***BELONGING***

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Texts: Psalm 24 and 1 Corinthians 3:18-23

 Some years ago, David Dobler, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, was walking through one of the Christian areas of Sudan. Many of the huts had symbols of their tribe on top. David noticed one hut with a crude cross on its roof, so he stopped and asked the owner, “What tribe are you with?” “I am with the tribe of Jesus,” said its owner.[[1]](#endnote-1) We all belong to the tribe of Jesus. It is a tribe that spans oceans and mountains, races and genders, political and denominational boundaries. It is a tribe whose chief is the risen Christ. There are a lot of other tribes out there who want you to belong to them, to have you identify first and foremost with their tribe. Some commentators have described our current political divisions as being tribal in nature with loyalties to one political tribe, regardless of their positions or actions. But this tribe of Jesus demands that we be all in with him, that we follow him and live as he has commanded and showed us. It is not always an easy tribe to belong to, for he asks a lot of us, but he also promises a lot for us – life, hope, and peace at the risk of suffering that may come our way as well if we do as he tells us: deny ourselves and take up our crosses to follow him. To what tribe do you belong?

 Some of you may recall the movie *The Gods must be Crazy*. It was my mom’s favorite movie, and I cannot think of the movie without thinking of her and her laugh. The movie begins with the story of a primitive African people who live in the Kalahari Desert. They are nomads who live off the land and hunt for their food. Morning dew drops and peelings from buried gourds are their only sources of water in the dry summer. But it is enough, and the people understand these meager gifts of water and food, like all good things in their world, to be gifts given by the gods for their common use. They respect and care for these good gifts: for the land, water, animals, and each other. Nothing is owned; nothing is wasted in this kind and gentle community.

 Into this desert Eden arrives a seemingly innocuous Coca-Cola bottle, tossed from a passing airplane by a careless bush pilot. The desert native knows nothing of planes or Coke bottles, so when he finds the bottle, he assumes that it is a gift sent by the gods. It proves to be a useful thing; it serves as hammer, rolling pin and musical instrument. But there is only one bottle which everyone wants; soon the bottle breeds anger, jealousy, and violence within the community as family members vie for possession of it. The coke bottle proves to be, not a good thing or “the real thing”, but an evil thing! The people murmur that the gods must be crazy to send this evil thing into their midst. They try to return the bottle by throwing it back up into the sky to the gods from whence it came, but it falls back to the ground, gravity being what gravity is. In desperation the natives decide to dispose of this evil thing by throwing it off the edge of the earth. Thus begins a long trek and a comic adventure to rid themselves of this Coca-Cola curse.

 We civilized folk know, of course, that the Coke bottle is not a gift from the gods, but the litter of a human pilot. It is not divinely created, but is shaped by human or mechanical hands in some such divine place as Detroit, MI or Atlanta, GA. The bottle is not evil; the evil lies in the hands and hearts of those who hold it. Yet, perhaps the bush man knows something we have forgotten: all good gifts are from God. For a generation accustomed to shaping Coke bottles and building airplanes and unraveling DNA and utilizing AI, the work of creation now seems to lie more in human hands than in divine hands. A beautiful sunset, rugged mountains and the slippery miracle of a newborn child still bear the fingerprints of God’s creative hands, but as I sit at my computer, talk on my cell phone, drive my car, or watch the Pittsburgh Pirates lose yet again, God’s creative handiwork is not the first thing that comes to mind. The work of *human* hands seems more apparent than *divine* craft in the world in which we work and live today.

 The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, says the psalmist, and by “all that is in it” I think he meant, ALL that is in it! Whether we acknowledge it or not, all creation belongs to God, not to us, and all good gifts flow from that same God. Not some, not most, but ALL things are from God to whom all things belong. That truth was apparent to the natives of the Kalahari; if we fail to recognize that truth as they do, it is not because we are more advanced than they are, but because we are more blind and proud of our own achievements. They were dependent upon the gods to supply the gifts that enabled them to live in that arid place, and they knew it! We dare to think we are independent souls who can provide for our own needs, until some disaster strikes – be it drought or hurricane or cancer or COVID – and then we are reminded that the earth is the Lord’s, and we are as dependent upon the grace of God as are the nomads of the Kalahari.

