

## A Kinship Worldview

(Contemporary reading; Romans 8:15-23)

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC, October 13, 2024

**Contemporary Reading on Mutual Dependence** (Excerpt from Jack Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*; Quoted in *Restoring the Kinship Worldview* by Wahinkpe Topa and Darcia Narvaez)

*The fact of our absolute, utter, complete dependence upon the earth is used by native teachers as a part of self-understanding. It is empirically obvious that we are not only children, sucking at our earth-mother's breast all of our lives, but that we are also mixed with and part of, that which Europeans choose to call the environment. For us, truly, there are no "surroundings." ... I can lose my hands, and still live. I can lose my legs and still live. I can lose my eyes and still live. I can lose my hair, eyebrows, nose, arms, and many other things and still live. But if I lose the air I die. If I lose the sun I die. If I lose the earth I die. If I lose the water I die. If I lose the plants and animals I die. All of these things are more a part of me, more essential to my every breath, than is my so-called body. What is my real body? ... We are not autonomous, self-sufficient beings as European mythology teaches. That which the tree exhales, I inhale. That which I exhale, the trees inhale. Together we form a circle. When I breathe, I am breathing the breath of billions of now-departed trees and plants. When trees and plants breathe they are breathing the breath of billions of now-departed humans, animals, and other peoples. As Lame Deer said, "A human being, too, is many things. Whatever makes up the air the earth, the herbs, the stones is also part of our bodies. . . " And that mutual dependence blurs into the circle of love, that mystery, that glue that holds all of this together. Scientists may call it attraction, or affinity, or magnetism, or gravity, as well as affection, symbiosis, kinship, community, family, compassion, or whatever. But there is that circle, that mysterious circle, that makes life possible.*

**Mark 10: 17-31** from *First Nations Version*

*As Creator Sets Free (Jesus) set out walking from there, a man ran up to him and honored him. "Good Wisdomkeeper," the man asked, "What path will lead me to the life of the world to come that never fades away?" "Why do you call me good?" Creator Sets Free (Jesus) asked the man. "There is only one who is good---The Great Spirit. You must know the instructions from the lawgiver Drawn from the Water (Moses). 'You are not to take the life of another, or be unfaithful in marriage, or take what is not yours. Never lie about or cheat a fellow human being, and always give honor and respect to your father and mother.'" "Wisdomkeeper," the man answered, from my youth I have followed all of these instructions." Creator Sets Free (Jesus) looked at the man with love and said, "Only one thing remains. Take all your possessions, invite the poor of your village to come, and have a giveaway. Then in the spirit-world above you will have many possessions waiting for you. Then leave everything behind and come, walk the road with me." The man's heart fell to the ground. He hung his head and walked away, for he had many possessions. Creator Sets Free then looked around at the people and said to his followers, "Finding and walking the good road is a hard thing for the ones who have many possessions." His followers could not believe what they were hearing. They thought having many possessions was a sign of blessing from the Great Spirit. Creator Sets Free (Jesus) spoke again to them. "Little children," he said, "the ones who trust in their many possessions will have a hard time finding their way onto the good road. It would be easier for a moose to go*

*through the eye of a needle.” They shook their heads in wonder, looked at each other, and said, “How then can anyone walk the good road that sets all people free? Jesus looked at them and said, “It is not possible for weak human beings, but with Creator’s help all things are possible.” Stands on the Rock (Peter) spoke up, “We have left all our possessions, and our relatives, to walk with you. What will become of us?” Creator Sets Free answered, “I speak from my heart. No one who has given up homes and families to follow me and walk my good road will go without. In this present world they will become part of an even greater family, with many homes and lands. Even though they have been abused and mistreated, they will receive much more than they have lost. Then, in the world to come, they will have the life of beauty and harmony that never fades away. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”*

Did you recognize the person on the cover of our bulletin? That is church member, Budge Walen, who at some point also played the organ for us here at church. He now lives in a senior residence in Belfast and delights his fellow inhabitants with piano music every day! You may notice that Budge is not alone in this picture. There is a pigeon sitting on his shoulder. Just recently, Budge sent me a letter in which he told me about meeting this pigeon. He was outside getting ready to get into Marian’s car (his kind former spouse) to be taken to an appointment. Low and behold, as he was quietly taking in his surroundings, this pigeon came for a visit. Budge was absolutely delighted and held very still. He wrote that it felt like he was communing with another being in this world and that it was wonderful to behold and to be beheld by another, all beyond words. Budge felt so connected to the rest of creation courtesy of this pigeon that it moved his heart deeply.<sup>1</sup>

Budge’s experience is an example of what might be meant by a “kinship worldview” in which, in part, belonging is defined in larger terms than human kinship within a family or tribal unit. Indigenous peoples of this world have been living by such a worldview for millennia. Jack

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<sup>1</sup> In his letter, Budge also reminded me about a recent sermon in which I talked about how I developed a connection to a Robin with an injured wing. I was visiting with friends and restoring their vegetable garden as a spiritual practice. I would feed the little bird with various grubs I inevitable unearthed in my work. That Robin always came when I turned up with my garden tools and inched closer day by day. It never sat on my shoulder though! Still, I felt a kind of kinship and connection at a time when I was dealing with loss and difficult transitions. The encounters felt like a blessing of getting unstuck, a reconnection with a bigger reality of belonging and an appreciation for the gift of life when I most needed it. That story had stuck with Budge, and he took the time to share about his special moment which he felt was a gift from God.

