

“And God Said . . .”: Creation, Word–Care, and the Care of the World

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Introduction

“In the beginning was the Word.”

Perhaps it is not too much of an overstatement to say that the Church exists to continually speak the truth of these words. The Church, we might say, is a linguistic community that seeks to bear truthful witness to the Logos which was in the beginning with God, and which was God. And if, as Wendell Berry has said, language is communal and its purpose is to tell the truth,¹ then the Church shares not only a way of speaking but a whole way of living that points to the Word–made–flesh as the source and bearer of all truth.

More specifically, we could say that the Church is a linguistic body in the sense that it is a community other than Israel that hears Israel’s story as its own by way of the story of Jesus.² Talk of the divine Logos always takes us back to Torah—to the story of a called–out people and their covenant–keeping God. But Torah also always sends us back to the apostolic witness, since “in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .” can only be understood in light of “in the beginning was the Word.”

I’ll begin by briefly tracing this circular motion from Creation to Christ and back again—how it is that the Word spoken at Creation’s beginning is history’s saving Logos that rescues and redeems, blesses and heals. In Easter’s garden, on the first day of the week, the burden of Eden’s garden is rolled away. Through the Logos of God, Creation and Salvation are of a piece.

¹ Wendell Berry, *Standing By Words* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2005), p. 26.

² Paul M. Van Buren, “Acts 2:1–13—The Truth of an Unlikely Tale” in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity*, Peter Ochs, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 301.

We'll then take up the practice of word-care as radical discipleship, specifically addressing Creation's call to be good stewards of the gift of language. We'll look at some familiar ways that our "talk is cheap"—how it is that we depreciate the value of words and diminish the power of our witness by paying insufficient attention to language and its uses.

I will also suggest that the idea of God at "play" in creating the cosmos offers rich associations for how we might consider theological and liturgical wordplay as a form of word-care. A brief look at Trinitarian theology will help us to see that Christians can risk playing with language because we are a people who live by God's extravagant, abundant, playful grace.

Thirdly, as the visible Word in the world, Christ's body speaks, with words and actions, the Priestly writer's refrain regarding the created order: "God saw that it was good." So we'll ask how it is that caring for words is a form of caring for the world; that is, how the subject of all our theological reflection is not words, in the end, but the world God loves.

These reflections are wide-ranging and only begin to gesture toward answers to the question of how God's speech and ours offer a witness against language that distorts and diminishes. But I hope they contribute something of value to our conversation over these three days—an image, an insight—as together we ponder the relationship between language and radical Christian discipleship.

Creation: The Beginning, The End, and the "Anxious Middle"

The problem with Creation, I want to suggest, is that it comes at the beginning. The Bible opens with the familiar, majestic hymn of Genesis 1: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth." Each "stanza" recounts, with increasing attention to detail, what divine speech has brought forth:

Light.

Sky and seas and earth.

Plants and fruit trees.

Sun and moon.

Sea creatures, birds, and land animals.

And, finally, humankind, made in the image of this God who speaks a world into being.

Another creation story comes immediately on the heels of this one: a much earlier story, it turns out—an “earthier” one in which Yahweh (not the transcendent deity of the Priestly hymn) is down and dirty in the mud, fashioning Adamh, the red-earth man, and breathing life into his nostrils. There’s a beautiful garden. Birds and animals appear. And, after a bit of divinely-elected surgery, a woman is created and “brought to the man” (Gen. 2:22).

That there are two creation stories has been a source of confusion, denial, and disappointment throughout the centuries. Unsuspecting undergraduates and many first-year seminarians are regularly ambushed by this revelation in Genesis that two very different stories of origin sit side by side in the sacred text. Biblical critics and historians tell us why this is so and yet, as commentator Rusty Reno suggests and as Genesis itself seems to insist, these two accounts can be seen as “complimentary portrayals of the same, stage-setting divine act.”³

God spoke. God acted. Creation happened. Seems straightforward enough, even when we allow that the two stories—the liturgical poem⁴ of Genesis 1 and the older, Yahwistic tradition of chapter two—are not geological accounts of earth’s origins but ways of “seeing the world” with God and in relation to God. But it’s hard to shake the idea of Creation as something that God did once, way back when. Creationists, evolutionists, and advocates of intelligent design all assume that the Christian doctrine of Creation is a theory about how everything got started a long time ago. So do most people in the pews.

