

All Flourishing is Mutual: Interdependency

By Pastor Leah Rosso

Psalm 96; 1Corinthians 12

For the past two weeks we have been exploring the concepts of Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *The Serviceberry*, in relationship to the Gospel and what we understand about the relationship God has set up in our world among all its creatures and earth, including us. We've talked about a Gift Economy, which is acknowledging the truth that everything is a gift and then learning to live into how that changes us and the way we have a relationship with the earth and with each other. Last week we talked about reciprocity, how everything affects everything else and so we need to be mindful of our actions in this world. And today we are focusing on interdependence - the reality that we are all connected and will all flourish when we live into this truth.

In Corinthians Paul offers us this metaphor of the body. And I had Dan read the Message version of the Bible for this passage because I think it so clearly gets across what Paul is trying to say - that each part is important; that each part may need something different; that each part offers something different; and that what makes all of the parts so complete, is that they are part of the whole. When we're thinking of our own bodies, it's not too difficult to translate, is it? If I break my toe, it affects my whole body even though it's just a toe. If you have a stomach bug, nothing else matters until your stomach is healed of that bug. Every part affects every other part, and some parts, as *The Message* points out, even though they aren't seen, like our digestive system, has a crucial role to play even though it doesn't make us look lovely like a full head of hair. Paul was specifically focused on speaking to the new followers of Jesus in Corinth, to help them get along; but I don't think we need to limit the metaphor. When everything comes from God, the reality is that our whole earth is a body of which we are part, and our responsibility is our relationship to the earth, to one another, and to God.

This message has been really consistent this spring as we've watched Artemis II take off for the moon, circle around it, and then return to earth just ten days ago. Christina Koch, one of the astronauts on the Artemis II mission, in the brief press conference right after they landed, encouraged all of us to see ourselves as part of the same crew on this planet. I'm positive that as a woman astronaut, holding several degrees, and setting the record for the longest single spaceflight by a woman, which was 328 consecutive days in space, Koch is fairly competitive. But that is not at all what she focused on before, during, or after her mission. In fact all of the astronauts on Artemis II continuously talked about gratitude; about mutuality in working together; about their deep sense of connectedness, especially as they watched our planet from space. Robin Wall Kimmerer says that while competition as a main driving force makes sense if we focus only on the individual unit, it does not make much sense when we look at

the whole - at the body, if you will. In order to flourish on this earth together, in order for any of us to survive, we all need to work in cooperation and mutuality because our lives are interdependent. And, she says, since we were not given the gift of photosynthesis like plants, so we can't make our own food within our own bodies, we are absolutely dependent on the life around us making it necessary to harvest what's on the earth. This doesn't mean destroying whatever we want, however. Kimmerer says there are guidelines for what she calls "Honorable Harvest." Normally, she says, these are not written down - they are wisdom that is handed from one generation to the next. But for our sake, she wrote them and I want to read them to you. (*The Serviceberry* page 64-65)

READ THE GUIDELINES

Do you hear in these guidelines the deep recognition that we are not the only ones on this earth? Do you hear the maturity and humility that is being asked from us so that all can flourish? When we talk about God's abundance, the earth's abundance, we're not saying that every insatiable appetite will be full. The earth actually has limits built in so that we stop and recognize what is healthy. After all, if all I ever do is focus on what *I want* and getting all of what I want, that's actually dependence, not interdependence. It's selfishness. It erodes my relationships with others as well as my relationship with God and my relationship with myself. When we talk about the abundance of the earth and the abundance of God, what we're actually talking about is there being enough; enough for sustainability, enough for flourishing, enough for all life. Because all flourishing is mutual.

This doesn't sound so different from the notion that we're all part of the same body. In a healthy body, none of the parts will take more than they need because it would hurt another part. And our importance comes not from puffing ourselves up, but by recognizing our role within the whole.

