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The Mission and Hope of Ecojustice *A Franciscan Perspective*¹

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WHEN TAKING UP A new challenge, or taking up the same challenge again, hoping to be more effective, it is wise to proceed on solid spiritual ground. Otherwise, frustration will quickly build, and we will give up, or give in to discouragement. For that reason, we need to discern what “solid ground” means in practice—and why it seems so difficult to find in these disruptive times of climate and ecological emergency.

I am writing from a personal, Franciscan perspective. The word “personal” here does not mean “subjective” as opposed to “objective.” Rather, it involves the whole of our experience and the *conversion of life*, which is the penitential heart of the order’s *charism*. Exemplified by St. Francis and St. Clare, a life lived in this way is a journey with Christ. It helps us to recover our diminished humanity and to rediscover (or remember) our shared existence within the whole fabric of life. Both are interwoven dimensions of our challenge to create effective ministries in ecojustice.

I remember hearing about Navajo elders who perceived us, the colonizers, as having a weak, rather than a healthy, sense of self. We’re so wrapped up in ourselves that we’re disconnected from the sacred reality

1. For their editorial assistance and support, I would like to thank Janet Fedders, Asha Golliher, Ken Gray, Rachel Mash, Masud Syedullah, chapter members of TSSF in the Province of the Americas, and the minister general and minister provincials of the global Provinces of the Third Order.

we all share. I also think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran martyr and resister of Nazism. His simple words—“life together”—point us in the right direction. St. Francis and St. Clare in the 1200s wanted to live holy and respectful lives, so they struggled to unwrap themselves from the crusading forms of domination that emerged in their time. They struggled to find solid spiritual ground, and they succeeded.

We are mistaken to believe that crusading and colonizing are relics of the past. “Settler colonialism” has been replaced by “extractive” or “resource colonialism,” in which the political and economic exploitation of people and the land continues in pursuit of profit. The “invisible hand” of Wall Street has become the world’s moral compass. The guiding principle offered in this chapter is that effective ecojustice depends on how willing we are to find solid spiritual ground, which depends, in turn, on our willingness to decolonize ourselves.

HOPE AND MISSION IN THESE UNTHINKABLE TIMES

According to Paulo Freire, genuine hope must be grounded in the truth about the reality we face.² If we avoid that, fearing that “too much reality” will throw us off course, then our efforts are based on an illusion of hope. Our words become just “talk,” whether in everyday conversations or on policy levels. We treat the symptoms, rather than the causes. Freire’s perspective resonates with the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare, suggesting that true hope requires us to discern not only the difference between morally right and wrong, but also our illusions and delusions.

Let’s consider our global crisis in the context of Freire’s understanding of hope. We are already living in a climate emergency, which is the outcome of greenhouse gas emissions combined with economic exploitation and habitat destruction. The work of the United Nations demonstrates that the whole fabric of life is affected: food and agriculture, water, energy, economics, human rights, poverty, gender, race, migration and refugees, land use, and population growth. According to the UN, carbon emissions must be halved by 2030 and reduced to zero no later than 2045 or 2050 to prevent a total catastrophe. Some scientists suggest that this time frame could be understated and that “tipping points” may be reached sooner than predicted. We live in a period of earth history called the “sixth great extinction.” A recent UNESCO analysis reports that over one million species currently

2. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of Hope*.

face extinction. The number of climate refugees will continue to rise dramatically reaching into the millions each year.

In light of Freire's teaching, the recent work of Wallace-Wells³ takes on unexpected significance, together with the helpful controversy, summarized well by Paoletta,⁴ that arose in response to it. Wallace-Wells originally said that unless we take substantial action now, then the earth could become uninhabitable by the end of this century. Scientists generally believe that this time frame for "uninhabitable" is much too soon. Nevertheless, the most recent IPCC report—described as their "final warning"—emphasizes that disastrous changes will likely occur to ecosystems and human life if greenhouse emissions are not halved by 2030 and brought to "net zero" (an ambiguous term) by 2050.⁵ The point is that the emergency we face is very real. Are we telling ourselves, in effect, that it's okay to continue basically on our present course—making "some" changes, losing "some" ecosystems, species, and people—while we postpone truly substantial action? "Hope," in that context, means making "some" adjustments in how we live, while keeping everything essentially the same. That amounts to a form of gambling. Our sacred, biblical directive to "care for" God's creation cannot truthfully translate into "gamble with."

