

Resolving a Deadly Duality
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
April 21, 2024, Fourth Sunday of Easter,
Good Shepherd and Earth Day Sunday
Psalm 23; Matthew 22:15-22; John 10:1-16

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday and Earth Day Sunday. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

The word pastor comes from a Latin root meaning shepherd. Jesus calls us to shepherd one another, so we are all pastors, we are all called to offer pastoral care to one another and to lay down our life out of love for one another, to help find the comfort and peace of green pastures and still waters, to encourage one another in the valley of the shadow of death, to walk together in the ways of goodness and mercy and work together for the cause of goodness and mercy.

Pastoring is crucial to the well-being of the whole flock. So please linger after the service again today to do this good shepherding, extending your care and support especially to those you do not know well and those you know are struggling so that every person here feels safe and at home within our fold.

Call to Worship During Easter Season we celebrate passing from the shadow of death into the light of new life. The fourth Sunday of every Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday because shepherding leads from death to life, and not just for the sheep.

As the Dalai Lama says, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

The secret to the greatest vitality we can have, the power of eternal life flowing through us, is to give our lives in service for the love of others, the love of the earth and the love of God. We know this is true by looking at those who have inspired us with their loving and serving, and how

they continue to be a living presence long after they are gone. Let us worship together with hope and joy the Good Shepherding Spirit that we see in Christ and in one another and in the invisible shepherds who are very much with us today.

Resolving a Deadly Duality

This sermon is in conversation with an essay by the former Poet Laureate of Maine, Baron Wormser, who now lives in Montpelier. Baron has been an influential teacher and good friend to many poets and writers. The essay is entitled “Living with Caesar.”

It begins by quoting the passage we heard where Jesus resolves a trick question about paying Roman taxes by saying, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

The question was a deadly duality that the leaders of the religious and political establishment sprung on Jesus. They were trying to force him either to break faith with his own teachings and lose his followers, or break a Roman law and be crucified.

Jesus not only foiled the attack, he crafted a koan, a profound teaching in the form of a paradox to expand our consciousness. It contains wisdom that can help us resolve the deadly dualities that are tearing human civilization apart and killing the earth today.

Baron Wormser accurately describes the duality that the attackers presented as Caesar vs. God, and he says this was and still is to an extent our paradigm, although God’s influence in our society has grown weaker while Caesar’s power is escalating with new technologies and concentrated wealth. Followers of God give power to Caesar by compromising their sacred principles or by declaring the will of empire to be the will of God. Wars are waged in the name of God, and industrial destruction of the earth is justified as serving God, as are inequity and oppression.

Baron observes how frightening the world is when the duality is resolved by totalitarianism, by Caesar claiming to be the hand of God or the religious establishment taking over the government. Baron says, “People become literally unbalanced.... Wariness is left at the door, so are scruples.... We gladly lend our voices to the roar of the crowd. Or power tells us to applaud because if we don’t power can kill us.”

Baron is so right. Today we see a political party taking on the characteristics of a religious cult, and Christian politicians and major donors going against their scruples out of either power-hungry greed or fear of retribution.

The duality of Caesar vs. God has proven deadly to lower income people, deadly to any who are different from the dominant empire, deadly to democracy, deadly to invaded nations, deadly to ecosystems and species.

Baron proposes that the way to solve the problem is to look to a different higher power, neither Caesar nor God, but the earth itself. He calls us to revere and love the Earth and act accordingly, conserving and living more carefully.

Baron writes, “The...ways of the Earth.... represent a power...before which, traditionally, Native peoples have humbled themselves. They have been in active conversation with the Earth.”

He ends the essay, “Given the history of ‘civilized’ humankind thus far, no reason exists to be optimistic. The Earth, however, as it speaks to the force of life is perennially optimistic, whether we are here or not.”

Earth-centered indigenous spiritual traditions do offer a path out of the deadly duality, but we tend to see and praise the mystical, nondual side of indigenous traditions and contrast it with the Caesar-corrupted, legalistic side of the Christian tradition.

