

A Theology of the Cross for the “Uncreators”

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There is good reason to distrust many theologies of the cross. I do. To others, I owe my hope and therefore, perhaps, my life. The question, of course, is, “Which cross and whose cross?”

The obligation of “faithful disbelief” is dangerous, far too readily wielded, assumed as a right rather than accepted as unwelcome burden, jumped into rather than avoided.ⁱ Too easily do people of Christian faith claim “my” version of Christian belief to be true and the “other’s” false or, at best, misguided. On-the-other-hand, faith indeed bears the responsibility of “disbelief.” A duo hermeneutic is the obligation of Christian faith: a hermeneutic of trust and of suspicion working together. Led by our forebearers and by Jesus himself, we are a critical tradition, testing our claims and convictions for the extent to which they either *pass on* the splendid Mystery of God’s unbounded and undefeatable love for this good creation and presence with and within it, or betray that good news.ⁱⁱ So it is with theologies of the cross.

Whose cross and which cross? False crosses have been with us since at least the year 313 when Christianity became the religion of the “known world’s” reigning imperial power. The cross of Constantine, for seventeen hundred years justifying war in the name of God was not and is not the cross of the God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. The cross of the “white Christ,” known most horrifically in the American slave holders’ religion, betrayed and betrays the cross of Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ That cross is present today in well-intentioned pictures of the Northern-European Jesus, subtly linking whiteness with goodness and saving power. The cross of “bear your suffering meekly,” “like a lamb,” where it drives abused women and others back into the hands of their abusers is not the cross of Jesus. Nor is the cross of Christian religious supremacy, raised in towns and cities where the faith of Jews, Muslims, or people of other religious traditions is denigrated.

Another cross so focusses attention on Christ crucified that it obscures Jesus the first century Jew, the very point where God becomes intimately knowable, touchable, one of us. To subsume Jesus in the cross seduces us into ignoring “the way” of living to which God in Jesus calls us. Irenaeus of Lyons, second century leader of a martyred church, knew this well; we are saved, he insisted, by God in the incarnation itself, which includes Jesus’ life as well as cross and resurrection.

The medieval turn to a cross that retains Jesus nailed to it, forever dead or dying, bears other dangers; the risen Christ, alive and breathing in and through creation is lost. The Incarnate One revealed today in a grain of wheat, in the touch of wind or sun on bare skin, and in human goodness, this Christ with us and within us may be pushed under where the cross holds Christ dead and captive on it.^{iv} False too is the cross that holds the second person of the Trinity so central that, in christocentric fervor, we forget that Jesus called us to worship not him, but the God whom he loved. As Joseph Sittler insisted, “There is no sense in being more Christocentric than Jesus was. And Jesus was not Christocentric at all.”^v

Indeed false crosses abound, in history and currently. At worst, they have justified domination, exploitation, and dehumanization. The responsibility of “faithful disbelief” includes recognizing

and exposing these falsehoods. Yet, that part of the life-giving story without which it would be neither the story nor ultimately and eternally life-giving remains central: the cross and resurrection.

We live in a world of beauty beyond comprehension, a glorious bit of earth and water resplendent with sight, sound, smell, and touch...a shimmering sphere created and destined to provide abundant life for all. I love to sleep outside so that when my eyes open, I see emerald and sapphire, or almost magical hues of grey, and my skin feels the breath of moving air. Often, I pretend that I am seeing for the first time the glittering of leaves in the light. It is marvelous and awesome, this fecund and fragile planet. The beauty within ordinary people--in their compassion, tenderness, courage, tenacity, and resilience--is another face of creation's splendor. When my perception is not clouded, I marvel at the depth of simple human goodness.

And this world is tormented. Our world--God's world--is tormented by suffering in multiple forms. This essay is concerned with human-caused suffering, more specifically suffering caused by social structures that bring power or wealth to some of Earth's people at the expense of others and of the Earth itself. Some theological trajectories, among them Catholic social teaching and some liberation theologies, refer to this dynamic as "structural sin." From a moral perspective, suffering caused by structural sin has two forms: that in which "we" are implicated--albeit unknowingly and unintentionally--and that in which "we" are not. This essay pertains singularly to the former. (Clearly, this distinction is overly-simplified. In reality, the two forms overlap. Furthermore, assessing who is implicated is enormously complex. Yet, despite the messiness, the distinction is significant.)