We must always discern what scientific reports really mean, but the issue goes deeper than optimism or pessimism about the future. Wallace-Wells actually pointed to the critical challenge before us by his choice of the word "unthinkable" to characterize the consequences of failure. Our climate and ecological emergency represents something that humankind has never faced until now. It might be "thinkable" for members of the scientific community, yet "unthinkable," in a manner of speaking, for the large majority of people. One huge psychological challenge is that those of us who begin to perceive the "unthinkable" possibility often experience denial, grief, and fear that can be disorienting emotionally and intellectually. Our consciousness and conscience are affected, while we are subjected to the profit motives of the media and manipulation by authoritarian powers. This reality must be confronted in order to strengthen our capacity for discernment and faithful, effective action. So, should we debate and discern the nature of the emergency that we face so we can act together? Of course—that's the whole point. Wallace-Wells made an essential contribution by moving the discussion, as Hayhoe (2019) aptly put it, into the mode of "story": a deeply personal, honest testimony that guides our search for solid spiritual

3. Wallace-Wells, *Uninhabitable Earth*.

4. Paoletta, "Incredible Disappearing Doomsday."

5. The Core Writing Team, "AR6 Synthesis Report."

ground.⁶ That is the story that we should all strive to tell, because we are all living it, for better or worse, each and every day.

As Jamail and Rushworth and others demonstrate, Indigenous peoples are good at discerning the “unthinkable.”⁷ This is because they’re more respectful and aware than we are of the world as a sacred body of life; and they have suffered the disastrous impacts of colonialism for a long time. Until the recent presidency of Lula da Silva in Brazil, who has begun to change the nation’s course, the exploitation of Indigenous peoples and their land continued as a result of greed, renewed deforestation, cattle ranching, and gold mining, and they speak out. Julian Brave NoiseCat echoes their cries as the “genocide of colonization and the ecocide of climate change,” which go hand in hand.⁸ Another Indigenous writer, Natalie Diaz, put it this way: “The Earth [is] telling us it’s exhausted. It’s ready to start cleaning itself.”⁹

In the wake of the 1992 Earth Summit, some economists and cultural analysts clearly perceived the implications of the challenge. The hope was and is that sustainable development guided by human rights and the elimination of poverty could be accomplished in an ecologically sound way. David Korten courageously wrote *When Corporations Rule the World*¹⁰ and *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*.¹¹ He hoped for a “Great Turning” away from the “global suicide economy” as he put it. Nevertheless, an intensive process of transnational economic globalization proceeded with little restraint as new forms of extractive colonialism intensified. Governments and corporations often encouraged (and still do) the misleading assumption that the crisis is “manageable” and that we can find technological fixes. More recently, authoritarian governments have flatly rejected the vision of global cooperation on which resolving our shared crisis depends. While some corporations have rejected or ignored the science (often using “corporate greenwashing” as a misleading screen), others have acknowledged the truth and made wise changes in their policies and behavior.

Nearly sixty years ago, Thomas Merton, the renowned Trappist monk, pointed to the last issue we need to consider concerning discernment. His *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*¹² was written before the reality of the climate and ecological crisis was widely known. Since that time, it has

6. Hayhoe, “David Wallace-Wells.”

7. Jamail and Rushworth, *Middle of Forever*, 290.

8. NoiseCat, “How Indigenous Peoples Are Fighting,” para. 1.

9. Diaz in Jamail and Rushworth, *Middle of Forever*, 290.

10. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*.