But what the Church confesses is that God speaks. God acts. Present tense. Creation, as Aquinas insisted, is the ongoing action of God that establishes a

³ R.R. Reno, *Genesis*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), p. 22.

⁴Ellen Davis, following Walter Brueggemann, uses this term in her book *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 42ff.

relationship between God and what is not God. God speaks and calls into being a world that is other than God. God is not bound to this created world, but the world is bound utterly to God. Rowan Williams helps us to grasp not only the power but the poignant beauty of this truth when he says that

It should be a rather exhilarating thought that the moment of creation is now—

that if, by some unthinkable accident, God's attention slipped, we wouldn't

be here. It means that within every circumstance, every object, every person,

God's action is going on, a sort of white heat at the centre of everything. It means that each of us is already in a relationship with God before we ever

thought about it. It means that every object or person we encounter is in a relationship with God before they're in a relationship of any kind with us. And if that doesn't make us approach the world and other people with reverence and amazement, I don't know what will.⁵

In the beginning, out of freedom, out of nothing, God created the heavens and the earth. But we don't really start at the beginning. The truth of God's creating work meets us in "the anxious middle"⁶ between the beginning and the end. And it is the end, we believe, which explains the beginning. The Church, as Bonhoeffer puts it, "bears witness to the end of all things. It lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims its message from the end."⁷ It is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth that make known the God of Creation's beginnings, that reveal God's purposes for the whole created order. "All creation breathes with the life of the Logos, apart from whom there is no life."⁸ As John's prologue has it: "What has come into being in him was life" (John 1:3b).

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 35.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (New York: Collier Books, 1959), p. 16.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 11.

⁸ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 156.

Again, this seems straightforward enough. But we're rather used to thinking of Creation and Salvation as if they didn't have much to do with each other, as if they were discrete plot points on a storyline that goes something like this: A long time ago God created the world; soon enough sin entered the picture and a "fall" occurred, necessitating a rescue; God sent Jesus to do the saving work on the cross; and now, through his resurrection, we have the hope someday of heaven. But if Creation and Salvation are different sorts of "events" in this way—albeit existing along a continuum—then it is not at all evident that there is a real relationship between the Creator and the Savior. Or, as James Alison has put it, "it's not clear what God has to do with Jesus."⁹

We see from the perspective of the end, and "only from Christ can we know what the beginning is."¹⁰ Creation is not something that God did once, but is what God is doing now in and through Jesus. Creation is being brought to completion through the life, death, and resurrection of a first-century Palestinian Jew who was tortured and executed by the imperial powers. The free gift that Jesus makes of his death on the cross is the same divine graciousness that brings the world into existence from nothing. "It is not as though creation were a different act," Alison reminds us, "something which happened alongside the salvation worked by Jesus, but rather that the salvation which Jesus was working was, at the same time, the fulfillment of creation."¹¹

Scripture shows us this. John the Evangelist sets the resurrection story in a garden, grounding Easter's hope in, well, the ground. "The tree of life," as Vigen Guroian observes, "still stands in a garden."¹² The hope of resurrection is that the material creation in all its fullness participates—now partially, then perfectly—in newness of life, in communion with the Source of all that is. Heaven and earth are joined, through the mystery of Jesus' rising from the dead, in the shalom of God.

⁹ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroads, 1996), p. 49.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 12.

¹¹ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p. 56.

¹² Vigen Guroian, "Lenten Spring: The Christian Gardener" in *The Christian Century*, May 15, 1996,

Because the Church reads Genesis with the help of John's gospel we can say, as Bonhoeffer does, that "only in the Word of creation do we know the Creator, in the Word in the middle do we have the beginning."¹³ And the Word that was in the beginning with God and that was God is, we believe, "God's self-statement in the flesh and texture of our history."¹⁴ What God has spoken to us is not some particular message (behind which he might have a rather different message up his sleeve)¹⁵—God's Word is God's self, the Logos who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

I mentioned a moment ago that the Church exists as a linguistic community—an idea that Barry will take up in greater detail on Thursday. "Linguistic community" is not a particularly elegant description of the Church but it is an apt one; it reminds us that Christ's body lives by words, by the Word itself; that, in hearing Israel's story as its own by way of the story of Jesus, the Church uses words in particular ways. Each of the Church's doctrines, for instance—the Trinity, say, or our topic at hand, Creation—functions something like a grammar for guiding and ordering our speech; doctrines help to provide what Nicholas Lash calls "a set of protocols against idolatry."¹⁶ They tell us what we can't say as much as what we can.