Forbes reminds us that this kinship with other beings, including plants and the elements is fundamental to our existence. We cannot exist unto ourselves. We are part of a circle and many cycles from the air we breathe to the minerals that help to form our bones. We are made even of elements transformed from those who have gone before.

I believe that trusting this interconnectedness lies at the heart of the Gospel story. The man in our story from Mark's Gospel yearns for eternal life and Jesus reminds him that eternal life is an experience. It is not a static state we can earn by our merit and only in some future existence beyond this life. Experiencing union with the divine, which is one way of understanding "eternal life," happens especially in moments of "self-forgetting," not only in life after death.

Moments of "self-forgetting" happen when we are free from the illusion that we are separate from God and each other, each unto ourselves. Clinging to our possessions can be one manifestations of this illusion and keep us from greater freedom. Jesus is asking, 'What if we experience the greatest connection exactly when we give our "separate" selves away as we care for others and share what we most cling to?' He knows how hard this is and offers the metaphor involving the eye of the needle and the camel (or "Moose" in our First Nations translation).

Rowan Atkinson, the infamous Mister Bean and occasional impersonator of Vicars on British television, has a little skit focused on just this passage. Imagine him dressed in full priestly attire as the vicar, reading this scripture with great pomp and circumstance and occasionally looking up to glower at the congregation. Then he gets to this moment: "And, verily, I say unto you: it is easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a camel to..." He looks up as he turns the page, looks down at the words, half-looks up again visibly puzzled, then resumes in a more tentative tone: "Than it is... for a *camel* to."

I love how the power of that metaphor is too much to bear for that poor vicar. He can't compute it and neither can we easily in our materialistic society. Notice how his brain just

changes the text to saying the opposite of what is there. He can't see it but also can't avoid the stumble. It is so hard for those of us with wealth to comprehend that wealth can get in the way of a life of greater meaning and freedom. It feels impossible but Jesus says that a different mindset is needed by the grace of God. With that different mindset, all sorts of things become possible. We can find our way onto the "good road," as our Indigenous Christian translation put it or the "Way of Jesus" as early Christians called it. It is a "Way" of interconnectedness, mutual service, compassion, collaboration and a broad definition of family and belonging.

I wonder if risking that wider sense of belonging is at the heart of what Jesus means when he says that we have to "sacrifice" our family and home if we want to follow him. For some people, this means literally getting on the road with Jesus and leaving everything behind. For most of us, the call may be more fundamentally to "sacrifice" our narrow definitions of who belongs to our family, what we call home and how we define a "rich" life and then to act accordingly. Notice how Jesus says that our own family, belonging and sustenance will multiply manifold when we dare such an expansion of the imagination and of our care. Again, we gain what we most deeply seek by giving away our attachment to what we think we depend on. We gain our lives by losing them, as Jesus says elsewhere (Mt 16:25, Lk 17:33).<sup>2</sup>

On this weekend leading up to Indigenous People's Day, I would like to draw on Indigenous wisdom to expand on these themes and hope to do so respectfully. I wish we could have an Indigenous person speaking today. Hopefully that will become a possibility in the future.<sup>3</sup> I have

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<sup>2</sup> In her children's talk enactment, Sarah Reynolds decided to let the man ask all of us where he can find God after he does let go of his wealth. These are first steps to connection. He and we are still learning that this finding God is not primarily an individual journey but happens in community and in the real and immediate acts of caring and sharing. I am reminded of how Jesus was also connected to other beings and the land. He drew his circle of kinship wide and was even ministered to by the wild beasts in the desert. Our family includes all beings. Our home is here in the region, but we are also at home on this vast and fragile planet.

<sup>3</sup> There are numerous indigenous sources which say that the Indigenous have known for a long time that the time would come that white people would come to ask for indigenous teachings to restore a greater balance. In that spirit, I want to point to some teachers and stories which you may want to explore more deeply. Sadly, Christianity has often been a source of denigration of Native Wisdom and has been an accomplice in the eradication of Native peoples and the violent take-over of their ancestral homelands. I have spoken to this at other times.

always been struck by how much can be learned about a culture's ethics through the creation stories told by that culture. Robin Wall Kimmerer is member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. In her brilliant book Braiding Sweetgrass,<sup>4</sup> Kimmerer shares the origin stories of *Skywoman* which speaks to a different way of understanding kinship. I want to express gratitude for the richness of the Native story telling tradition and acknowledge that I am not in this line of storytellers. I hope you will read the fuller story in Kimmerer's book directly but want to give you a sense of it here. (I am shortening it a little).