11. Korten, *Great Turning*.

12. Merton, *Conjectures*.

magnified greatly. Our instinctive response when reading the words “guilty bystander” might be something like, “well, that’s not me!” There can be some truth in it, despite the fact that the developed world shares the responsibility in different degrees. As much as many people organize and protest, most are still “watching” the crisis unfold. This is how Merton perceived that dilemma in his time:

The greatest need of our time is to clean out this enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes of all political and social life a mass illness. Without this housecleaning we cannot begin to see. Unless we see we cannot think.¹³

He was reflecting on the mass media and its impact on our minds long before the Internet. One might argue that our greatest need is not to clear our own mental rubbish, but to heal Mother Earth. In practice, they go hand in hand. The corporatization of the media since Merton’s time and its impact on politics has a profound impact on our life together. Merton was pointing prophetically to one reason why Wallace-Wells described our emergency as “unthinkable.” Let’s keep in mind that some aspects of Francis’s life and experience could have been “unthinkable” for him too. We will see below that his “conversion of life” encourages us to clean out the “rubbish” in our minds and lives so we can discern more clearly. He also laid the groundwork for the “Great Turning” that the whole fabric of life desperately needs.

THE FRANCISCAN “CONVERSION OF LIFE”

Stories about St. Francis offer signposts on a spiritual journey that we, as followers of Christ, are all meant to make.¹⁴ Perhaps the pivotal story took place in the very heart of Assisi. He had been a rowdy youth, a troubadour, a would-be crusader and an imprisoned soldier. After a difficult period of soul searching, St. Francis entered the town square for a public hearing involving money owed to his father. He removed his bourgeois clothing in the presence of the bishop, his father, and many onlookers. That in itself was a proclamation—that he was leaving behind one way of life in search of another. There was no outward appearance of official religious meaning. Yet, the implications would have been self-evident for those who knew and observed him through the eyes of the Spirit.

13. Merton, *Conjectures*, 77.

14. Cowan, *Saint’s Way*; Sweeney, *Francis of Assisi*; Sister Joyce, “Walking in the Footsteps.”

The Spirit helped St. Francis break through the hard shell that the worldly powers of domination had wrapped around him. Then, after he retreated to a nearby mountain, his deepening soul began to flower. Having once heard the divine voice say, “Rebuild My Church,” he began rebuilding the dilapidated church in San Damiano with meaning that must be discerned from the evidence of his life. St. Clare would join him, along with many others. Together, their lives left a distinctive mark on the church and history.

The soul of Francis flowered in many ways: befriending lepers, strangers, and the Wolf of Gubbio, visiting Muslim leaders, and writing the “Canticle of the Creatures.” These expressions of his “conversion of life” exemplify the unfolding of a deeply relational “life together,” to borrow Bonhoeffer’s words. His story contradicts the exploitation of God’s creation that has magnified in our day, sometimes applauded as the will of God. St. Francis discovered that to be humanely human is to enter into relationships of kinship with the whole fabric of life.¹⁵ His “conversion” exemplifies what we call “decolonization,” revealing the solid spiritual ground on which our lives depend.

In recent times, the UN’s work in cultural and biological diversity has been grounded in a similar vision, drawing upon the life of St. Francis, as well as eco-philosophers and Indigenous peoples. In a vision statement arising from the UN’s Biodiversity Convention, both biological and cultural diversity are understood as having “intrinsic value,” rather than the commodified for-profit value customarily assigned by the marketplace.¹⁶ That same vision is central to the traditions of Indigenous peoples who the Euro-American colonizers once called “savages.” In ways that resonate with St. Francis, Chief Oren Lyons (Faithkeeper of the Turtle-Clan, Onondaga Council of Chiefs), who contributed to the UN’s work, describes the Indigenous perspective in this way:

The Lakota end all their prayers with “all my relations.” This means more than their families or extended families. It includes all life upon this earth. It is the recognition, respect, and love for the interconnected “web of life” that Chief Seattle spoke of. It is the instruction to the human community of our relationship to the earth.¹⁷

15. Horan, *Francis of Assisi*.

16. Posey and Darrell, *Cultural and Spiritual Values*; and Gollhofer, “Church as Renewed Creation.”

17. Lyons, Oren. “All My Relations,” 450.

St. Francis could have prayed with the Lakota as brothers and sisters. He departed boldly from colonizing assumptions, while remaining true to the Holy Sacraments. His decolonized vision of our life together suggests that the larger “church” is the whole of God’s creation in a process of renewal.¹⁸ This includes interfaith relations, issues of racial and gender justice, ecojustice, and “all our relations.” Our church buildings and gatherings of the faithful, customarily called “the church,” are obviously sacred too. There, we are called “to remember deeply” (in the Greek sense of *anamnesis*) the inward and outward dimensions of our lives in Christ. Jesus instructed us to do precisely that in the Holy Eucharist: “*Do this in remembrance of me.*” The remembering that St. Francis and St. Clare experienced was gradually revealed as their transformed, decolonized lives flowered. This became the essence of the Franciscan charism of *penitence*, which means the *conversion of life*.