Steve will take us more deeply into this in his treatment of language and what it means to say that "God has spoken in the Son," and Barry will use John's Apocalypse to flesh out some particulars of the "Church as a Community of Word-Care." But I hope it's already clear that the one-word categories the three of us were assigned to help guide our shared conversation on language and discipleship—Creation, Christ, and Church—are necessarily intertwined and always mutually informing. Each presumes the others and their order is always muddled.

But for now we come to these questions: How does the Church's understanding of Creation enjoin us to be good stewards of language? How do we as creatures

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Nicholas Lash, "Considering the Trinity" in *Modern Theology* 2:3 (July, 1986), p. 190. (Italics in original).

¹⁵ Lash, "Considering the Trinity," p. 190.

¹⁶ Lash, "Considering the Trinity," p. 187.

exercise our responsibility to care properly for the words we've been given to speak? As Sharon said to the EP board last year while we were making plans for this gathering, "words are all we've got." It matters how we care for them.

Stewards of the Gift of Language

Other Language-Worlds

Who would have thought that "measuring our words" would come to mean observing the 140-character limit of a Twitter post or crafting the perfect—clever-yet-concise—Facebook status update? A friend recently confessed that she often finds herself parsing her experience into Facebook status updates in an internal commentary in her head. Her honesty points to how easily all of us are caught up in forums and media in which a good deal of attention is paid to words but very little to language—to the shared forms of life that make language more than just a mode of communication.

If you're a regular on Facebook, maybe you've been the recipient (or the perpetrator) of a status update that failed to communicate—a cryptic message about something personal in your life or an obscure song lyric posted for no apparent reason. (I've noticed that college students seem to favor the obscure song lyric option in what I take to be a perverse attempt to confound their elders). Such miscommunication is more than just sloppy speech or willful confusion; it falls under the category, I suggest, of what Wendell Berry calls the illegitimate use of the powers of language.¹⁷ "Language that becomes too subjective," says Berry, that is too cut off from a common world, "will impose, rather than elicit, its desired response."¹⁸ Genuine communication, real understanding, will not take place.

Now if you are not a part of the world of Facebook, first of all, you are much admired for your resistance, and secondly, you probably have no idea what I'm talking about, which is pretty much the point.

¹⁷ Berry, *Standing By Words*, p. 32.

¹⁸ Berry, *Standing By Words*, p. 32.

It isn't just new social media that present a challenge to the stewardship of language and the practice of word-care, obviously. The Church has long been in the grip of the language of the market—of investment and growth, of management, results, and advertising strategies. We're also captive to the language of consumerism which makes salvation a commodity obtained through a "personal decision" and colludes with the discourse of entertainment to present us with an array of choices when it comes to worship "styles" and mission "opportunities."

Much of the Church's worship speaks the language of commercial pop music with its emphasis on facile lyrics and simplistic melodies—"praise music," it's called; you might have heard of it. One example is a popular chorus called "Our God is an Awesome God." I often think about this song alongside, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which is not only a praise song of sorts but is also a tour de force in Christian theology and doctrine: Salvation, Creation, Incarnation, Christology, Death, Evil, Eschatology—it's all there in Luther's rousing anthem, crafted into a narrative with tropes and images that resonate deeply with the story-world of Scripture. "Our God is an Awesome God" is skimpy and artless by comparison and lacking in textual (and musical) nuance. Moreover, songs like "Awesome God" do not mine the deep reservoirs of the Church's theological and biblical heritage, and because interiority is their "hook"—there is no traditioned speech they draw on or are indebted to—they impose, rather than elicit, their desired response.