Today, humanity faces a two-fold moral crisis never before known: We are, in the words of John Cobb and Herman Daly, living toward "a *dead end*," destroying Earth's life systems, and building a soul-shattering gap between the rich and the impoverished. "The fact that many people of good will do not see this dead end is undeniably true...."^{vi} Hear it slowly: The human species, living in the manner in which you and I live, is a threat to life on earth. Our numbers and our excessive consumption threaten Earth's capacity to regenerate life. God created a planet that spawns and supports life with a complexity and generosity beyond human ken. Never before has a species endangered that generative capacity. *We have become the "uncreators."*

Here I have not time to argue that claim. Others in multiple fields of human inquiry (i.e. the life sciences and earth sciences, ecological science, economics, Christian ethics, moral philosophy, and business, to name just a few) have done so convincingly. Here I simply illustrate the two-fold crisis with the following voices, beginning with the ecological dimension and moving to the related challenge of economic equity.

The Earth Crisis:

- The World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environmental Programme warn that: "Humanity is conducting an unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be second only to a global nuclear war. The Earth's atmosphere is being changed at an unprecedented rate by pollutants resulting from human activities, inefficient and wasteful fossil fuel use, and the effects of rapid population growth in

many regions. These changes represent a major threat to international security and are already having harmful consequences over many parts of the globe."^{vii}

- A 1992 "Warning to Humanity," issued by more than 1600 senior scientists, including a majority of all living Nobel Laureates in the sciences, advises that: "[H]uman beings and the natural world are on a collision course...that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know."^{viii}

- "The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that the world's oceans could rise by about 95 centimeters by the year 2100....it is an alarming prospect for many low-lying regions of the planet, in both large and small states....Low-lying regions of the world are frequently fertile, densely populated and invested with expensive infrastructure. Therefore, sea-level rise by even 1 meter will lead to astronomical human and material costs. For example, it could affect over 70 million people in coastal China, and displace up to 10 per cent of the population of Egypt and 60 per cent of the population of Bangladesh. In low-lying states like the Maldives or the Marshall Islands, the entire population would be at risk....Sea levels rise due to the thermal expansion of the oceans and the melting of polar ice, as just one consequence of the ecological degradation that leads to global warming....Global warming is a result of the increasing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases. The primary cause of this is the overwhelming dependence of the world economy on fossil fuels."^{ix}

- "A child born in a wealthy country is likely to consume, waste, and pollute more in his lifetime than 50 children born in developing nations. Our energy-burning lifestyles are pushing our planet to the point of no return."^x "Every time someone in the West turns on a kettle, he or she is helping to flood Bangladesh."^{xi}

- "We're doing great, thank God. The American economy is flourishing. We're using more fossil fuels. We're putting more CO₂ in the air. The coal plants are running at record levels. Business has never been better. We're doing great!"^{xii}

The Economic Equity Crisis :

- The United Nations Human Development Programme reports that, "The world's richest 225 people have a combined wealth...equal to the annual income of the poorest 47 percent of the world's people."^{xiii} For many, asserts Jesuit priest, Jon Sobrino, "poverty means death."^{xiv}

- Methodist Bishop Bernardino Mandlate of Mozambique, when asked to address a United Nations meeting concerning the causes of poverty in Africa, identified the external debt as a primary cause. The debt, he declared, is "covered with the blood of African children. African children die so that North American children may overeat."^{xv} (The bishop was speaking of the millions of dollars in capital and interest transferred yearly from the world's poorest nations to foreign banks and international finance institutions controlled largely by the world's leading industrialized nations. The money spent in debt servicing is then not available for health care, education, or food and water security.) Bishop Mandlate's words ring a note of horror in the heart for those of us whose economies benefit from the capital and interest paid by the world's

poorest nations.

- According to an Oxfam Education Report, “Each year sub-Saharan Africa pays more in debt servicing (capital and interest) to the World bank, other multilateral institutions, and corporate banks than the total of all health and education budgets of the entire region.”^{xvi} Hold this together with the fact that “four million children under the age of five will die this year of preventable diseases--for lack of clean water and sanitation.”^{xvii} In 1997 the percent of GDP that Tanzania paid for debt service was ten times that spent on primary health care.^{xviii} Julius Nyerere, while President of Tanzania asked, “Should we really let our children starve so that we can pay our debts?”

The reality is gut-wrenching for people of relative economic privilege who live in the Global North, including me and, I suspect, most of my readers. Our lives are wound up in and benefit materially from social structures and norms that breed deadly economic violence for many whom we fail to see. And everyday life, in the ravenously consumptive and petroleum dependent mode that we consider normal, threatens the web of life called forth by the One whom we know as Creator of all.

