

How would our outlook, our actions, be different if we believed, or acted as if, the body of God was present in all of creation.

We are in the midst of an ecological crisis. Species are disappearing forever for a variety of reasons. Sea levels are rising, threatening those who live in low-lying coastal or island places. The powerful and the wealthy will build walls. The poor and the voiceless will be displaced or die. Entire ecosystems are threatened or disappearing due to desertification, drought and warming.

We have heard from Mary Oliver and other poets this morning, speaking with awe about the natural world, the world we inhabit, the world we are a part of. Now we will back up and fill in some of the potentially more controversial stuff. Theology, the study of the nature of God. Something many of us that grace these doors regard with misgivings or disbelief. We have been scarred by, or have simply rejected, literalist interpretations of Christian or other scriptures.

Specifically, we will look at a theology of nature? A theology of nature explores how God might be present in the natural world and in humans without contradicting current science and without setting out to prove the existence of God.

And just to be clear, a theology of nature is not the same thing as natural theology. While you may not remember which is which by the time this sermon ends-- and I still tend to forget--at least know that they are not the same.

Natural theology argues that the existence of God is supported by the evidence of design in nature as discovered through science. This argument attempts to use science to "prove" the existence of God.

Using science to prove the existence of God is not what we are talking about this morning. A theology of nature, on the other hand, starts from a particular religious doctrine and reformulates that doctrine in the light of current science.

In her brilliant book "The Body of God," the theologian Sally McFague advances a theology of nature in which she proposes a model for an embodied God, a God that is both eminent and imminent, meaning a God that is both beyond this world (the creator) and fully present in this world (embodied).

McFague approaches her modeling exercise from the standpoint of a Christian, a feminist and a ecological theologian. She approaches her work knowing that theories and models can at best be only partial representations of reality.ⁱ

Let's speak first about Christianity. Early Christianity was about the Word (or God) being made flesh. God became, for a time, a person, in the form of Jesus. This was embodiment, even if it was only in one person and one time. However, under the influence of Greek thinking, Christianity quickly became disembodied. The Greeks deeply distrusted bodies, despite their statuary of perfect male and female bodies. Christianity quickly evolved a spirit/matter duality, in which spirit took overriding precedence over bodies and matter (read nature). McFague argues to reclaim the importance of bodies, particularly the bodies of the oppressed, those without voices, including the multitudes of non-human bodies in nature.

McFague argues as a feminist. The Greek and Roman societies were hierarchical, human-centric and male-centric. In the Greek culture and continuing to this day in many cultures, women were identified with body and nature, whereas men were identified with reason and spirit. Is it any wonder, with this thinking, that women and nature are treated with disrespect and violated?

As an ecological theologian, McFague reflects on how prevailing Christian theology has diminished the importance of the natural world. After all, doesn't Genesis 1:26 have God saying "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." While there are plenty of countering views in the Bible, this particular interpretation has been dominant in Christianity for millennia.

As a feminist and an ecological theologian, McFague has come to understand what she calls "the interlocking character of oppression." The way women are treated is related to how we rape the world for material things; is related to how we treat indigenous cultures whose "backward thinking" understands that the divine is embodied in the world; is related to the thinking that black lives don't matter. I could go on.

McFague argues for a theology of nature in which God is embodied in the world, not just in the body of Jesus, but in the body of all things, all creation. This model of the divine dovetails with our own UU thinking about the inherent worth and dignity of all humans. It goes beyond our own theology, in that it regards all living things, all creation, as being of inherent worth and dignity because they are all part of the body of God.

Postmodern science tells us that we, all creation are interrelated. Our earth, our bodies, are made from elements formed in ordinary stars and in the cataclysmic supernovas. The life of humans and all air breathing organisms depend upon photosynthesis by plants. We humans are dependent upon the health of the earth that we inhabit. Just ask the residents of Flint, Michigan. Just ask poor

communities in the San Joaquin Valley whose groundwater is dangerously contaminated with nitrogen from factory agriculture. Just ask the Native Americans who, with clergy from our own denomination and others, stand vigil at Standing Rock to protect their water.