We may design, build, and shape things in this world, but God alone creates. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the verb for create – *bara* – is used only to describe the work of God. No one else *baras*, only God, for God alone is the Creator and source of all good things. The psalmist harkens back to that creation story when he says, “*The Lord has founded the world upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers*.” The creation story in Genesis imagines God carving out the world from watery chaos, pushing the waters back with the dome of the sky and pushing the waters down with dry lands. It is not science but theology that is expressed in those images, and the bold statement is that one God – the Lord – made all things; the Lord is a God who brings order out of chaos and life out of lifelessness. In granting humankind dominion over the earth, the good things God creates become good gifts entrusted to our care by a divine Creator.

 “*Do not boast about human leaders*,” writes Paul. “*For all things are yours – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God*.” We may think that all these things are ours to do with as we please, but the truth is that all things, including our very lives, belong to God. We are the stewards of God’s good creation, those charged with caring for all that God has made. That is the divinely appointed vocation of humanity according to the writers in Genesis. God has entrusted this world to our care – it belongs to us – but we belong to Christ and so to God, which brings us back full circle to the words of the psalmist: “*The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.*”

 What difference might it make to acknowledge God’s ownership of all things, including this world and our lives, to think of ourselves as caretakers of creation for God instead of the owners? Might we be more careful in our use of the land, more concerned with the impact of our decisions on the environment, more generous in sharing the fruits of our labors rather than thinking that they belong to us for our selfish use? For instance, USAID has been dismantled and its work halted; that work fed millions of people around the world while the monies paid farmers here to grow the crops that fed those people. If we think of those monies and crops and people as belonging to God, how can we not share with them the portion of God’s good gifts that they desperately need to survive? Is there really something more important than that work in God’s eyes?

 The psalmist offers his own commentary on our role in this created order in the 24th Psalm when he asks, “*Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and who shall stand in the Lord’s holy place?*” In other words, who may enter holy space without tainting the house of God? His response goes beyond the Law of ritual cleansing and holy rites, for the language he chooses is that of ethics. Those who may enter are those with clean hands and pure hearts. What the Lord of all creation desires is not ritual but righteousness, not ceremony but integrity. What the God of all creation asks of us is to be the people God created us to be: the humble, loving, righteous, faithful people who belong to God. And our lives should reflect the love of the God to whom we belong. As the Dalai Lama puts it:

*[W]here love of one’s neighbor, affection, kindness, and compassion live, we find that ethical conduct is automatic.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

Clean hands, a pure heart, true souls – love of neighbor, kindness, and compassion – those are the ethics of Christian living to which we are called. It is not a list of things to do or rules to obey, but an ethic for living, a way of life that embraces the Way that Jesus taught us and showed us.

 How are you doing on that count? When the King of Glory arrives, that One who is “strong and mighty,” and asks to see your clean hands and pure heart, what will you have to show him? Good luck arguing that you are accountable to no one but yourself. Good luck making excuses about how hard it is or how busy you are or how good your intentions may be. For the King of Glory is the One who remained faithful, loving, and forgiving until he drew his last breath on the cross. He knows how hard it is, and he knows us as we are – not as we seem to be, but as we truly are; and still he loves us, still he calls us to follow and to be faithful and to live with integrity and love. Groucho Marx famously said that he refused to join any club that would have him as a member. This is a club, a tribe worth joining, for despite who we are, God still claims us as God’s own, saying, “You belong to me.” And that, my friends, is good news – good news for us, good news for the people of the Kalahari, good news for all! Amen

1. Marj Carpenter in *Monday Morning*, Vol. 64, No.3, Feb. 1, 1999 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millenium*, Riverhead Books: New York, 1999, p.131 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)