Many churches live in the language-world of computer technology where Microsoft's PowerPoint does the talking on Sunday morning. Just as a typical PowerPoint presentation in an IBM boardroom too readily elevates format over content ("chartjunk," as one critic has described it),¹⁹ PowerPoint in worship reproduces the same "stacking" of text, the relentless sequentiality that divorces content from context. When the text of a hymn (or, more likely, a praise song) is projected onto the big screen, it can only be experienced as fragmentary and incoherent—small groupings of words cut off from the narrative whole and no musical notation at all. The textual and theological arc of a great hymn cannot be communicated when only a few lines of text can be

¹⁹ Edward Tufte, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2003).

accommodated on each of the 30-something frames it takes to display the entire hymn.²⁰

Worse, perhaps, is the morning sermon brought to you by PowerPoint. Richard Lischer has noted that “[t]he projected outline of the sermon gives the impression of a reasoned flow of information, but the conversational, dialectical aspect of the sermon is eliminated. We are left with a list.”²¹

This returns us, I suggest, to an observation made a moment ago: our cultural fixation on words but our lack of attention to language and its shared forms of life. Like the boxed script under a TV talking head, words on a big screen in church are flat, depthless, isolated from context and practice. But the words we speak in worship and preaching are often so dense (and so odd) that they make no sense apart from the Church’s strange language and its attendant practices and gestures. “This is my body,” is simple enough English, but it is a phrase that both acknowledges a mystery beyond human language and requires the peculiar linguistic community of the Church for its intelligibility.

There’s an unspoken assumption undergirding this practice of borrowing from language-worlds for the Church’s worship and ministry—from corporate culture, commercial pop music, computer technology, and others: that they are value-neutral, mere tools that can be taken up and used without effecting the job at hand or its outcome. But of course no medium or discourse is value-neutral. Theology done on a blog is not the same as theology done in a book or in a classroom. I think that it’s possible to do theology well on a blog (and there will be a workshop tomorrow discussing this topic), but form always shapes content and we are unavoidably affected by the discourses and media we engage; that is part of their power and their point.

To be stewards of the strange language of the gospel is not to try and protect it from outside influences—as if that were even possible. We communicate our story through speech that is always culturally conditioned. But we also practice discernment in the ways we tell the story, alert to temptations that would

²⁰ See my article “PowerPointless” in *The Christian Century*, July 25, 2006, p. 10ff.

²¹ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), pp. 25–26.

minimize or domesticate or otherwise miscommunicate the unsettling grace that comes to us in the Logos of God—temptations that would make God “nice,” say, or “religious” or “one of us.”²²

The language of our call to worship earlier this afternoon is an example of this kind of stewardship of language, this kind of recognition of the “awesome” God we worship. I’m also reminded of Annie Dillard’s well-known observation about worship: “I often think of the set pieces of liturgy,” she says, “as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed.”²³ We are stewards of a strange language indeed.

Wordplay as Word-Care

We’re used to describing the creation of the world as divine “work”; after all, God took a rest on the seventh day. We extrapolate from this to fashion an understanding of—and a rationale for—our own rhythms of work and rest. Moreover, we often associate creativity with work. There’s a reason that a great musical composition is sometimes called an opus, from the Latin for “work”: more often than not it is a product of intense labor, rigorous and exacting for mind and body.

But there’s also a sense that creativity is a form of play and that God’s own creative work is playful. Artists of all kinds are often thought to possess playful dispositions (something to admire but something also to worry about a little. When will the poet, painter, sculptor, singer, writer get a “real” job?).

Of course, Christians historically have been suspicious of play. It’s the Protestant work ethic, after all. For Augustine, you may remember, conversion to Christianity meant conversion from a life of play. But I suspect that Augustine rejected not the kind of playfulness under consideration here but rather the enjoyment of the wrong things.

²² D. Brent Laytham, ed. *God is Not . . . Religious, Nice, One of Us, a Capitalist, an American* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004).

²³ Annie Dillard, “Holy the Firm” in *The Annie Dillard Reader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 447,

When theologians talk about the creation of the world, they often describe it in terms of an overflow of Trinitarian love. God’s very being—that which constitutes God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is communion: love-in-relationship. As John Zizioulas has argued, “Love is not an emanation or ‘property’ of the substance of God . . . but is constitutive of [God’s] substance, i.e. it is that which makes God what He is, the one God.”²⁴ This love—the supreme ontological predicate, as Zizioulas puts it²⁵—overflows its bounds, we might say, such that the act of creation is the outflowing of the triune God’s inexhaustible love. The love of the holy Trinity cannot be contained and the cosmos is born.

Central to the Christian doctrine of Creation is the idea that, for God, there is no compulsion to create—God’s love is already complete within the mutual self-giving of the persons of Trinity. God lacks nothing; God needs nothing. And it is this reality which makes Creation something of a playful enterprise. This overflow of divine love that brings the world into being is sheer gratuity, a gift that flows outward from the inner life of God. It is given freely, generously, and—we might say—playfully.