We each have a role to play in the protection of the oppressed, in the protection of our Earth. McFague's role is as a theologian. Mary Oliver's role has been that of an artist, a poet. Poetry can allow us to glimpse ideas and truths in ways that prose does not. Mary Oliver is one of the great living ambassadors for the idea that God is embodied in nature. As was John Muir.

John Muir referred to the natural world, the source for his beautiful reflections, as "the divine manuscript."ⁱⁱ Who can argue that the natural world is also a divine manuscript for Mary Oliver?

In 2004, Thomas W. Mann wrote a beautiful little book titled "God of Dirt, Mary Oliver and the Other Book of God." In writing this book, Mann set out to begin to right what he saw as a wrong. Despite being a Pulitzer prize winner, despite her widespread popularity, Mary Oliver's work had received little attention by the scholarly community. In particular, despite her being revered by many readers for her spiritual perception of nature, she had been ignored by religious scholars.

The "Other Book of God" to which Mann refers is nature. Mann quotes Terrence Fretheim regarding nature as metaphor for God. Says Fretheim, if the "natural metaphors for God are in some ways descriptive of God, then they reflect in their very existence, in their being what they are, the reality which is God."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the scripture that Mary Oliver has read and translated for us in a lifetime of writing poetry. Hear now this excerpt from her poem "One or Two Things:"

The god of dirt came up to me many times and said
so many wise and delectable things, I lay
on the grass listening
to his dog voice,
crow voice,
frog voice; *now*,
he said, and *now*,
And never once mentioned forever...

Mann finds analogs between Oliver's verse and the scripture of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. He compares the excerpt we just heard with words attributed to Jesus. Compare with these words from Matthew 6:26-27.

²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

Both Jesus and Oliver, using observation of nature, speak about the immediacy of life, the importance of being in the moment. Sounds, too, like thinking we have heard from Buddhist teachers, doesn't it. Be in the moment.

Mann finds another analog in Psalm 19 and in Oliver's poem "The Sun."

From Psalm 19, vv 4c-6:

In the heavens^[b] he has set a tent for the sun,

⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,

and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

And now Oliver:

Have you ever seen
anything
in your life
more wonderful
than the way the sun,
every evening,
relaxed and easy,
floats toward the horizon
and into the clouds or the hills,
or the ruffled sea,
and is gone--
and how it slides again
out of the blackness,
every morning,
on the other side of the world,
like a red flower
streaming upward on its heavenly oils,
say, on a morning in early summer,
at its perfect imperial distance--
and have you ever felt for anything
such wild love--
do you think there is anywhere, in any
language,

a word billowing enough
for the pleasure
that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you
as you stand there,
empty-handed--
or have you too
turned from this world--
or have you too
gone crazy
for power,
for things?^{iv}

The psalmist speaks of the sun with wonder and as a metaphor for God. Oliver, too speaks with wonder regarding this daily blessing, one that we can fully explain through science, but yet a blessing that still deserves our full attention for the sheer wonder and beauty of it.

Let me conclude with a quote from Mary Oliver, a portion of which is at the top of our order of service. This is from her recent book of essays, titled *Upstream*. She speaks of knowledge in this quote, by which she means not so much ideas, but demonstrated facts.

"Knowledge has entertained me and it has shaped me and it has failed me. Something in me still starves. In what is probably the most serious inquiry of my life, I have begun to look past reason, past the provable, in other directions. Now I think there is only one subject worth my attention and that is the precognition of

the spiritual side of the world and, within this recognition, the condition of my own spiritual state. I am not talking about having faith necessarily, although one hopes to. What I mean by spirituality is not theology, but attitude."^v

May we all be blessed with the spirituality, the attitude, of Mary Oliver, who sees the natural world with wonder and respect; as filled with the divine. May it be so.

ⁱ Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, 75.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Mann, *God of Dirt: Mary Oliver and the Other Book of God*, xiii.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mann, *GoD*, 6.

^{iv} Mann, *GoD*, 7-8.

^v Mary Oliver, *Upstream*, 153.