FINDING SOLID SPIRITUAL GROUND FOR ECOJUSTICE

We now move more deeply into the essential qualities of a solid spiritual ground on which ecojustice depends—and we must do this at a time when solid ground seems difficult to find. Solid spiritual ground is not disappearing. Rather, the climate and ecological emergency combined with an intensely recolonizing period in history make it seem “unthinkable.” For many, this can make the essential teachings of spiritual traditions seem simpleminded or irrelevant, as if they won’t help us now. Yet, the life of St. Francis contradicts all kinds of “mental rubbish,” as Merton put it. His life reminds us to put our desire to good and holy uses, to overcome fear, and to live respectfully by turning our attention to experience as it is lived each day.¹⁹ The practical implications of this will become apparent as we take it several steps farther. The World Council of Churches, for example, has posted on their website a very helpful *Roadmap for Congregations, Communities and Churches for an Economy of Life and Ecological Justice*.²⁰ This is how the WCC summarizes the roadmap’s essential features:

1. Living in accordance with the covenant with God and creation [small scale agriculture, community gardens, clean water]

18. Gollhofer, “Church as Renewed Creation.”

19. Sweeney, *Feed the Wolf*.

20. Tendis, *Roadmap for Congregations*, 5.

2. Renewable Energy and Climate Protection [energy consumption, renewables, climate friendly mobility, conscious energy]
3. Just and Sustainable Consumption [buy ecological, fair and regional, reduce waste, re-use and recycle]
4. Economies of Life [create places for moneyless interaction, practice alternative economic models, practice just nature]
5. Networking [name contact persons for economic and ecological justice, raise voices in communities and beyond, network with other communities and beyond]

Notice the wide-ranging content that the WCC briefly recommends. *Notice also that to follow through in any of these areas of work requires us to gain knowledge of our local ecosystems, cultures, and economies, including the political dynamics that shape them.* The efficacy of Dubos's famous dictum for sacred ecology immediately comes to mind—"think globally, act locally." A good example involves the emergence of numerous youth groups in many parts of the world that have learned to organize passionately for political action. We urgently need to join efforts of that kind. I also think of Karen Armstrong's exploration of our need for ecological healing in *Sacred Nature: Restoring our Ancient Bond with the Natural World*.²¹ All these efforts ask us to use our discernment with prayerfully conscious intent. How can we do that? What do we actually need to do in order to make ecojustice ministries effective?

The Principles of the Franciscan Third Order (Anglican)²² offer substantial assistance. I'm thinking specifically of *Humility, Simplicity*, and the three Forms of Service: *Prayer, Study, and Work*.²³ Below, you'll find the traditional meaning of those principles, followed by an in-depth discussion of how they can be lived in perilous times. As Merton understood in relation to the media, the temptation today is to overlook the deeper meaning—and the solid spiritual ground—by looking only on the surface.

Humility: "We always keep before us the example of Christ, who emptied himself taking the form of a servant, and who, on the last night of his life, humbly washed his disciples' feet."

Simplicity: "The first Christians surrendered completely to our Lord and recklessly gave all they had, offering the world a new

21. Armstrong, *Sacred Nature*.

22. Brother Geoffrey, *Way of St. Francis*.

23. Gollhofer, "Franciscan Forms of Service."

vision of society in which a fresh attitude was taken towards material possessions.”

Prayer: “Tertiaries recognize the power of intercessory prayer for furthering the purposes of God’s Kingdom, and therefore seek a deepening communion with God in personal devotion, and constantly intercede for the needs of his church and his world.”

Study: “True knowledge is knowledge of God. Tertiaries therefore give priority to devotional study of scripture . . . some of us accept the duty of contributing, through research and writing, to a better understanding of the church’s mission in the world: the application of Christian principles to the use and distribution of wealth; questions concerning justice and peace; and of all other questions concerning the life of faith.”

