that need attention, but the first care must be taken of the boat; otherwise nothing and no one can be saved. And so at the present, there is a certain urgency beyond all discussion, beyond religious differences, beyond political differences, there is the issue that is before us: Shall the

earth live or shall it die? We are the people that bear the responsibility. We are the people that will hand the earth on to future generations, not to some one generation, but to whatever hundreds or thousands of generations that will come after us. They will have only what we hand on. They will never see any species that we extinguish. They will certainly live amid the ruined infrastructures of the industrial world. It would be even more terrible to condemn them to live amid the ruins of the natural world itself.

These are issues that we must think about. These are the issues that can unite us. The greatest value that we possess exists in this glorious planet on which we live. The Christian people should come join in this great project. If we come together in this way, we can attain a functional unity that will integrate the human into a functional cosmos. The difficulty that I see at the present time is not exactly the past sectarian difficulties in Christianity. The greatest difficulty that I see is the division within Christians of those who are concerned with the planet and those who are not. There are those who would live simply and solely out of a limited interpretation of Genesis. There are those of us who consider that beyond all verbal revelation, the revelation of the universe and of the earth is the great unifying power among all peoples. Verbal revelations cannot function outside of the revelations of the natural world itself.

This, then, I put before you today with the hope that the Christian peoples will recognize that in the larger sense the earth is itself the Body of Christ. The earth community is the divine presence. This is our life, our unity.

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Mrs. Joseph M. Elliot

I appreciate
your sending the
transcript of your
memoir - it a
trifle - also I've
already made
some copies for
myself -
many thanks

Tom Berry