

Earth Day falls in April. Excellent marketing strategy. A season when every green thing is growing like mad, when one can almost hear the sizzle of shoots breaking the ground.

And it's true that 14 percent of land animal species face extinction in the next twenty years, while perhaps 90 percent of coral reefs are endangered. This is primarily due to human-caused climate change.

Essayist Scott Russell Sanders notes that the paradox of human beings is “that we are once the most creative and the most destructive of all the animals. We are smart enough to adapt nature's forces and materials to our uses, but not smart enough to avoid depleting or destroying the sources of our well-being.”

In such a time as this, where will we look for leadership? With a few exceptions, politicians and business leaders have failed us. Both sacrifice the long-term health of the environment for short-term personal gains. Some of the most prominent and vocal religious communities are more interested in policing human sexual behavior than creating societal change in our relationship to creation.

Yet religion offers a deeper vision. One that is capable of changing our behavior to be part of healing and wholeness. I think it was Carl Sagan, a renowned astronomer, who said that the scientific achievement of the past hundred years was like climbing a mountain only to discover that religious gurus had been sitting on the summit for millennia. This is not in support of the fundamentalist notions of six-day creation or six-thousand-year Earth, but rather the incredible ideas that everything came into being from a single source and continues to remain connected.

The letter to the Colossians intuited these ideas thousands of years before science developed the Big Bang or quantum theories. In the verses we heard this morning, Christ is the cosmic creator: “In him, all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.” From the vast galaxies to the microscopic bacteria to the planet's whirling forces of gravity to the indeterminate nature of electrons, “all things hold together.” This Grand Unifying Theory evaded Einstein and the best scientific minds. Again, religion had the idea all along.

The point, however, is never to use this knowledge to privilege believers but to promote unity. From the lofty theological claims of the opening chapter, Colossians quickly moves into concrete human behavior. Colossians 2:18 warns, “Do not be puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking... [instead] hold fast to the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with a growth that is from God.” What a powerful image that, like ligaments and tendons, we are connected to each other and to the rest of creation!

Climate crisis is real. Our planet is warmed and running a fever. We must stop certain actions that are killing us. Anne Lamott claims that, in recovery programs, healing is not only sobriety but connection—connection to a higher power and also to community.

Disease and dis-ease both isolate. In the crisis of climate change and a myriad of other concerns, healing is wholeness, connection, and community. Worship is a way to feel this connection, and not only on Sunday morning.

Yesterday, we held a Blessing of the Animals event that was open to the wider community. All sacred occasions should include food, and we offered animal cookies, goldfish crackers and cheddar bunnies. You sense a theme, right?

As far as the living, breathing animals, there were plenty of dogs: tongue-hanging, tail-wagging dogs, who were happy to be there. But a number of cats, who were reported to attend, declined the invitation with responses ranging from mild annoyance to outright hostility. We did not have any chickens and ducklings either, which proved fortitudinous because there was a dog named Rooster.

Unfortunately, a young friend’s lizard named Tom Petty had already passed away like his rock ‘n’ namesake, but we remembered the pet fondly. We are sad and grateful when a beloved pet dies, as sorrow is often entangled with blessing. My friend, Walter, recently wrote a poem about his elderly dog: “We know you will die soon. / Outside, daffodils bloom.” Sorrow and gratitude, death and life are connected, just like everything; it is so sad and so beautiful.

When I ponder the idea of blessing, especially in terms of the gifts of Mother Nature, I think of the reciprocal aspect of giving and receiving. To be blessed is not about reward or gain as much as an awareness of forces beyond your ken. The blessing is to pay attention to the grace in the world. Dogs understand the blessing by wagging. I wonder if our lack of receptivity is why we lost our tails.

Watching the relatively chaotic scene in the church parking lot, I recalled the lines from Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai: “the precision of pain and the blurriness of joy.” Whether the loss of a pet or another loved one, what hurts can be so specific; suffering is personal. Joy opens us to something vaster and connects us to the living. That is part of the blessing. Another poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, wrote, “Birdsong can make the whole world into a sky within us.”

Back to yesterday: due to Tom Petty’s absence, we did bless several skinks from afar — not even the lizard-loving youngster was quick enough to catch them. When my young friend grew frustrated by his futile pursuit, I led him to the snack table where we found it much easier to grab hold of an animal cookie. We blessed the food and ate together.

I think again of Colossians: “Do not be puffed up...” It strikes me that humility gives us the blessing of noticing beauty. Whether one believes that the source is the Cosmic Christ, an intelligent designer, or random disbursement of molecules, I think many can agree that, from atoms to galaxies, the universe is saturated with beauty. Might that beauty, whatever its origins, inspire us to connect? For, what does beauty do?

The blessing of beauty calls us out of ourselves. Beauty engages our senses. It inspires affection and gratitude. The appropriately humble recognition is that beauty is bigger than us. Once again, quoting Scott Russell Sanders, “In a world abounding in beauty, we rejoice in it, care for it, and strive to add our own mite of beauty with whatever power and talent we possess.” I add that we trust that our actions affect the whole; healing is about connection, for “In Christ, all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. All things hold together.” Again, Walter’s poem: “We know you will die soon. / Outside, daffodils bloom.” Sorrow and gratitude, death and life are connected, just like everything; it is so sad and so beautiful. Blessed.