What is the cross of Jesus Christ for a people who have become the “uncreators?”

Please note that “we,” “us,” and “our” figure prominently in this essay. They are dangerous pronouns, made much more so when the referent is not specified.^{xix} Henceforth, in this essay, unless otherwise noted, they refer to citizens of the United States who identify as Christians and who are “relatively privileged in economic terms.” With this phrase I am suggesting those of us whose have some degree of choice in how we spend our time, energy, and material goods, because the totality of those resources is not demanded by the need to assure basic minimal requirements of survival with dignity for ourselves and those dependent or interdependent on us, and because we have relative mobility and access to the commonly accepted processes of citizenship.

My Point in Sum

I will argue that, amidst widespread and vast suffering in which we are implicated, and given the threat that our way of living poses to life on Earth, the cross is central if Christians of relative economic privilege in the United States are to *confess* faith in the God whom Jesus revealed and trusted. Luther illumines the implications of “confessing faith.” “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God *except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking*, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ” (italics mine). Christians are called to confess the faith anew in each time and place in relationship to “that little point [of the truth of God] that the world and the devil are at that moment attacking.” Discerning what this means in our particular moment is the work of all who would confess faith in Christ.

Clearly the implications are infinite. It seems that “the devil and the world are attacking” numerous points of “God’s truth” at this moment in the brief history of our species’ presence on

this many-splendered planet. This essay concerns two of those points in relationship to one another. They are the truth claims that:

- God loves Her whole creation, not only the one species blessed with consciousness capable of reflection on itself, meaning, history, and potentiality.
- human beings, created in the image of God, are created for and called into intimate lovership with this God. We are to receive God's love and then to bear it into the world. God's love, breathed into us by the Holy Spirit, is creating, healing and liberating, and sustaining the world. Said differently, we are called to participate in what God is doing on Earth, and are empowered for that work by God's Spirit.

These two claims--held together--are "under attack" by the way in which we live. Our lifeways are a menace to Earth's life-support systems (air, water, soil), and are generating a massive and growing gap between those who have too much and those who have too little. For many, poverty is deadly. To live in life-destroying or life-degrading ways, where resistance and alternatives to those ways are possible, is to attack the truths of God's life-giving, life-saving, and life-sustaining love for this world and of our call to love as God loves.

To confess the faith *at this historical moment* is--drawing upon Luther's formulation--to profess or defend these two truth claims. We cannot defend them in words, if the over-whelming weight of our actions betray those words. To defend these two truth claims means engaging the pan-human and inter-faith "great work" of our day: forging ways of living--at the household, institutional, and societal levels--that Earth can sustain and that build economically just inter-human relations.^{xx} I will argue that, for Christians, so doing--as act of faith--is made possible by the cross of Christ. Thus, confessing the faith today is made possible by the cross.

The Question and the Preliminary Question

One question looms: *How* might the cross and our understanding of it do what I have asserted: enable people of faith to work toward ecologically sustainable and socially just ways of life? How might the cross of Jesus Christ contribute to this all-encompassing transformation of society--this re-formation of economic policies and practices, political structures, modes of transportation and recreation, architecture, business, and more? How might it enable people to conceptualize and adopt ways of life that do not threaten Earth's regenerative capacities and that build economically just relations with neighbors far and near?

Response requires a preliminary question. "What currently *undermines* our capacity to work toward ecologically sustainable and socially equitable ways of life?" What disables our moral-spiritual capacity to live as if indeed, as we claim: God loves this good Earth and its living beings with a love that seeks well-being for all, and we are called to embody that love? *Why* do we betray these truths by the ways in which we live? How is it possible that a people--the church--who professes these truths continues, as a whole, to endorse, embrace, further entrench, rationalize, "draw a line in the sand" for, and wage war to maintain an all encompassing mode of living that endangers all of Earth's life-support systems, and sucks the resources out of many lands whose people need them? In short, what undergirds our astounding moral inertia in the face of Earth's distress and the anguishing poverty of multitudes?

This set of questions--my “preliminary question”-- is, I believe, one of the most important facing humankind at this pivotal point in human history. Vaclav Havel said it well: “Today, the most important thing in my view is to study the reasons why humankind does nothing to avert the threats about which it knows so much, and why it allow itself to be carried onward by some kind of perpetual motion.” The question defies simple resolution. Accurate responses will be, of course, highly contextual and perspectival. As indicated previously, the context out of which and to which this essay speaks is that of United States Christians who are “relatively secure economically.”