*It all began with Skyworld. Skywoman one day fell out of the sky like a leaf in autumn. She hurled downwards toward the dark waters of the earth clutching a bundle tightly in her hand. She was enfolded by a column of light blazing through the hole that had opened in the sky when she fell. There were animal beings below who saw her falling. The geese responded first and flew up to catch her and break her fall. She was far from the only home she had ever known and finally caught her breath resting on the soft wings of the geese who carefully brought her downward to the water. But the geese could not keep holding her up above the water. The animals gathered to discuss how to best help her. A great turtle came to offer his back as a resting place until they could find a way forward.*

*The animals knew that Skywoman needed land to survive and the deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water. They knew it was very deep and hard to get to. Loon tried first but could not dive deep enough. Then otter, beaver and sturgeon all dove in turn but came up empty as well. Finally, it was little muskrat who volunteered though muskrat was thought to be the weakest diver among them. Muskrat dove down pushing hard with his little legs as other looked on full of doubt. Muskrat was gone for a very long time. The others began to fear for their relative. Then their worst fears proved to be true as his little lifeless body rose to the top of the water. Muskrat had died trying to help Skywoman find a way to live.*

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants (Milkweed Editions, 2013), pp. 1-9.

*Amidst their grief, one of them noticed that, in his little paw, Muskrat was clutching a small bit of what must be the mud they had been looking for. Turtle urged them to put it on his shell. Then Skywoman spread the mud across the turtle's shell and began a song of thanksgiving. She also danced to caress the earth while it was slowly being formed. Thanks to the gifts of the animals and her dance, Turtle Island was formed. When the land had been created, Skywoman remembered that she had grabbed something from the Tree of Life on her way down from the sky. She had little branches, fruit and seeds and all kinds of plants in her bundle. She now scattered them on the new ground and carefully tended until the world began to turn green. Skyworld streamed light from the hole that had formed, and the seeds flourished. Before too long, there were also trees, wild grasses, flowers, fruits and medicines growing. The animals now had more to eat as well, and many came to live with Skywoman on Turtle Island.*

I have always been moved by this origin story because of the emphasis on hospitality, compassion, interconnectedness, kinship, and collaboration. The animals welcome Skywoman and seek to tend to her need because that is their ethic, even as it comes to a cost to little muskrat. It is their way of life and not done in deference to Skywoman being somehow superior or special. It behooves us to remember that we do not own this earth and can learn from others a wiser way. The animals provided a "lifeboat" to an "immigrant," as Kimmerer puts it. The animals in the story see a new relative who needs their help and expertise and act accordingly. They see a new relative who also has gifts to bring. Her work of helping to create a thriving world in a spirit of reciprocity really made her part of this world, made her indigenous to the land, as Kimmerer writes. And, together, they all thrive more than before in a garden whose riches and beauty provide for the equal well-being of everyone. I see this as an expression of living "eternal life."

Kimmerer notes that the story of Skywoman is shared by many indigenous groups around the Great Lakes and belongs to their so called "Original Instructions." They are a compass, Kimmerer writes, rather than "commandments" or "rules." They give orientation for a way forward, a way to be day to day. As the story of Skywoman continues, we learn that she arrived

pregnant on Turtle Island and was also investing in future generations. They would hopefully remember the sacred instructions around this broader kinships with other species. Kimmerer essentially encourages all of us to find ways to become truly native/indigenous to the places where we live by how we care for this precious earth and all its inhabitants.

This story of Skywoman is an important antidote to our all-too-common interpretation and translation of the lines in Genesis 1:26-28 that humans are to have “dominion” and can subdue the earth. Such translations sound like everything is created to serve humans who seemingly alone are made in God’s image. As Kimmerer points out, the story of Skywoman also contrasts with that of Eve in our biblical origin story who is exiled from the garden and subjugated for daring to eat a particular fruit (Genesis Ch. 2-3). What a different way of honoring the feminine as Skywoman uses her imagination and wisdom to serve. For Kimmerer, this exile and story of sanctioned abuse of women plays out in how our white dominant culture exploits the earth and its creatures and in our loss of connection with the very land we live on.

While our biblical heritage is so rich, it is also full of pitfalls which sometimes include an inflated image of humanity and too small a God, as Richard Rohr likes to put it. I am grateful that we find glimpses in Jesus’ teaching today of expanding our worldview and sense of kinship beyond nation and tribe. We do have so much to learn as humans. On this Indigenous People’s Day weekend, let us give thanks for the depth of wisdom of our indigenous siblings who have suffered so much exploitation and abuse in the name of Christ. Let us stop clinging to what is not life giving and hold on to that which does and then share it. Thankfully, God is not done with us yet. God is still speaking. May we have ears and hearts to hear!