

Earth Day Homily April 19,2020

What the Earth Can Teach Us

Rev Lucy Bunch

It's the 50th anniversary of Earth Day and I remember when it started. My ecology club at a school celebrated it and created a special pin to recognize the day. We used two boomerangs to form an E to indicate that what we do to the earth comes back to us. It was my first real exposure to the idea of how systems work.

We now know so much more about natural systems than we did 50 years ago, but at the same time, evidence is clear we have not really acted with awareness of our role in the system. We still behave as if we can control things and that we can selectively make changes that have limited impact. That is not how systems work. In an ever-changing interdependent system what each actor does has ripple effects throughout.

Our seventh principle of UU is respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are apart. It doesn't say the web we are in charge of, or the web that does what we tell it to do. We are a part of the system. Just like my boomerang pin, the message we need to learn is that we are not outside manipulators of the natural system, we are a fully integrated part – affecting it and being affected by it.

The corona virus is a part of this system just like we are. Because of shifts that have arisen in the natural system, this virus is flourishing. We can do our best to minimize its impact on us, but it has its own place within the natural system, just like mosquitos, and polar bears, and cockroaches. We can't make it go away. We can learn how to minimize its impact on the most vulnerable. We can do our part to help keep the system in balance.

In the story that Miranda shared the author helped us to see how each being in our systems has its own place, its own ways, its own appreciations, and each contributes to the whole system in important ways. The author didn't include mushrooms and bacteria and viruses and water beetles, but she could have. Or slime molds. I love Science Friday on NPR and they had a recent feature about slime molds. These creatures live in rainforests and help digest dead materials and recycle them into the system. They are usually just one big cell, but when times get hard they send out signals and find others like themselves and form a multi-celled creature to weather the challenge. And despite having no brain or neurons and being just one giant goopy cell, these slime molds can solve mazes, learn, and even anticipate events. They can make rational and irrational choices that mirror our own. Not to mention they're visually

stunning too even if they are bit gross. They communicate, grow and change and have a place in the natural systems of the earth.

I find this incredibly humbling – that a one-celled creature can make choices that mirror our own. At first these creatures were dismissed as inert beings on the forest floor. But scientists learned about their capabilities by paying attention. By studying them they learned things from the slime molds that are helpful in other ways.

This is the humility that we need to bring to our relationship to the earth – this openness to learning what our natural world can teach us.

Which brings me to the central question of my homily today – what can the earth teach us for a time such as this?

The earth has some real cred in its teaching role, after all its been around a long time and has been through a lot! Our natural world can teach us to take the long view, that there is a cycle to life and death. That change is a part of any system with many players, in fact it's a constant part of any system, because when one player changes something, the affect ripples through the system. Just like if one person with the corona virus were to interact with another and infect them – the virus would ripple out to all the people and places where that person was present. This is the nature of the interdependent web.

But let's think more specifically about what the earth can teach us in our current circumstance. This time of disaster, and destruction and profound change.

One important lesson is what the earth can teach us about healing. We can observe how the earth heals from a disaster, such as a fire or volcanic eruption.

At first nothing happens that we are aware of. The first part of healing is assessing where you are, how you are, what had happened and what has changed.

To humans it can seem like a slow process, and yet in the earth's time frame it is just as it should be. Healing begins in ways that we can't see or understand rationally.

Life returns slowly and starts small, like green shoots that rise up from the forest floor. Many forms of life return, but they often come back differently or in a different balance. Some things do not return in any time frame that humans can measure.

For the earth takes the long view: healing takes time.

We can't use the ides of returning to normal – because systems are always moving and shifting. There is stasis, a period of stability, but it is not like a reset. Even if it seems the same it is not,

because of what came before. The earth teaches us that we don't return to the way it was before because the natural systems have moved on.

But the earth teaches us to have faith. Life goes on. The cycles of life have times of bounty and times of struggle.

The earth teaches us patience.

The desert can go for years with dry, seemingly lifeless earth, until the rains bring a rush of blooms.

We know that in this time where humans are physically isolating and reducing our impact, natural systems are changing. Wildlife are coming back into urban areas; the air is cleaner and clearer. We see more stars in the sky.

The earth teaches us to trust the natural system, trust the other beings in the system. And asks us to be trustworthy participants as well.

In the children's book that we read the author said, "trust the rabbit in the fields, and the deer that crosses your path, and the wolf and the geese who find their way home. All these know something about life – that everything is changing."

So on this earth day, with gratitude and humility for our place in the natural system, let yourself take in what the earth is teaching us. Let it settle into your mind and body so we can draw on it in the days to come. The earth teaches us that this too shall pass.

I want to close with a prayer for our mother earth.

We pray to you Mother Earth with gratitude

For your holding and sustaining love

For the air water and soil that feed us, for the mountains and rivers and oceans that calm our spirits.

For what you have taught us at this time of challenge.

For loving and supporting all beings and all creation.

We pray to you Mother Earth with humility

Help us to remember our place in the great web of life

Helps us to remember that we are but a part of this great web, and that we must do our part for the life of all.

We pray to you Mother Earth in with gratitude and humility, we ask that you hold us and sustain us, as we strive to live in connection with you and all life. Blessed Be