In July of 1965, six boys with ages ranging from 13 to 16 decided to hop in a boat and sail the sea near their home country of Tonga. Their intention was just to play hooky from school that day, but while they were out a storm quickly came up and they found themselves tossed far from home and shipwrecked on a remote and uninhabited island. As the reality of their situation sunk in, they began to set up rules for themselves. They had different parts of the island that they cooked in, slept in, went to the bathroom in, and harvested food from. They had no idea how long they were going to be there or if anyone would ever find them. Does this sound familiar? They are the actual living example of the situation presented in the book "Lord of the Flies" if you ever had to read that in school. Unlike the book, however, which fairly quickly devolves into competitive bullying and a man eat man world, the Tongan guys understood that their survival depended on one another. They understood that in

order to thrive they would need to figure out how to get drinkable water and enough nourishment from the land to live. They set up chores for their small community; they created a storage system in logs that collected rainwater to drink; they found wild taro and made this a staple of their diet; and in an age old technique that had been passed down through generations, they were able to spark a fire and keep it going continuously for warmth, for cooking, and for signaling help if a ship were to pass by. They also set up a system for conflict resolution and had a specific part of the island that they would go to when they were angry and needed to not be near each other. They lived there for fifteen months, and years after they were rescued and returned to their homes, these six men retained their deep friendships from their experience of working together, celebrating the variety of gifts they each brought, and learning firsthand their interdependence on each other and the land.

In an age of loneliness; of deep wounds and division planted in our communities; in a world in which we strike first and ask questions later, it is so vitally important that as people of faith we live into these deep truths of community and caring and kinship that God gave us from the beginning and keeps calling us to. When we gather together, when our bodies are nourished and our spirits are fed through common and mutual flourishing, we are also given the most vital of foods - a deep sense of belonging.

Belonging comes not by all trying to be the same; think the same; be accepted as the same; but rather by celebrating our diversity and working together in mutuality toward a common purpose, a shared community, a healthy planet to call home. We are all a part of the same body, even in ways we don't yet understand.

I want to share one more story with you that blew my mind when I first heard it. In many places in the world, of course, where humans and animals have to figure out how to share land and resources, there is conflict. In South Africa in the early 2,000's there was a herd of elephants known for their disruptive behavior - charging humans, knocking down fences and houses and causing all kinds of trouble for the people that were trying to live there. People kept trying to keep the elephants from trampling the human communities, but nothing seemed to be able to contain them. Even electric fences and massive walls were found broken and in pieces as the matriarch led them through even the toughest of materials to get where they wanted to go, often figuring out how to smash the electrical box and then ploughing through the fences. Lawrence Anthony had created an animal reserve called Thula Thula, and decided he wanted to try to get the elephants to go live on the reserve. The people who had been trying to keep the elephants out of their homeland, thought he was crazy. They did not think there was any hope and were at the point where they were planning to kill these beasts that had caused so much destruction. Lawrence couldn't figure out how he was going to get the elephants to stay in his reserve. Every time they had tried to

relocate them, the elephants had returned to their home. So Lawrence decided the only way to change anything was to build trust with them. He started sleeping near them, hanging out with them, speaking to them, singing to them, and even, when they charged, standing his ground. He focused in particular on the matriarch, knowing that the others would follow her lead. In time, and through many tense moments, even ones where he wasn't sure he was going to survive, Lawrence built up a relationship with Nana, the matriarch, to the point where they would walk together through the bush and she would raise her trunk and touch his cheek as though they were family. And the elephant tribe stayed on the reserve. The elephants had plenty of room to travel in different seasons and after several years Lawrence didn't necessarily see them regularly. It had been about 18 months since their last interaction, when, in 2012, Lawrence died suddenly of a massive heart attack. People began to talk about his gifts, his connection to the elephants and all of the animals on his reserve, as people will do when someone has died; but everyone was astonished when two days later, after his death, the elephants began to arrive. They stood around his home making low moaning noises for two days before they silently walked away. How they knew he had died, no one could figure out. But what is perhaps even more surprising, is that ever year to the day, they returned, honoring their friend, for several years after his death.

I tell you this story as a witness that there's something so much deeper that connects all of us in this body we call earth. And it's not just Christians. And it's not just humans. The interdependence, whether we choose to see it and live into it or not, is there. We are all a part of the same web of life. And Jesus beckons us to choose life and life abundantly - not just for ourselves, but for all. We belong to each other. Thanks be to God.