

Part of Something So Much Bigger
Based on Job 38:12-21 and Mt 10:26-31
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March 17, 2024

I'd like to begin by asking you all to raise your hand if you have in your house a drawer where you put all the stuff you don't know what else to do with. The junk drawer, I have always called it, and I have always had one. Mine is kind of large. A sampling of what you might find there includes batteries, a trowel, lightbulbs, duct tape, twine, a battery-powered magnetic light strip I could never get to work, the smoke alarm that should be on my kitchen ceiling, and a bag of asparagus fertilizer. If it were bigger I put a few other things in there. I just found out that my stepmother calls her drawer like this the go-to-hell drawer. I love that. As if when I put something in there, I am either actually condemning it to hell or possibly just never really want to ever see it again. Go to hell, asparagus fertilizer.

Jesus seems to be saying, in this passage from Matthew's gospel, that God has no go to hell drawer. That is, God has no special compartment where God dumps all the stuff God doesn't want to think about or care about any more, and where that stuff all stays, like my smoke alarm, indefinitely. For God, everything that is, counts.

Literally. Jesus says that God has counted the hairs on our heads. There might be some subtraction going on with those hairs, or some new math, in some cases, but God keeps count. Of all of it. The hairs on your head, the ants in your kitchen, the children in every suburb and small town, every ghetto and war zone. Every 85 year old struggling to get the groceries put away, every child in foster care, trying to survive; God sees them; God does not forget them.

We find it hard to open our hearts, to fire up our big brains enough, to care about all that lives, much less all that is. We need (or think we need) a junk drawer, a weed killer, a prison, we need to close the door on all that seems overwhelming or confusing or scary. God does not need that.

There is research going on now, using genetic analysis "to map the history of biodiversity in the oceans over the past 100m years." So we could see, what species lived here 40 million years ago, what passed through here 2 million years ago. Journalist James Bradley writes, "Would such a map change the way we imagine the deep? It seems likely it would, if only because it would make it clear

that the ocean's depths are not an alien realm, but intimately entangled with every other part of the planet. In particular, such a map might provide an antidote to the tendency to treat the ocean – and particularly the deep ocean – as a convenient place to dump waste that is too dangerous or expensive to store on land.”

It does seem that the more we learn, the more we understand that there is no convenient dumping ground. We cannot separate from our own lives what is ugly or dangerous, because we are all of a piece, part of one system. There is no global go to hell drawer. As the psalmist writes,

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Psalm 139:8-10)

There is no place we could go that God doesn't know about. Much more recently, poet and novelist Wendell Berry wrote, “there are no unsacred places. There are only sacred places and desecrated places.” We have to grow out of the idea that we can use the ocean, or the moon, or Malaysia as our dumping ground, that we can desecrate certain places freely, and that the trash and waste we put there will stay there, away from us. It doesn't work that way. We are part of a system. Just as with the human body, abuse or neglect of one part will eventually make itself felt in the whole system. If we ignore an infection in the baby toe, we put ourselves in danger of losing a leg. There is nothing in all of creation that we can afford to lose, nothing we can cut off from circulation without putting all of creation, including ourselves, in danger.

Just as there is no convenient go to hell drawer in nature, there is none in society either. We have to grow out of the idea that we can leave troublesome people to rot in meaningless jobs or scary schools or prison cells, believing that doing so will make the rest of us safer. It doesn't work. We find that they are us, there is no hard and fast line, between the person who needs to be protected and the person they need to be protected from. We are part of one body, and in the end, we thrive or we suffer together.

Research shows that the greater the income inequality in any society, the worse the crime rate will be. It isn't just poverty—it's the presence of poverty right alongside wealth. People begin to distrust the government and the police and one

another. The rich devise means of insulating themselves and the poor do what they can to beat the system, which is so clearly skewed against them. We should strive for greater equity, in other words, not only for the sake of the poor, but for the safety and peace of mind of every member of society. For less crime and for more neighborliness, more social support, and more happiness. This is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. It means realizing that your neighbor's welfare is your own. It's not so much selflessness as it is a bigger view of what actually works, for ourselves and for everyone else.

You may wonder what happened to our Lenten theme of awe. But this is what generates our awe—the occasional, gut-level revelation that we are part of an incredible vastness of moving parts and interacting elements. We catch a glimpse of astounding beauty, say, of miniscule life like the hummingbird, that carries on as though it is essential, as though its life is the life of the whole world. Or we are confronted with the reality of the overwhelmingly huge, like the blue whale, that makes us feel we are the size and importance of the hummingbird. Often awe is the revelation that there is life unseen carrying on all around us—dolphins living in our horizon, rabbits raising their young in our garden. Nature is not something out there. It is in and among us.

Every gardener knows that a fence can only shut out so much. Rabbits will squeeze through, birds will stop by, and the slugs and the worms don't even know the fence is there. We do not, cannot shut ourselves off from God's creation. We are a part of the world all creatures share, or rather we are all together making up that world.

The more we can make space for those moments of awe and awareness, the more we can feel our connectedness in the grand scheme of things. We will feel less alone in that way, because we are not in any way alone, any more than a single grain of sand on the shore is alone. And we will act with more compassion, more love, more gentleness, as people do when they know that they are not alone, as people do when they know that they are part of something vast and beautiful.