To risk a crude, anthropomorphism here, it’s as if God flung the stars into the vast heavens—a gesture of pure whimsy and joy. The second creation story in Genesis is suggestive of a God who wants to play with what he has created. When the Psalmist says to and of God, “you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind,” we understand that the poetry is metaphorical but it just sounds fun (Psalm 104:3b). G.K. Chesterton famously imagined the act of creation as God at play. Pondering a field of daisies Chesterton envisioned God, having created one daisy, delighting in it and saying to himself, “Do it again! Do it again!”²⁶

When we think of play in the human realm we often misidentify it as aimless frivolity. (There may be occasions when aimless frivolity is called for but that’s not exactly what we’re after here). Consider the philosophy of Maria Montessori

²⁴ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 46 (italics in original).

²⁵ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 47 (italics in original).

²⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, reprint edition, 1995), p. 66.

who turned the categories of work and play inside out with her studied observation that children at play are doing the work they've been given to do—the “methodical, purposeful, deep work of establishing patterns in the body and mind that will serve as templates for all further learning”²⁷—and that uptight, workaholic adults might have something to learn from this. Or consider the phenomenon of improvisation in jazz, theatre, or dance. There's a playfulness to this practice, an openness and generosity to one's partner or partners that glimpses—if only briefly—the playfulness of divine self-giving. It's not haphazard but it is joyful. Musician and writer Stephen Nachmanovitch suggests that the improvisation that occurs in art is the same creativity—what he calls “free play”—that can happen in the most ordinary of activities.²⁸

Play is rooted in creatureliness, physicality. From a biblical point of view, it is the sheer delight in the goodness of being alive, of being a beloved creature of a generous God, “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). It comes from learning to live thankful lives. It is freedom from the over-earnestness that stifles spontaneity and joy. It requires the habits of friendship—we can't really play alone—that allow us to receive the gift of another in our lives for no calculated end other than that of delighting in their physical presence. And perhaps play is also a kind of training in virtue since playfulness is a quality we often recognize in people who practice generosity, patience, gentleness, peaceableness.

What might all of this have to do with wordplay? In her recent book, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre suggests that “play comes from loving life, and play with words comes from loving language.”²⁹ And we love language, I would suggest, when we are at home in it, when we have enough familiarity and facility to play with it and to be delighted and surprised by what such play might produce.

²⁷ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 189.

²⁸ Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1990).

²⁹ McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, p. 191.

McEntyre notes that the sixteenth century French writer Montaigne is credited with coining the term “essay” for the brief thought pieces he wrote. “His writing,” says McEntyre, “has the delightful exuberance of someone who went through life saying, in effect, like E. M. Forster, ‘How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?’”³⁰ Stanley Hauerwas has explored this idea in his writing, most recently in his memoir, *Hannah’s Child*,³¹ reminding us that even theological writing—maybe especially theological writing—is an exercise in being surprised (and changed) by playing with words.

But to “play with words” within the traditions of theology and liturgy is not to strive for innovation. The theologian or liturgist, as Stanley has also taught us, is not charged with the task of originality, but with that of fidelity to a living tradition that has some parameters, to a language with rules of speech. There are things we know we can’t say—like, for instance, “that majestic mountain over there is God”—but such limits are not limitations. Rather, they are, as Wendell Berry observes, “inducements to formal elaboration and elegance, to fullness of relationship and meaning.”³² That is, such limits make art and beauty possible. The received wisdom of the Christian tradition is an enclosure of sorts but it’s still a big room to play in.

I think of Marilynne Robinson’s marvelous novel, *Gilead*, as an example of the kind of rich play with language that makes art out of so little raw material and elegance out of textbook orthodoxy. Who knew Calvinism could be so beautiful? The setting of *Gilead* couldn’t be more prosaic—a dusty Iowa town in the 1950s—but Robinson is a skilled player with words (and a more than competent theologian). In a narrative of minimal action, she brings new life to old words and ideas, taking your breath away with startling insights on topics like baptism, blessing, and the work of human hands. Robinson shows us that to be stewards of the gift of language is to live in grace.

³⁰ McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, p. 191.

³¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010).