That stage set, this essay proceeds in two parts. First I respond to this set of questions--my “preliminary question”--by probing four key factors undergirding moral inertia. Subsequently, I argue that a theology of the cross could counter those four factors, thus enabling our capacity to live toward more sustainable and just lifeways. In other words, by indicating how the cross might counter the dynamics that truncate our moral-spiritual power for just and sustainable living, I am suggesting how the cross might, in fact, enable that power.

Four Factors

Multiple factors contribute to moral inertia in the face of economically and ecologically exploitative lives. In previous work, I have investigated two.^{xxi} Others certainly include the power of sin in human life, and the practical constraints of time in our time-starved lifestyles. Here I suggest four additional dynamics.

Avoidance and Denial of Our Participation in Structural Sin

Some of us are not engaged because we do not see that ways of life long-lauded as “good” may in fact be quite the opposite from the perspective of eco-systems or of people whose poverty is maintained by social structures or political moves that enable our relative wealth. We fail to recognize the role that we play in on-going sins committed against the Earth and against many people whose lands, resources, and labor are enabling our lifestyles of outrageous consumption levels. We do not see because seeing would be too terrible. It would be too painful to acknowledge the truth, to recognize our implication in profound and widespread suffering, and in what threatens the life of the world today. Over 500,000 children under the age of five died in Iraq between 1991 and 1998 from disease connected to the United States’ bombing (devastation of water systems and electrical system and land contamination), and U.S. invoked sanctions prohibiting medicines from entering Iraq.^{xxii} How could we live with realities like this, if we truly took them in? How could we face the piercing, life-shattering anguish endured by the parents of those children? While human life depends upon the health of Earth’s life-support systems (air, soil, water, biosphere), “every natural system on the planet is disintegrating,”^{xxiii} due in significant part to massive consumption of petroleum products in the last 50 years. We, citizens of the United States, with our blind and insatiable addiction to oil, spew forth over 100 times the deadly green houses gases per capita as do our counterparts in some lands. How will we face our children, when they realize what we have done? How can we think the unthinkable, acknowledge the utterly unacceptable?

We, not by intent or will, but by virtue of the social structures that shape our lives, we are complicit in both the ecocide and the economic brutality. Our everyday lives, and the public policies and social structures that we assume to be normal or inevitable contribute to the destruction of God's good creation and to the life-shattering poverty of many.

It has been said that "to be human is to suffer knowing that we create suffering." "We are haunted," David Tracy declared, by that suffering.^{xxiv} Knowing *that* we cause suffering is not new. Knowing that we cause this magnitude of suffering is unprecedented. "We are the first generation in human history to know that we effect the survival of millions of species and of millions of people."^{xxv} We have no concrete guidance for living with this knowledge. Human beings are to learn "how to live" from those who go before us. Yet no ancestors have prepared us for this position, for this knowledge of ourselves as the "uncreators."

From this knowledge of this kind we flee. *Not seeing*--moral blindness--is far more bearable. Blindness failing, numbness sets in. Where numbness thaws, despair makes sense. We retreat into denial and defensiveness, privatized morality, or overwhelmed exhaustion. Holy outrage and lament are dead before born, and we hide from accountability for systemic sin under the comforting cloak of virtue in private life.

Grave moral danger accompanies avoidance and denial. Crucial moral wight lies in what we see and refuse to see. When good and compassionate people do not see the consequences of lifeways we uncritically accept as normal, natural, inevitable, or divinely ordained, we simply carry on with them. Thereby our lives betray the truths that the world--including its human creatures--is beloved of God, and that we are called to love as God loves. That betrayal stems, in part, from failure to acknowledge who we are as accomplices in a human attack--albeit unintentional and unknowing--on God's beloved Earth and many of its people.

Denial of Who We Are as Bearers of God's Love

Others, who, in contrast, do dare to face their participation in structural sin, may retreat from public morality for an opposite reason, a denial of *who we are* because of Gods saving acts and of *why we are created*: we are friends of God, beckoned and empowered by God to receive Her love, and then to live that justice-making mysterious and marvellous love into the world. Life is breathed into us for a purpose. We are given a lifework: to receive God's love; to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength; and to love neighbour as self. We are here to let God work through us, in us, and among us to bring healing from all forms of sin that would thwart gods gift of abundant life for all. This is our vocation as Christ's body on earth today. If the first factor is a failure to see the consequences of social structural sin in our lives, this second is a failure to see the depth and extent of the freedom for which God has set us free from sin to serve the God of life.