Work: “Tertiaries endeavor to serve others in active work. . . . The chief form of service which we have to offer is to reflect the love of Christ, who, in his beauty and power, is the inspiration and joy of our lives.”²⁴

The meaning and practice of these principles are interwoven signposts for finding solid spiritual ground in our journey with Christ. As basic as they are, it is important to keep in mind that they are not the ground itself. For example, the principle of *humility* speaks to our tendency to overstate what we think we know, a form of ego-inflation. Making the point in a different way, Korzybski, the philosopher, reminds us of perennial wisdom: “The map is not the territory.”²⁵ The territory we seek—solid spiritual ground—reveals itself when we put our faith into practice. Another example: intellectual insight alone into what carrying the cross might mean is not the same as actually carrying it. The point is that we need to be careful not to overly-intellectualize any of this, which often makes our colonized wrapping tighter, as we “wave flags” of self-righteous religious identity. Let me share what Sweeney said about St. Francis and his views on *study* in this regard:

Francis was not a man of many words. . . . In fact, it is impossible to imagine Francis sitting in a library or with a pen in his hand. . . . Some have even accused Francis of being anti-intellectual, and for good reasons: he often warned his brothers against owning books and excessive reading. He counseled his brothers

24. Society of St. Francis, *Living with the Principles*.

25. Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*.

again and again to study only if they could do so without it ruining their spiritual lives. And yet he wrote.²⁶

St. Francis was encouraging us to reflect deeply on our life together. Today, we might ask this about our lives everyday: how much do we stereotype others by projecting our own predispositions and opinions onto them based on what we've heard or read? Do we even bother to ask what they really think or believe? I had my own experience with this years ago, ironically, during my doctoral training. I asked my mentor, a highly skilled cognitive analyst of meaning, how I should proceed with my study. Her answer was direct: "Don't read." She was serious, but she didn't mean it literally. She was drawing upon the practical wisdom of some founders of her field of study who were resisters of the Nazis and propaganda decoders. She wanted me to take responsibility for how much more our minds have been colonized than we realize. It's likely that St. Francis would have given the same advice for much the same reasons.

The same perspective applies to the Franciscan principle of *prayer*. To unwrap ourselves from our colonized baggage, it is important to free ourselves of our incessant inner dialogue, which keeps our heart and minds wrapped up tightly. Ross, the Anglican solitary, explains how silent prayer and meditation are a great help in that regard, as is the traditional Jesus Prayer.²⁷ The principle of *work* involves weaving together—and weaving back together—our communities, bioregions, and political systems that have suffered the destructive consequences of exploitative profit at the expense of our life together. Similarly, the principle of *simplicity* asks us to examine and act upon our relation to the material world, which includes our use of greenhouse gases, plastics, and consumerism generally.

Based on this understanding of Franciscan principles, the solid ground that we seek involves three simple but unexpectedly revealing questions:

1. Do we really know where we live?
2. What do we see?
3. Who are our neighbors?

Our discernment of genuine answers to those questions depends on our willingness to practice *humility*, which can carry us into the heart of effective ecojustice ministry.

26. Sweeney, *Francis of Assisi*, 4.

27. Ross, *Silence*, vols. 1 and 2.

OUR FIRST RESPONSIBILITY: DO WE REALLY KNOW WHERE WE LIVE?

Our best starting point is the creation story in the opening chapters of Genesis. This story is part of our shared cultural and religious heritage, including the patriarchal portion, discussed so well by Fox, that blames Eve for the “fall.”²⁸ Translated and interpreted in different ways, the meaning at the heart of the story is that creation is God’s, not ours, and God bestowed on us the responsibility to care for creation. The pivotal symbol is the primordial tree of life at the “center” of the cosmos, which has parallels in the sacred traditions of many Indigenous peoples. In some Franciscan traditions, the cross of Christ transforms into the tree of life as we carry it to the heart of our life together.

