

“Honor Thy Mother” (Earth Day)

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Two years around this time of year, I went with two of our church members to a UCC church in Massachusetts for a Progressive Christian conference, and one of the keynote speakers at the conference was Diana Butler Bass.

If you don’t know who she is, Bass is a best-selling Christian author and theologian, and, if you haven’t read any of her books, I highly recommend that you do so.

At the conference, Diana Butler Bass was promoting her book called *Grounded*, which is just out in paperback.

The premise of *Grounded* is that we as people of faith need to shift our thinking from a vertical understanding of God to a horizontal understanding of God.

Bass says that we in the Christian church have been taught for centuries now that there is this 3-tiered vertical Universe. That the devil’s down below, we’re in the middle, and God’s way up there.

And, we’ve been taught that the purpose of religion – the purpose of our faith - is to make sure we get up there, and not go down there.

The subtitle of the book *Grounded* is *Finding God in the World: A Spiritual Revolution*. Bass says we need a spiritual revolution in order to find God. We need to shift our perspective from vertical to horizontal.

In her book, Bass writes: “Christianity has imprinted a certain theological template: that God exists far off from the world. Sermons declared that sin separated us from God. Most American churches teach some form of the idea that God exists in holy isolation, and that we, God’s children, are utterly unworthy to stand before the Divine Presence. The role of religion, therefore, is to act as a holy elevator between God above and those muddling around down below in the world. Because of this, church has become a struggle for me. I have found it increasingly difficult to sing hymns that celebrate a hierarchical heavenly realm, to recite creeds that feel disconnected from life, and to find myself confined to a hard pew in a building with no clear windows to the world outside. This has not happened because I am angry at the church or God. Rather, it has happened because I was moving around in the world and began to realize how beautifully God was everywhere: in nature and in my neighborhood, in considering the stars. It took me five decades to figure it out, but I finally understood. The church is not the only sacred space; the world is profoundly sacred as well. And thus I fell into a gap - the theological ravine between a church still proclaiming conventional theism with its three-tiered universe and the spiritual revolution of God-with-us.”

So, that’s the spiritual revolution she’s calling us to: Stop seeing God “up there,” and start seeing God right here. God is not separate from us. God is not distant from us. God is here with us. If we are to grow spiritually, we must shift from the “Distant God” of conventional religion and experience an intimate sense of the sacred that is with us in the world.

That, I believe, is what Jesus was trying to teach us. He never said God was “up there.” He said, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” He said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” It is here and now.

God is here! God is in the soil, in the water, in the sky. God is everywhere in the world around us.

In our reading this morning from the Book of Genesis, the very first chapter of the Bible, we heard the creation story: that God created the sea, the land, the sky; the birds of the air and the fish of the sea; the flora and the fauna. And, as God creates each thing, God says that it is good.

“God” and “Good” are the same word. So, when God created the earth and said that it is good, it means that it is God.

And, that is why it saddens me that the majority of Christians in our country today have little concern for the environment.

A recent Pew Survey showed that just 6% of all Americans say that their religious views influence whether they think there should be stronger laws protecting the environment. Only 6%.

We feel very differently in the United Church of Christ. In fact, we have a UCC Minister for Environmental Justice. How cool is that? His name is Rev. Brooks Berndt, and he says that Christians are less likely to believe in climate change and, therefore, less likely to mobilize around issues of environmental justice.

Why do you think it is that the overwhelming majority of climate change deniers in our country are people who are Christian? Why do so many Christians in our country see a disconnect between their faith and caring for the environment?

Well, I think a lot of it has to do with what Diana Butler Bass is saying in *Grounded*. Many Christians believe whole point of our faith is to get “up there” – that’s where Paradise is. All of this “down here” can be used up, because *this* is not our home, “*up there*” is. God isn’t here. God is up there.

They believe that the God “up there” is the one who affects the environment, not us down here.

And, they believe that the words of the Bible from Genesis – that God gave us dominion over the earth – means that we can do whatever we want with it.

They confuse “dominion” with “domination.” Domination means to conquer. Dominion means to “govern” or to “care for.”

We, as people of faith, are called to be caretakers of God’s creation, to be good stewards. To be God’s stewards. The word “steward” means “guardian.” We are called to be guardians of this garden (this Paradise, this Eden) which God has entrusted to our care.

And, when we begin to shift our view of God from vertical to horizontal, we begin to see God in everything. And we begin to understand that we hurt the environment, we are hurting God.

We are here to honor our Mother Earth. We dishonor her when we turn a blind eye to issues of environmental justice.

And, that is what’s happening in our country right now. That’s why this is such a scary time, because programs and protections that have been in place to curb climate change and to reduce air pollution are being defunded, removed and eliminated.

And, much of this is being done in the name of greed. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s needs, but not every man’s greed.”

I believe it is our Christian duty to care for the environment, just as it says on our UCC “Be the Church” banner. And, as part of that duty, we are called to make our voices heard; to speak truth in the face of injustice.

We make our voices heard by attending town hall meetings, by writing our political leaders, and by taking to the streets in protest, as our church did in last year’s People’s Climate March.

Make your voices heard. Make them hear you. Make them see you. Make them know that Christians DO care about the environment.

That’s how we spread the Good News, by proclaiming to people that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. It is here, and it is now. On earth as in heaven.