³² Wendell Berry, *Faustian Economics*, *Harpers’s Magazine* (May, 2008), italics in original. <http://harpers.org/archive/2008/05/0082022>

There's a particular passage in *Gilead* that plays with the idea that at the heart of the Christian life is a kind of divine playfulness. If you've read the novel you'll remember this. Rev. Ames, the novel's narrator-protagonist, says this:

Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense. How well do we understand our role? With how much assurance do we perform it? I suppose Calvin's God was a Frenchman, just as mine is a Middle Westerner of New England extraction. Well, we all bring such light to bear on these great matters as we can. I do like Calvin's image, though, because it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think about that far too little.³³

The genius of Marilynne Robinson aside, theological wordplay involves risk and, as McEntyre puts it, "consent to the possibility of failure."³⁴ It also requires trust. "It is to trust in the truth that we are saved, loved, and perfectly safe, and so we are free to play around a little."³⁵ In sermons, prayers, poems, blogs—even scholarly writing—we can loosen up a little and approach the holy work of bearing witness with our words as the serious play it is. It seems we must do this if we are going to reckon honestly with the Church's failures, its capitulation to the powers, its inability to speak its own language fluently and persuasively. In as playful a poem as I know of, Wendell Berry gives us a needed word of encouragement:

Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.
Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.³⁶

Word-Care and the Care of the World

³³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p. 124.

³⁴ McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, p. 194.

³⁵ McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, p. 195.

³⁶ Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC30/Berry.htm>

When the Church attempts to speak the truth of God—with words and with our lives—we are not talking to ourselves. In one way, of course, God is the proper audience for much of our speech—the words and work of liturgy; our prayers, both corporate and personal. In these speech-acts we respond to the Creator with the full range of feelings and dispositions that constitute our creatureliness. But, as a linguistic community, the Church also communicates to the wider world. It may do this well or poorly, but it is always saying something.

We've already visited some of the ways that the Church risks miscommunication by its uncritical adoption of other modes of discourse; this is an enduring challenge. The gospel is always spoken in particular times and places with all of the cultural and linguistic conventions that may obtain; discerning what is faithful speech (and practice) and what is not isn't always easy.

But in the “anxious middle” where the Word always meets us we're reminded that the peculiar language of the gospel can only be recognized by participating in it. This insight comes from Herbert McCabe—a playful theologian if ever there was one—who points out that if you look from the outside at the new mode of communication that Jesus provides “it does not even look like a possible blueprint . . . it merely looks destructive.”³⁷ This, of course, is why Jesus was killed by the powers of his day: “The openness of love,” McCabe says, “becomes the vulnerability of the victim. If you love enough you will in the long run be killed.”³⁸ And because Jesus achieved his mission through failure, he is relevant not as past but as future, as God's desired end that all of creation be fulfilled through him.

So the Church “makes the presence of Christ articulate as a language, as an interpretation of the world.”³⁹ “The resurrection,” says McCabe, “meant not just that a church was founded, it meant that the world was different: the

³⁷ Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love, and Language* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 130.

³⁸ McCabe, *Law, Love, and Language*, p. 133.

³⁹ McCabe, *Law, Love, and Language*, pp. 141–142.

church exists to articulate this difference, to show the world to itself.”⁴⁰ There are many ways to talk about what this might mean and McCabe goes on to suggest, convincingly, that it is the sacramental life of the Church that most fully reveals and realizes “the revolutionary future of the world.”⁴¹

But in my remaining moments I want to return to our discussion of Creation to briefly sketch out another possibility of what it might mean for the Church to “show the world to itself.” First, I take this so-called “showing” to be not an act of opposition or confrontation but of hospitality. In articulating the presence of Christ, in practicing word-care in its worship and witness, the Church loves and cares for the world.

One of the foundational truths that the creation stories in Genesis reveal is that to be human is to live within limits. God is limitless but we are not—we are not God. The “fall” that occurs in the garden in Genesis chapter three names the overreaching of our creaturely limits—our attempt to be godlike—and thus our sin lies in failing to claim and live into our creaturehood. Salvation consists, we might say, in our becoming fully human through the Word that took on our own flesh.

As I noted a moment ago in drawing on Berry’s work, limits are not limitations. But this is a truism that does not square with the project that is modernity in a place like North America. Economists might talk about limitless growth or limitless wealth, but limitlessness is not an exclusively economic term. Rooted in one of modernity’s guiding principles—the maximization of personal freedom—limitlessness is considered a defining quality of our being human. Under this principle, “all are entitled to pursue without limit whatever they conceive as desirable—a license,” Berry says, “that classifies the most exalted Christian capitalist with the lowliest pornographer.”⁴²

In recent months, we have witnessed in vivid, chilling detail what belief in the doctrine of limitlessness has wrought: Credit-default swaps and collateralized

⁴⁰ McCabe, *Law, Love, and Language*, p. 142.

