“Sacred Ground”
Genesis 1: 1-2:7

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From the Pulpit
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On a First Church mission trip to Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, we learned the phrase, *Mitakuye Oyasin* (repeat) which means, “We are all related.” At the time, I really only understood this to mean that all of creation was important. I had understood that, as a whole Native Americans had a special connection with the earth, but only began to understand the sacredness of this connection with this phrase, Mitakuye Oyasin. I was 16. We were there to build bunk beds and learn about the culture, history and legacy of the Oglala Lakota people. While many of us had been on a mission trip together before, this was the trip that changed our worldview—our understandings of poverty, Native Americans and United
States history. Speaking for myself, my entire life was changed; God had truly spoken to me through the Oglala Lakota people. We learned about sacred ground.

In thinking about sacred ground within the Christian tradition, we turn to Genesis where we not only have one but two stories of creation. While each of these stories has two different authors, and different viewpoints, in the lectionary, only the creation story in Genesis one is told. In thinking about our relationship with sacred ground, with creation the passage from Genesis 1:26, is usually the focus, as it says, “Then God said, “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”. Here we focus on the word dominion. We are told that we are stewards, co-creators because we are made in the image of God. I am not denying this, but I think this is only part of the story. In the words of famed theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “This freedom of dominion directly includes our tie to the creatures who are ruled.”¹ He understood, especially at that point in time as Hitler was rising to power, Just as we are bound with God in mind, body and spirit, so are we with all that God created. Because of this bond we are all on sacred ground.

Over time I learned the real and deeper meaning this phrase Mitakuye Oyasin, “we are all related” to mean not only are we related with the rest of creation as a creation of God, but that we were related in how we were created-by the dust of the earth. In the second creation story of Genesis 2:7, “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being. “ With that in mind, we jump to 2: 9, “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food”. Out of the ground God created life. We are all dust! How strange.
Even with this in mind, within our Christian tradition we associate the idea of being dust with death instead of life. We encounter this idea of coming from the ground every Ash Wednesday when we hear the words, “from dust you came, to dust you shall return”. We are reminded that in dust, our existence is sacred.

We are reminded as we reach the end of summer in gardens and flower beds we are seeing life from this dust through our harvest and death of flowers that first bloomed in the beginning of spring. Bonhoeffer talks about this sacredness of dust, “His [Man’s] bond with the earth belongs to his essential being… Of course, the ground from which man is taken is still not the cursed but the blessed
ground. Man does not ‘have’ a body; he does not ‘have’ a soul; rather he ‘is’ body and soul… He is his body, as Christ is completely his body, as the Church is the body of Christ.”² Just as each one of us is part of the body of Christ, so are we part of the larger body or web of God’s creation. Because of this understanding, Mitakuye Oyasin is also a prayer unto itself. We are all related. We are on sacred ground.

I experienced this concept again more recently when Jo Anne Nay, member of North Congregational Church and I joined a community organizer, Sharon Day and her traveling companion Barb, from the Ojibwe Nation on the

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² Bonhoeffer, 44.
Bois Forte Reservation in northern Minnesota in her Water Walk, or, Nibi Walk (Nibi is the Ojibwe word for water) along the Ohio River. I knew Sharon through our previous fundraising efforts for other Nibi walks at All Nations Indian Church, UCC in Minneapolis, Minnesota-my home church while I was in seminary at United. For this walk along the Ohio River, she began in the headwaters in Pittsburgh and ended in Cairo, Illinois.

This Nibi walk along the Ohio River was different for her though, she had never seen so much pollution from coal, nuclear and fracking plants who use the water as a cooling agent, and dump the polluted water back into the river. It is the most polluted river in the United States.
More than ever, this river was in need of healing and awareness of its destruction.

In Sharon’s tradition, because water is a life giver, and women are life givers they are in charge of caring for the water. In this case, Sharon and other Grandmothers that have led this walk in order to teach their young this deeper connection with creation. Women who join the walk are asked to wear a long skirt in respect to the ceremony that happens as we are walking. When joining the walk, I carried a bucket filled with water from the headwaters in Pittsburgh that had a GPS tracking device on it so that those following the walk online could also pray for the water. It was prayer 2.0! In my other hand I held a feather. Around my neck, a
pouch of loose tobacco to spread on any dead animals I walked by as a way of offering up prayers for that creature. I only walked for a mile at a time, handing it off to the next person to keep the bucket moving, like the flow of the river. As I walked, I prayed for the water with my feet, with my heart. When passing on the bucket and feather to the next person, I said the prayer, *Gi Bimosyaan nibi ohnjay*, which translates to, “We walk for the water.” The woman receiving the bucket and feather would say it back to me and continue the walk. Those of us who were not walking kept each other company in the small RV that was following the walk.

I only could join the walk for a day along State Route 23 to Portsmouth, but it was an experience to remember.
Along the way, as we were praying for the water I could not help but think about how water is life-giving in our own Christian tradition. We find a new life in Christ through the waters of baptism. Jesus meets a woman at a well. The tears of the women who comes to wash the feet of Jesus. Water flows through our faith tradition, calls for justice to roll down like waters; and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. It reminds us that the one who gave us life continues to give it each day.

As we were walking, the spirit was flowing. As we were walking, we shared food with one another. As were walking, a couple who heard about the walk came with sandwiches, potato chips, salads, and drinks. As we were walking we met
other people who slowed down and asked us what we were doing, and blessed us before they went on their way. As we were walking, people were calling Sharon to tell her that they would be covering her hotel stay that night. As we were walking, an entire community was praying with us and for us online. This was sacred ground.

Caring for the earth means that we are caring for our relationship with God. Wherever God is present, so is sacred ground. Wherever two or three are gathered, God is in our midst. Wherever God is most needed, there is sacred ground. Wherever God is still speaking, there is sacred ground.
In our western culture we like to put our passions, faith journey, everyday chores, driving to work, feeding the homeless, vacations, relationships in separate categories. Yet I tell you today, every breath, every step, every action you do is a prayer and is sacred. I ask you to treat it that way. Why? Because in this world of ours we often forget the sacredness of who we are, and that we matter. Because black lives matter, because children’s lives matter, because water matters. We seem to forget that. In this world of consumerism everything has become a commodity. Everything, including people has become something we use, abuse and throw away. As Christians we are called to live a life fully part of this world because God created it. We are
called to live in a way that is counter-cultural. Let us begin with the very breath we take. We are just as interconnected with creation, with as we are with God. It is all sacred ground.

So, yes, we are standing on sacred ground. We are called to treasure it as our relative. We are called to continually see where God is in places that are seemingly mundane. Or is it?

Mitakuye Oyasin

Amen.

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