In most public discourse, the sacred ecological significance of this story has been largely ignored or lost. Often, the story we think we know is understood as “so basic that everyone knows it,” or “we learned it in Sunday school.” The underlying assumption is that it’s a “kid’s story.” However we rationalize it, our first responsibility in life has essentially been overlooked. This has parallels in the widely shared linguistic usage of the word “environment” among English speakers. I’m not criticizing the work of environmental organizations, but reflecting on the culturally defined meaning of the word. It overlooks the essential part/whole relationship of our life together, of our complete dependence on the living earth—God’s creation—that we live within. Instead, “environment” usually suggests something that is object or thing-like, existing exterior to and separate from us. This represents a historical disruption in the collective wisdom of humankind.

From a Franciscan perspective, this ordinary usage of the word “environment” opens the surface of a deep wound, which raises a serious question for discernment: *Do we really know where we live?* In the English-speaking West, our immediate answers often reflect official meanings. We might answer with a street or mailing address, which is what we would say to a traffic cop. The fact that we do this so routinely suggests that the immediate spiritual reality of the creation story is far from our thoughts. By extension, we probably overlook or ignore our God-given responsibility. It’s not that we don’t “know” in the abstract. We just don’t think about what it means very often with regard to our life together.

If we were to ask Chief Oren Lyons that question, his answer would involve actual relationships. In addition to his earlier quote, this is what he says:

28. Fox, *Original Blessing*.

All relationships are forms for kinship—a family of God in which no one is left out and everyone and all creatures are welcome. The spiritual traditions of Indigenous peoples express this plainly.²⁹

St. Francis would agree with Chief Lyons, as he would with the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. Reflecting on the ecological implications of the African word *Ubuntu* and its current context, Tutu writes,

Ubuntu acknowledges what we are, biologically. We are not individual beings; we have evolved as a social organism. This is the literal meaning of Ubuntu. . . . Shouldn't we extend Ubuntu beyond people to all other living beings? . . . If Ubuntu encourages us to cultivate and care for ourselves, for our families and our brethren, so too should we care for our larger, extended body—the veld, bush soil, air, water, and the wetlands.³⁰

Scientists began to “discover” the foundation of Indigenous wisdom—the fact of the interwoven fabric of life—about two centuries ago. Humboldt's description of the “web of life”³¹ comes to mind first, and then Dubos and his vision of “sacred ecology,”³² which helped to shape the policies of the UN's response to the climate and ecological crisis. More widely known is the vision of the biosphere proposed by Lovelock as an interwoven and self-regulating body of life known as “Gaia.”³³ It suggests that when disruptions in the biosphere threaten the balance of life, the biosphere employs its own agency, making adjustments within the living system to maintain its balance.

The looming question now falls squarely on our own agency: on our willingness and capacity to pursue ecojustice in sound and effective ways. The first step is to know where we live in a more ecologically realistic sense; the second step follows from the prophet Amos.

THE QUESTION GOD ASKED OF AMOS: “WHAT DO YOU SEE?”

The historical context of Amos, the great eighth century BCE prophet of social justice, was very different from ours; but in other ways, it's much the

29. Lyons, “All My Relations,” 450.

30. Tutu, “Eco-Ubuntu,” 2.

31. Humboldt, *Views of Nature*.

32. Dubos, *Celebrations of Life*.

33. Lovelock, *Ages of Gaia*.

same. The divide between the wealthy and the poor was large then and now, and the poor along with foreigners were treated with disrespect. Because Amos left a written record of his vision of God, we can consider its implications for our time:

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” (Amos 7:7)

The larger symbolism of Amos’s vision includes the throne of God with justice and righteousness at its foundation. With the plumb line measuring justice and injustice, he saw a world out of balance. Taking this living image to heart in our time, the same question that God asked of Amos is asked of us—“what do we see?” The answer: a world hugely out of balance, much more so than in the time of Amos. Have we been fulfilling our responsibility to care for creation with justice and respect? The answer is clearly “no” to an unthinkable extent. In our out-of-balance world, the hidden hand of Wall Street plays a large role. Consumerism, including its impact on the media, subsumes citizenship and community. Exploitation in the name of democracy gains power over genuine relationships with God’s creatures. In many countries, intensifying resource extraction and habitat destruction have become “legal,” but that doesn’t make them just. In some countries it is illegal to nonviolently protest unjust laws regarding fossil fuel pipelines and water rights. According to Amos (5:24), when the plumb line is out of balance, the judgment of God can be harsh: “Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness with an ever-flowing stream.”

