



Circles of Relationships

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, May 18, 2008*

Genesis 1:1–2:4:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights — the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night — and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Once in a great while, someone comes along with remarkable insight and is able to see what has been taken as a given—a familiar problem or human predicament—and to re-cast, re-frame it in such a dramatically new way as to completely change the landscape. This is how I felt when, in the May, “third annual green issue” of *Vanity Fair* (no.573), I read about the work of William McDonough. Very successful, he may be known to you; I had not heard of him. The article written by Matt Tyrnauer begins: “On February 7, 1993, the architect William McDonough, a prophet of the sustainability and clean-technology movements, which set in motion many of the green design practices that are commonplace today, delivered a centennial sermon from the [pulpit] of the Cathedral of St John the Divine, in New York City. The sermon ... laid the foundation for a lifelong crusade to do nothing less than right the wrongs of the Industrial Revolution....

“If we understand that design leads to the manifestation of human intention, and if what we make with our hands is to be sacred and honor the earth that gives us life,” McDonough said that day, “then the things we make must not only rise from the ground but return to it, soil to soil, water to water, so everything that is received from the earth can be freely given back without causing harm to any living system. This is ecology. This is good design. It is of this we must now speak.”

McDonough’s theory of ecological design, *Cradle to Cradle*, “does not just reduce waste, it eliminates the *concept* of waste,’ stipulating that products be manufactured in new ways that will allow them to be reduced to their essential technical or biological elements in order to be re-used. Nature’s cycles provide the model.” “Waste equals food” is his motto, summarizing the objective that all things return in a cycle, becoming nutrient for the next incarnation.

The goal then, is not efficiency, not reducing our use of resources, our use of stuff. The goal is to use stuff effectively, so that it is usable again. McDonough and [his partner Michael] Braungart reject what they call “the dour face of eco-efficiency.” Instead, they “celebrate growth. Abundance is something we want.”

“The metaphor he employs to make his point is the cherry tree. ‘Think of the abundance of a cherry tree’s blossoms in the spring,’ he says. ‘We celebrate its abundance of blossoms. You don’t look at a cherry tree in the spring and [say], ‘Oh, my goodness. How many blossoms does it *take*?’ It’s not very efficient. You know, thousands of blossoms, just so that a couple of them can turn into cherry trees, is not very efficient. But it’s highly *effective*. And effective, rather than efficient, is what we want. Think about efficiency versus effectiveness in another way. You don’t listen to Mozart and think, How many notes does it take? He could have hit the piano with a two-by-four and got them all at once. Very efficient, but would we love it?

“One of the points we make in *Cradle to Cradle* is that being less bad is not being good—it’s being bad, just less so. To be efficient is the same thing as being less bad. If I left here and went north to Canada and found myself going 120 miles an hour toward Mexico, it is not going to help me to slow down to 20. I’m going the wrong way. We need a change in direction.

“What we really need is an eco-effective strategy, to go along with our eco-efficient one, where we look at the idea of actually inventing new things that will take us all the way to our desired goals.” McDonough has re-designed one of Ford Motor Company’s production plants, has designed furniture, fabrics and automobiles; he is designing an entire city in China, is working with NASA to explore possibilities for life on other planets and regularly gives presentations at the Davos World Economic Forum. The test case for his grandest scheme in sustainable design was successfully carried out at my alma mater—Oberlin College.

“It’s a building like a tree; that was the assignment.”

“Think about what a tree can do,” he says. “It can make oxygen, sequester carbon, fix nitrogen, distill water, provide a habitat for hundreds of species, accrue solar energy as fuel, make complex sugars into food, change colors with the seasons. We imagined ways we could do this in a 13,600-square-foot structure.” And they largely succeeded.

With vision and prodding from architects and scientists, politicians, farmers and poets, we are slowly re-awakening to the reality of our intimate and intricate relationship with nature. I see this as one of three primary pre-existing relationships that shape our existence and our relationship with the holy.

“Baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” said the Gospel: this is Trinity Sunday. One can make the case—and some have—that the Trinity is merely a human construct, born of the councils of the 4th and 5th centuries as the early church tried to make sense of the relationship between God and Christ (Son of God; fully human and fully divine) and who or how the Holy Spirit relates to these other two. One can just as readily make the case that those early faithful did not create but discerned, discovered the Trinity as the true nature of the holy; a right articulation of God’s fullness and being, much as we have come to discover the force of gravity and have learned to speak of it. The Trinity was ever present; now it is discerned and named.

Whatever else it is—or is not—the Trinity is a relationship. We speak of one God, yet we speak of God in three persons—anthropomorphically as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or descriptively as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. The Trinity reveals to us that relationship is part of the very essence of God's being; God—in God's self—is living, dynamic, ever related, ever relating. Might we consider that—as God's holiness, God's essence, is defined and shaped by God's relatedness, God's relationships—so our human grasp of the holy is defined and shaped by our relatedness, our relationships? Which is to say, do our relationships reveal the true nature of holiness, the true nature of God?

I view relationships as circles. Not linear, relationships are a matter of give and take, mutuality, reciprocity. As I said, I see three primary pre-existing circles of relationship. These are beyond, or below, the most obviously apparent ones we have among family, friends, and neighbors. These are circles of relationship to which we awaken at some point in our lives. They were always present, always vital, yet not always apparent to us.

I have already spoken at length of one of these: our relationship with creation.

In her words describing the situation in Darfur, Ms. Haroun calls us to wake up to the realization of our relationship with all of humankind, with all the peoples of the earth. We are not free to live in isolation, to live as if we are independent from one another—for we are not. We are related. Our lives, our decisions, our use of resources, our exercise of power, our creative potential, all have an immediate and lasting effect upon others—just as their lives and actions effect our own.

Finally, we may by grace awaken to the relationship we already share with God. It is said that prayer is our response in a conversation already initiated, begun by God. We often think that the motive to pray, or the desire to learn more of God, comes from ourselves; I believe that what we sense as an inner prompting in truth comes from God speaking in our hearts, calling us to see and attend to what is already alive, calling us to fan into flames the glowing embers of God's love.

We are not alone, not living in isolation. Awakening to each of these primary, dynamic pre-existing relationships is a way of awakening to the holy. As we revel in the abundance of spring blossoms, as we respond with compassion, courage and justice to the cries of the people of Darfur, as we heed the promptings of God within, we find ourselves in a world that is holy, in which we are interwoven with the love of God. Amen.