The truth is that the Christian tradition has a contemplative, nondual side very much like the indigenous tradition. It has a similar relationship to the earth and material things and a similar stance on issues of peace, social justice and care for the natural world. And some indigenous leaders have been corrupted by Caesar or forced to betray their traditional earth-centered values to buy their way out of a poverty Caesar inflicted on them.

What I would add to Baron’s thinking is that it is not the earth that makes indigenous or Christian mystical traditions so right, because all humans have egos or survival needs that can compromise their relationship to the earth. It is not the earth alone, it is the Spirit of the earth that both traditions see flowing within and around all people and things.

That Great Spirit flows through time as well as space, it brings new visions, it helps humans evolve over the course of a lifetime and over the course of generations, leading toward the ultimate nondual consciousness that sees the interconnectedness and oneness of all people and creatures and things.

This vision of oneness is the foundation of the ethics that we have the opportunity to grow into now to resolve the dualities that are so deadly to the earth.

Jesus and Paul both present an apparent duality [see Paul in Romans 8 and see the Sermon on the Mount section in Matthew Chapter 6]. They appear to say there is a duality of God and mammon, or Spirit and flesh, but if you read carefully and interpret deeply you see that they were at a level of consciousness that saw true nonduality, and they were trying to get people at lower levels of consciousness to expand their vision.

What Jesus and Paul knew was that if you choose the Spirit side of the dualistic equation, all duality melts away because there is nothing that is not the Spirit's. If you choose Spirit over flesh, the Spirit will teach you that it is in all flesh and all things, even Caesar and his coins. There is nothing that is not of or in the Spirit, all things are sacred and to be treated with reverence, even when we have to oppose them.

The Spirit sparked the first cells to life, the Spirit kept the will to live burning through five mass extinctions, it evolved human consciousness in the Axial Age when the Buddha and Aristotle and Isaiah awoke, and in the Enlightenment when rationalism and concepts like liberty and equality awoke. The same Great Spirit of the earth inspired the wisdom of mystical traditions, including Native American and Christian.

The paths and practices wise spiritual teachers have handed down offer our greatest hope for resolving the duality that is killing us, because they are designed to lead human consciousness to the awakening to oneness that we need now. What is exciting on this Earth Day and Good Shepherd Sunday is that we can see this evolution happening around the edges of the empire of Caesar and God, or you could say, in its deepest heart.

The Spirit of the earth revered by indigenous traditions is the Spirit of the Good Shepherd revered by Judeo-Christian tradition. It is the greatest force in the universe, and it is at work right now in us.

Its power is very different from an authoritarian God or Caesar. It works through the lowliest of sheep. Mahatma Gandhi taught that it is through our self-emptying to zero that we fill with the greatest power, and Margaret Mead observed that the only thing that has ever changed the world is a small group of committed citizens, like us.

What could be more hopeful than having that Spirit on our side? What could be more meaningful than dedicating our lives to serve as instruments of that Spirit?

Let us open our hearts and minds to see through duality to the oneness of all, and to treat the world with the love that flows from that vision. Let us pray in silence...

You are God's temple. So am I.
So, too, the stranger passing by,
And those you love or fear or hate,
Created things, things they create.

God lives in all and all in God.
Go through each wondrous moment awed,
For everywhere is sacred ground,
And holiness breathes all around.

Through God, all things belong to you,
And you to all that God lives through.
Because God lives in one and all,
All life is one, all live for all.

You do not need to ask my name.
The name of each thing means the same.
It means, "I am God's dwelling place."
It means, "I am God's living grace."

Each place, each creature at its birth
Is given all and given worth
By that of God that we each bear
And our shared call to love and care.

You are God's temple, like all things.
Live by the wisdom this truth brings.
Let oneness, love and joy increase.
It is the only way to peace.

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Haiku by Mel Goertz
Coltsfoot blooming
in the valley, by the road.
Spring is finally here.