We have the capacity to act and bring the plumb line back into balance, but doing so depends on our agency—which depends on our willingness to form genuinely respectful relationships with each other and Mother Earth. Writing recently in *The Christian Century*, Preston, an associate of the Iona Community, got to the heart of it in two ways. In the first, she writes about our agency in relation to the interwoven fabric of life. “The most miraculous part of Earth’s agency is not how she makes mountains rise and streams curve. It’s how she offers humans an invitation to intimacy. In the second: Reciprocity is a far more powerful expression of kinship than right. . . . Love is more powerful than laws.”³⁴

Honest, uncorrupted legal systems are desperately needed to protect ecosystems and the people that live within them, as is nonviolent protest and resistance to loosen the hold that corruption has on us. However, changes in legal systems alone will not be enough in a world where corporate power

34. Preston, “Earth’s Self-Care,” 44.

seeks control over politics and the courts in the name of freedom. One immediate response for ecojustice ministry should be steps towards bio-regional awareness and justice, as the World Council of Churches suggests: organizing friends and neighbors, working and networking with local farmers, youth, civic organizations, and protecting the rights of nature. We need to organize globally and locally, while walking together on the solid spiritual ground that brings about a genuine “conversion of life.”

THE TWO GREAT COMMANDMENTS: WHO ARE OUR NEIGHBORS?

Let’s remember again the Indigenous voice of Diaz: “The Earth [is] telling us it’s exhausted. It’s ready to start cleaning itself.”³⁵ The response that the Earth needs can only come from us. To do this, we must reach a tipping point in how we put our faith into practice. It centers on the questions of whether we—together—can really know where we live, know what we see, and then act on the knowledge that our responsibility is for the whole living earth.

For that reason, these reflections come to a conclusion with the two great commandments of Jesus: *to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves* (Matt 22:36–40; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:25–28). Remember that in the context of Amos’s prophetic vision, the life and teachings of Christ are traditionally elevated to the right hand of God, with justice and righteousness at the foundation. This vision for the practice of loving-kindness should guide us in all dimensions of our lives, including the pursuit of ecojustice through right action.

Jesus’s teaching is also based on a warning clothed in discernment: *you cannot serve God and wealth* (Matt 6:24). It should be obvious that we’re living at a time when the “principalities and powers” have created a profit-driven world based on an “us versus them” calculus. In practice, this means that our neighbors and their land can be exploited, even sacrificed, in the name of God and profit. This flatly contradicts the relationships of kinship that are the essence of solid spiritual ground.

The two great commandments and Jesus’s teaching about wealth should also be a warning about the distinct possibility of authoritarian movements becoming “eco-fascist.” “Mental rubbish” of that kind appeared in the 1930s and it can happen again. For that reason, we must remember that our sacred Mother Earth cannot be politicized into the equivalent of “motherland” or “fatherland” ideologies. Dangers of that kind arise when we restrict and diminish the meaning of “neighbor” for our own self-righteous purposes. In

35. Diaz in Jamail and Rushworth, *Middle of Forever*, 290.

effect, people pose the deceptively rhetorical question: “Well, who actually are my neighbors anyway?” (Luke 10:29). We’ve all heard many versions of it, which amount to asking whether Jesus really meant that our neighbors include people we don’t know, or those with a different skin color or nationality, or of different religious faiths, or creatures of a different species. And especially now, when so many climate refugees are seeking sanctuary: Are they all our neighbors too? Of course they are!

That our lives can be rooted in a vision encompassing the whole fabric of life is much more than an ideal to be brokered or decided in a court of law. We need good, effective laws, but we cannot depend on them to be solid spiritual ground. *The practice of loving-kindness is the foundation of the solid ground on which our life together depends.* In my lifetime, the leaders of the world’s religions have sometimes taken steps towards this vision of a life together. Today, in the midst of an “unthinkable” emergency, we must all join together in that shared vision for the sake of our survival. St. Francis and St. Clare, Indigenous peoples, and countless others have understood what is at stake. It’s time for us all to join them, speak out, resist evil, and organize.

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