

Restoration of relationship

Making peace with all creation

Randolph Haluza-DeLay

I'm glad we are letting go of the language of stewardship when we refer to protecting the world God loves. Increasingly, Christians talk about "caring for creation." But I'd like to propose something even more consistent with our Anabaptist principles. At the same time, I think it's more biblical.



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The extent of human-created damage to the planet is stupendous—an ecological violence of World War scale. Let’s say that we humans are at war with (the rest of) nature. Into other such situations of violence, Anabaptists bring a peacemaking practice. Could we engage in “making peace with all creation”?

NEW EYES FOR NEW TIMES

This is an exercise in reimagining our place in the cosmos, of reading the Bible with ecological eyes. That is, of reading with eyes that know our culture has become the Anthropocene.¹ The ferocity of human ingenuity and “progress” is reshaping the planet at a fundamental, geological level—changing climates, eliminating species, accelerating the desertification of once-fertile lands, changing the course of rivers, eliminating polar ice caps, melting glaciers, and acidifying oceans. We need new eyes when we pose new questions to the old wisdom of Scripture about these radically new times.

GOD’S LOVE EXPANDS BEYOND

Remember, “God so loved the *cosmos* that he gave his only begotten son.” Yes, that is the Greek word in that familiar passage. The “world” God loved is the “cosmos.” Ecological eyes see God’s love expanding beyond just the human portion of all creation.

Ecological eyes envision the idea of “making peace with all creation” in the first chapter of Colossians, specifically, the Christological hymn in 1:15-20 and the next few verses.

Here’s the basic message of the passage: in Christ, in whom all things were created, and in whom all things hold together, in this Creator who is firstborn into creation, God reconciles all things, making peace by his blood. All things! All things, whether on earth or in heaven! This gospel is proclaimed to every creature.

The letter to the Colossians is a relatively short epistle. The writer uses what appears to be an early hymn or poem with a cosmological imagination—the Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” He then observes that the immanent presence of the divine

in the universe culminates in “making peace” for “all things” and for “every creature,” which in the Greek is a linguistic derivative of the words so frequently used for “all things” in the earlier lines. These statements about peace for all creation make no sense, unless we let go of the idea that the other-than-human parts of creation have no relationship of their own with their Creator. They challenge modern cultural understandings of humanity, the earth, and the relationships among us all and God. Even our Christian worldviews have been captured by modern ways of understanding that were not the cultural milieu in which the various books of the Bible were written. This capture limits effective action of caring for creation. Our imaginations have been captured by empires of human-centered rationality, treadmills of capitalist production, values-agnostic technology, and hegemonies of human hubris that act as if humans were exempt from ecology or biology.

The theocentricity of this Colossians passage is emphatically not anthropocentric. There is a continuity of human and other-than-human parts of creation.

REIMAGINING HOW WE LIVE

This passage from the letter to the Colossians identifies four key themes that contribute to reimagining how we live if God loves all the world.

- *First:* The divine as immanent and incarnated; the one and only Creator of all things became a part of the creation itself. Since God took material form in Christ, Christian faith cannot deny the value of the material world; it was good enough for God!
- *Second:* Reconciliation is the good news that is the gospel, but to whom does it apply?
- *Third:* Reconciliation culminates in peace with and for all created things—the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah 11!
- *Fourth:* All this is situated in, and comes through, the Christ.

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1. Anthropocene: the period of time during which human activities have had an environmental impact on the Earth regarded as constituting a distinct geological age, <https://www.merriam-webster.com>.

To be sure, it is difficult to understand how peace can be part of ecological systems that include predatory creatures. How can the owl and the mouse make peace, or the lion and lamb lie down together? But peace is a consistent theme through the scriptures. So while peace in human social relations is difficult to imagine, we do not stop seeking it despite our historical propensity to global and interpersonal violence.

THE POLITICAL CHARACTER OF LOVE

One starting point is to put peacemaking in the context of love. Recent years have seen the growth of a rich literature on the political character of love and care. Ecologist and ethicist Susan Power Bratton wrote an essay on the role of *agape* in environmental management. Published in the premier secular, mainstream environmental philosophy journal, she wrote,

Because [love in its *agape* form] creates fellowship... it cannot deny the interests of the poor and dispossessed; nor can it deny the interests of nature.... The contemporary model of environmental protection primarily asks: how can I avoid hurting nature? The *agape* model asks: How can I best take my place in the community with nature, and what can I give of myself to nature (and to my human neighbors)?²

THE FOUNDATION FOR JUSTICE

Love is the foundation for charity in the Christian tradition. It becomes the foundation for justice when people see that caring charity alone cannot overcome societal structures that cause conditions that keep people from the full flourishing of life as God intended.

Based in love and relationships, making peace is far different than the stewardship model of managerial imposition and avoiding harm. Contrary to stewardship, this model of peacemaking is action directed towards mutual blessing. Peace is positive, not just the absence of violence. It is about the restoration of relationships. We are neighbors to the rest of creation.

Drawing on something from our Abrahamic brothers and sisters might help us figure out what

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2. S. P. Bratton, “Loving Nature: Eros or Agape?”, *Environmental Ethics*, 14 (1992): 18.

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this means. Many people have heard of the Muslim concept of *halal*. *Halal* is whatever is permissible and acceptable. When applied to meat, it means the animal must be blessed and properly—that is, humanely—slaughtered. But a higher level of the “good” is *tayyib*, which refers to purity. In this context, it means the animal lived a good life and was treated well, tended with concern for its welfare.

Why? Because the other-than-human world is meaningful in God’s eyes. “There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you. . . . they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end,” says the Qur’an (6:38). The Hebrews also believed God loves the whole world: “The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.” God satisfies the desire of every living thing (Psalm 145:9, 16).

THE COMMUNITY OF ALL CREATION

Cherokee biblical scholar Randy Woodley studies Scripture through Indigenous (Native American) eyes. He says the goal of God is *shalom*—peaceful or “right relations” in Hebrew. Woodley extends the goal of *shalom* to the community of all creation, beyond the narrow notion of the human community alone.³

Making peace with all creation goes deeper than preventing further violence to the rest of the creation community. It also means ecological restoration—restoring the conditions that are good for all of creation. It means reimagining the moral community to which love and duty are owed. That community is broader than the human world. While it is hard enough to engage in peacemaking across boundaries created with other humans, it appears that Colossians calls us to do so with all the earth that God loves.

3. Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).



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