

2021-4-11

Participatory Creation

Sermon by Ed Smith

Hymns:

For the Beauty of the Earth

The Garden Song (Inch by Inch)

Anthem:

I Choose Love

Scripture reading:

Genesis creation story: Genesis 1: 1-2

Mark: 12: 28-34

In the midst of my career as a science educator I revisited a sense of calling to the ministry that I had experienced at times earlier in my life. A major element of the ministry I envisioned was the articulation of a theology that my scientifically oriented friends and colleagues could find meaningful, a quest I had pursued for myself at least since high school. I ultimately chose to continue my calling in education to seek ways to make things better for students and teachers.

A few years ago, I was inspired as I listened to a lecture series from the Great Courses catalog called “Big History,” the scientific highlights from the Big Bang to modern times. This renewed my sense of calling for a more meaningful theology and lead me to a story that I call “participatory creation.” I will share some of that story with you today and what it means to me.

In the modern theory of the earth’s origin, “The Big Bang” some 14 billion years ago gave birth to our universe in the form of a soup of tiny particles. These particles combined to form simple hydrogen atoms. These atoms combined to form stars that gave off enormous amounts of energy as they converted hydrogen into helium. Stars formed galaxies. The interstellar debris of collapsing stars formed planets and planetary systems.

Collapsing stars also gave birth to atoms of carbon, nitrogen and oxygen, the very atoms that constitute you and I. Look at or feel of your hand. The palm, the fingers. Just think, the atoms that make up your hand were formed in the collapse of a star millions of years ago. We are indeed made of stardust.

The universe itself seems imbued with the power to create. Collapsing stars helped form planets. The evolution of life began with chemical compounds, some of which began to replicate

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themselves.¹ As such structures increased in complexity, simple life forms emerged with amazing capabilities. The plants produced oxygen and a simple sugar. That simple sugar supported—and still supports—the lives of almost all other organisms that have evolved, including us humans. Even the rocks create, participating in the leveling of mountains and carving of valleys as small grains are carried along by flowing water. Herds of bison participated in creation, enhancing the plains ecosystem through their fertilizing and the impact of their hooves on the soil.

We are products of creation. But we also participate in creation, whether we realize it or not. Humans have built grand structures. Scholars have produced vast stores of knowledge. We create friendships, relationships that are nourished or crippled with each interaction. When I think about what I have created, foremost is the blended family Jackie and I have fostered, with four children and seven grandchildren. I think of my research, my work with teachers and what they may have created with their students. I think of the beautiful building we have at Edgewood with its graceful lines and symbolism. I think of the policies and programs we have created and the covenants we have made. Beyond the words, our actions have impacted many in our congregation and beyond. I am grateful for the creations of the Edgewood founders, Pastor Truman Morrison, and all those whose creations make our own creations possible.

Think for a moment about something you have created. What impact do you think that creation has had on others?

I see each human as a creation most marvelous; each and every human being. Do you recognize that in yourself? You are a creation most wondrous! Each family where loving parents strive to provide for cherished children is a wondrous creation and an ongoing process of creating. The rich variety of other creatures and their amazing interconnections with each other and with us, and the majestic beauty of our environment are not only wondrous to behold, but essential for survival.

In my experience, the greatest gift of participatory creation is love. Love echoes through my descriptions of the wonders of creation. Jesus' call to love has inspired my Christian faith. An early awareness of this came from a Methodist Youth Fellowship district gathering. Honoring the tradition of the Last Supper, we took communion in groups of 12. As I reflected on that experience on the way home, I felt the overflowing love of Jesus for his disciples. There was something important there for me.

¹ New Scientist, "First Life: The search for the first replicator." 10 August 2011
(<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21128251-300-first-life-the-search-for-the-first-replicator/>)

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The centrality of love in my life was brought home to me in a most unexpected way 15 years ago. I was standing on my house's lower roof, cleaning leaves from the gutters on the upper roof. As I stepped along sideways, I suddenly realized my left foot was no longer on solid roof but out in thin air. As I began spiraling down, I was aware I might well be about to die. I felt no fear. I felt the love for and from my family. That was enough. And, though injured, I survived.

Love was further brought home to me as I began recovering in the hospital. In words from a poem I wrote about that experience:

Through the haze of the next few days,
The presence and touch of my family,
And the faces
 students, faculty colleagues,
 neighbors, friends from church,
 face after face.

 Buoyed me up on a sea of love.
And I felt blessed.

What lies behind this marvel of participatory creation? Indeed, is there any "behind"? I could call it "God." But there are so many connotations of that term that I don't wish to imply. I will settle for "The Great Mystery." We are both products of and participants in creation as a part of this Great Mystery. I stand in grateful awe of what we have been given: I am grateful for all of creation and for all those whose lives created and continue to create opportunities for me.

In gratitude, I make the following affirmations:

The gifts and opportunities provided through the Great Mystery of creation are
"enough," I need not ask for more.

Love is central to fulfilling the potential of these gifts, both individually and collectively.

This is my *Christian* affirmation.

Creation as both product and process is, I believe, undeniable. We humans are, as far as we know, the only organisms who can reflect on our creations and plan for what we might create. This singular ability then leads us to a profound question. "What shall we create?" We face this systemic question as individuals, as families, as informal and formal organizations, and as governments at all levels.

As individuals, we make choices in everyday interactions with others. How do I react when I feel criticized by someone for something I've done or said? Do I react in anger, or do I take a deep breath and reflect before responding with empathy? Such choices over time shape our relationships, in

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positive or negative directions. I might have to choose between a career with more security or one for which I sense a deeper calling. As a congregation, we face choices about how, or even whether, to live out our covenant for peace and justice. As a nation we confront perplexing choices in the face of the existential threats of systemic racism and climate change, among others.

As Moses, in the book of Deuteronomy,² admonished the people of Israel to choose ‘life’ over ‘death,’ and ‘blessing’ over ‘curse,’ we face choices great and small as we participate in creation.

What guidance do we have for the momentous choices we must inevitably make? I know no better guide than Jesus’s articulation of the “great commandments” in the Gospel of Mark:

‘...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these. Mark 12:30-31 RSV

To love all the world’s people with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my mind, and with all my strength is the closest I can come to “loving God;” and so caring for each other and the environment that sustains and inspires us is our essential task.

We are both products of and participants in the Great Mystery of creation.

So, I ask you today, my Edgewood family and friends:

What shall we create?

Amen

² Deuteronomy 30, verse 19, RSV