⁴¹ McCabe, *Law, Love, and Language*, p. 145.

⁴² Berry, *Faustian Economics* (italics in original).

debt obligations—those mysterious financial “instruments” invented out of thin air for the purpose of generating limitless wealth for corporate executives and shareholders. A busted oil well gushing millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico because of the demand for cheap, limitless energy. (Calling the BP oil disaster a “leak” or a “spill” is one of many examples in our public discourse of how words are—without much protest—evacuated of their commonly-held meanings, sacrificing truth for the sake of spin).

Words about the BP catastrophe—explanations, defenses, diatribes, rants—have spewed forth as profusely as the uncontained oil itself. Political speeches have pandered to constituencies who want either more rigorous development of renewable energy sources or a return—sooner rather than later—to drilling for oil here, there and everywhere. But neither the right nor the left seems much interested in addressing the root problem: our need to be healed from “the disease of limitlessness.”⁴³

How does the Church “show the world to itself” in such a time as this? First, we must acknowledge—contrary to what I said a moment ago—that we are talking as much to ourselves as to others on this one. It’s probably safe to assume that none of us in this room have been involved in naked short selling or in any of the other corruptions born of Wall Street’s limitless greed. But when it comes to the catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, all of us are, as our friend Brian Volck wrote recently, “accessories to the crime.”⁴⁴ And it’s not just the cars we drive. It’s the petroleum that drives the American food system and the petroleum necessary to produce the cheap plastic we love—like the ubiquitous, petroleum-based water bottles we can’t seem to do without.

Yet even when we’re not quite sure how to extricate ourselves from our complicity in the destruction of seas and soil, riverbeds and mountaintops, we exist as members of one another and of Christ’s body, the Church, to make the presence of Christ articulate as an interpretation of the world, to express in

⁴³ Berry, *Faustian Economics*.

⁴⁴ Brian Volck, “Oil Spill and God Talk, Part 2” in *Image* (June 25, 2010) <http://imagejournal.org/page/blog/oil-spills-and-god-talk-part-2>

words and deeds the difference that the God of Creation and Resurrection makes.

The Logos became particular flesh, in a particular place, embodying the limitlessness of divine mercy and grace in the finitude of one earthly life. When Jesus says in John's gospel, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), we hear these words as a call to counter the "the economics of extinction"⁴⁵ with ways of living that speak to the fullness of life for all that God has spoken into being. The limits of a finite planet—there is not an inexhaustible supply of oil in the ground—are not hindrances to abundant living (contrary to consumer-capitalism's working hypothesis). Rather, they are the conditions under which fullness of life for all is possible.

In this post-christendom world, there is no unity of witness that would make clear to the world what abundance within limits looks like. Instead, Christian communities large and small, here and there, in mostly modest ways, do the playful, joyful work of making this evident. They do it, say, in community gardens where on a limited plot of earth an abundance of riches comes forth—food and friendships. Or in intentional communities where limited resources, blessed and shared, become more than enough for all.

With humility, Christ's body speaks, with words and actions, that the world might know itself as the world. The limits we must live within—ecologically, economically, and otherwise—are the conditions in which we might have life, and have it abundantly. And in this we are able to affirm the truth of the priestly writer's refrain: "God saw that it was good."

Conclusion

Words are all we've got.

If you've ever tried to change the behavior of a headstrong toddler or teenager with words, you know something of the futility of human speech. If you have

⁴⁵ Wendell Berry, "The Burden of the Gospels" in *The Way of Ignorance* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2006) <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3248>

longed for silence amid the ceaseless chatter of our days, then you may not be that impressed by all this talk of language—can't we all just shut up already? To say that "words are all we've got" may not sound like very good news in the talkative times in which we live.

But thankfully we are saved by a Word who speaks in and through us, whose own life, death, and life beyond death reveals the God of Creation whose grace sustains us in our stumbling to articulate Christ in and for the world. And, as we heard in the word from the prophet Isaiah read and proclaimed awhile ago, we have God's promise that our efforts are not in vain:

"So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.