A Sense of Powerlessness

For many people, moral inertia in the face of the Earth crisis and the inequity crisis stems from a sense of powerlessness. On some level, perhaps unconscious, many of us perceive that

something is terribly wrong; life should not grant unbounded consumption to some while others starve. Yet the systemic forces undergirding that situation and the Earth's degradation seem too powerful for human agency to impact. The sense that "I cannot make a difference" easily overwhelms, and with good reason. It seems impossible or at least difficult to trust that God indeed is luring all of creation toward the reign of God, and that no form of sin ultimately can triumph.

An Anthropocentric Lens

Finally, I suspect that the anthropocentric lens through which we tend to view God's indwelling presence may inhibit the moral power inherent in it. Until recent eco-feminist theologies, feminist theologies of mutual relations, and ecological theologies, Western Protestant theology and ethics have not taken seriously the ancient Christian claim that God dwells within, not only human creatures, but "all things." Failing to consider the "presence and power of God abiding in "other-than-human" parts of creation, we fail to consider how that God-presence might nurture human capacity to serve God's work on Earth. Furthermore, anthropocentric assumptions preclude questioning the implications that ecological destruction might have for a faith tradition that locates Christ on the underside of power and in places of destruction and pain. Cruciform Earth does not appear where the abode of the immanent Christ is singularly human.

To confess Christ is to profess "that little point [of the truth of God] that the world and the devil are at that moment attacking." Today, those include the truths that this Earth is infinitely beloved by God, and that we are called to embody God's justice-making love in all that we do. In our context, defending those truths entails seeking sustainable Earth-human relationships, and economic practices and policies that lessen rather than aggravate poverty and the wealth gap. Having asked what disables our moral-spiritual capacity to do so, we noted four of many contributing dynamics. I have experienced all of them, sometimes more than one at a time. They are dangerous. Together they seduce otherwise morally responsible people into complicity with ways of life that undercut Earth's regenerative capacities and enforce the poverty of many. I am convicted that the cross of Christ and a practiced theology of the cross may counter these four dynamics, thus profoundly *enabling* moral-spiritual power to strive for justice-making Earth-honoring ways of being human.

The Cross

What has the cross to do with healing these forms of moral inertia? How might the cross counter these disabling dynamics? That is, in what sense might the cross of Christ enable God's people to: 1) recognize the extent of our implication in ecological and economic injustice, 2) claim our identity as participants in God's life-giving and life-saving work on Earth, 3) embody a sense of hope and power for that work, and 4) receive the moral power, motivation, and wisdom that may flow from the presence of God inhabiting "even the tiniest leaf"?

For insight, we turn initially to the lived theology of the cross emerging in the last two works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,^{xxvi} and then, briefly, to the long under-considered theology of Christ immanent in all things, as it converges with a theology of the cross. A significant assumption

about theological method surfaces in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*.^{xxvii} Reflecting Luther, Bonhoeffer demands and demonstrates that theology worthy of its name develops out of struggle to live the gospel where it is betrayed in each particular time and place. Often that betrayal is grounded in failure to see clearly. Bonhoeffer, as I, was convinced that moral power dies when good people fail to recognize evil in the guise of good. He warns that the moral sensibility of good people easily is warped by their failure to recognize social evil "disguised as light, charity, historical necessity, or social justice." Referring to "fools" who have become passive and complicit in the face of structural evil, he writes: "The fool will be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil. Here lies the danger..."^{xxviii} Theology, then, must address the very points at which evil parading as good is attacking the life of the world, disclose evil for what it is, and counter it with prayer and righteous action. So doing, he understands, may be at risk of life, but is in fact life-giving. Bonhoeffer's theological method, in this sense, enjoins: To glimpse the meaning of the cross, seek and see where the good news of God's unquenchable and incarnate love for the world is betrayed, and there act in accord with that love.

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer struggles to formulate four alternative ethical frameworks. All are theologically grounded, and either point to or presuppose and elaborate the following three theological claims inherent in the theology of the cross found in the later Bonhoeffer and in Luther. These three--held together--reveal a theology of the cross capable of countering the morally enervating dynamics identified above. That is, Bonhoeffer points to a theology of the cross that could assist contemporary Christians to accept the challenge of forging ways of human life that actively embody God's healing and liberating love for this world. Consider these three claims and a fourth, noting that the first cannot be read without the two that follow it.

