

Proper 17 Season of Creation

Creation: the Fifth Gospel By the Rev. Salying Wong

This spring and summer, Andrew and I have been volunteering with the San Francisco Bay Observatory to monitor an endangered bird called the least tern. It is the smallest tern. On our training day with the wildlife biologist, while looking out at the beauty of the marshes, the sky and the variety of birds, I said to her, “If I had another dream job, it would be to a wildlife biologist.” She asked, “Oh, what do you do now?” I said, “Oh, I’m a priest.”

As I reflect on this Season of Creation we are embarking on till the blessings of Animals in October, I have been reflecting about my long-lasting love of creation. I have pondered a question I’ve never pondered before, “Would I have become a priest, if I had not been a scientist first?” People are often surprised when they hear I’m both a priest and a scientist, as if the two are incompatible. But, I think about how from an early age, I found the world an utterly fascinating, beautiful place—full of wonder. Gregory the Great complains today in his commentary on Job about the lack of wonder at ordinary miracles. But, I never took any of it for granted. How amazing that flowers become fruit, that leaves and algae give us oxygen—sun, moon, and stars; and this fragile earth, our island home. I wondered so much as a child, I became a scientist to look deeply and see what else there was to see.

Perhaps if I didn’t practice all that wondering, I would not have wanted to be a priest, to be in the presence of the Wonderful itself, to point to this Wonderful within the church. Prior to embarking the path of ordination, I was studying global climate change. When you study this, you quickly see that beside the wonder of creation, there was the pain of its destruction. During my studies, I quickly understood that there were much better scientists than me working on the content of the pain—fashioning equipment

to measure greenhouse gasses, drilling ice cores, going up to the clouds to gather gasses, spending hours and hours devising experiments. They were good at getting more proximate to our planet's glory and its suffering. It's a thing I find with life: the deeper you love a thing, more exquisitely you will feel the pain when that gets injured.

Christopher Heuertz, an author of books on the enneagram, tells a story. He has a statue of the Crying Buddha in his home. When his niece sees it, she asks, "Why is he crying?" He replies, "Because of all the pain in the world." To which his very practical niece argue, "Well he doesn't have to if he doesn't want to."

'Tis right little girl. You don't have to cry, you don't have to feel the pain, if you don't want to. It is pretty much the same attitude Peter has when he hears that Jesus will undergo suffering, immense suffering. Well, Jesus, you don't have to if you don't want to.

So, why, why feel the pain, why get close to it? I believe It's something about how love works. It is a trend that people who become birders often become conservationists. They might start out birding just to enjoy the beauty of the birds. But then, they see how the birds suffer because of habitat loss. They consider how birds travel thousands of miles to land in the place they're standing, just to fuel up before the rest of the journey. The birder begins to understand how everything is connected and these connections are fragile. Suddenly this world is a place to love and suddenly its destruction is a pain to feel.

The great Buddhist teacher and surprisingly adept Christian theologian, Thich Ngat Hanh, once said, "The kingdom of God is not a place without pain. If it were a place without pain, it would not be a place of compassion." Compassion literally means to "suffer with." When Jesus told his disciples of his intentions to suffer, he was telling of his intention to suffer with them because of his love for them. And he was asking for the same in return. "Anyone who wants to follow me, must pick up their own cross." Could it be that Jesus was asking them to love him by sharing in

his suffering? Could it be that we can't really know divine love till we greet our own pain?

We begin this Season of Creation together. I know that many of you know enough of the problems of climate change to feel as overwhelmed as I do at the intractability of the problem to move collective human will to stop hurting God's creation. How do I find hope again? The only way is love, and nature is the fifth gospel. We must listen to it. I encourage you to fall in love with God's creation even more—with a tomato fully ripened, with a tree rustling in the breeze, with the moon as it wanes, with the tides that pull out and release a stench of sulfur, but feed the dowitchers, the avocets, the whimbrels, godwits and curlews. Keep looking and noticing and seeing how God's love is written every, how every line on a leaf is a line of love. Let love and pain make contact and feel the hope of compassion for God's creation be a source of energy to repair the world.