Cross Reveals Who We Are: Selves "Curved in on Self"^{xxix}

First, we have said that people of relative privilege tend to arrange life around lines that hide from us, the cruel impact of structural sin and our implication in it. Our media, zoning policies, investment procedures, commercial activities, vacation and recreation patterns, transportation routines, and other life habits shelter us from those realities. Theologian Simeon Illesanmi describes the blind ignorance that accompanies economic inequity today. "Those at the bottom are very bad off in both absolute and relative terms." "The conduct of those at the top produces the poverty of those at the bottom." And the former can "avoid contact" with the latter, and thus avoid consciousness of their poverty.^{xxx} I do not *see* the children of Mozambique, for example, who do not eat because their nation's resources goes to finance the international debt, a debt structure that brings wealth from the most impoverished nations to the wealthier.

Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross--mirroring Luther's--counsels that the work and ways of God are revealed most fully in Jesus Christ. Moreover, in some way beyond full human comprehension, this One--while known profoundly in life's beauty and joy--is known perhaps most deeply in places of brokenness and suffering. Thus, we will know God and glimpse what God is doing most fully, to the extent that we recognize God in the goodness and splendor of earthly life, *and* allow ourselves to be present in profound solidarity where people and creation suffer most.^{xxxi} Where systemic injustice breeds suffering, solidarity means seeing that injustice and, in Bonhoeffer's terms, "putting a spoke in the wheel" to stop it. Many others--especially in

early liberation theologies--have articulated this argument, clearly and convincingly. Here, we build on it.

To be deeply present “with and for” beings (human and other) and places who suffer the ravages of systemic exploitation, and to seek its undoing, is to begin to see the world in reverse, upside down. It is to begin to see that ways of life previously assumed to be good, may not be. To be with and for people and places on the underside of power and privilege, from a stance of justice-making love, opens eyes to systemic sources of suffering. Glimpsing those structures (economic, political, ideological, and other) is a window into ways in which our lives, and particular our material wealth, are wound up in those structures and dependent upon them. Daring to follow the gaze reveals ourselves as a people so “curved in on self” that alone we consume ??% of the world’s resources while comprising only ??% of its population, and accept the reality of poverty and ecological degradation without effectively asking “what are the political, economic structures that make this possible, and how can we resist?” If being present “with and on behalf of” is integral to a lived theology of the cross, then the cross opens eyes to who we are as participants in systemic sin. If, as I have suggested, failure to *see* our implication in ecological and economic violence fosters moral inertia in the face of it, then the cross, by enabling that vision, may free up moral power.

Were a theology of the cross to end here, it would not be the cross of Jesus Christ To behold in the cross the depth of humankind’s corruption, and not our salvation would defy the gospel. My own experience and the truth-telling of others convinces me that this vision of corruption is indeed too dangerous. It is a realization too condemning to bear unless at the same time we see that precisely there, in the furthest reaches of brokenness, in bondage to evil, the saving Christ is present, is healing, is liberating. The only force that truly can heal creation is drawn instinctively there, and in that place draws forth healing power that we did not know we had. This truth enables seeing the structural brutality of which we are a part without being destroyed by that knowledge. This truth beckons us out of the denial and avoidance that render moral complacency. Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, says it well: The central message of the cross “is not to reveal that our condition is one of darkness and death; it is to reveal to us the One who meets us in our darkness and death. It is a theology of the cross not because it wants to put forth this ghastly spectacle as a final statement about life in this world but because it insists that God...meets, loves, and redeems us precisely where we are : in the valley of the shadow of death.”^{xxxii}

This claim is stranger than it seems. It is not unusual to realize that in illness, death, despair, destitution, and other forms of suffering, the saving One is present. Many of us have experienced that grace. However, God’s presence in the depths of our brokenness means that God with grace is present even where “I” am perpetrator of tremendous violence against others. God is present even if I continue with that violence, and even if I have no awareness of God’s presence, and have no faith that God is present. A central message of what became known as Luther’s theology of the cross and continued in Bonhoeffer’s is that where God seems *absent*, there God is. God is hidden in God’s apparent absence. The saving power of God is hidden in the form of its opposite (*sub contrario suo abscondita sunt*). “*Nothing* can separate us “from the love of God in Jesus Christ” (Romans 8:39). The power of this claim is immeasurable for those who have glimpsed even momentarily the horror of being an extravagantly wealthy Christian in a world filled with

hungry people whose hunger is connected to ones wealth. This saving claim makes possible seeing that reality, rather than pretending that the economic systems that create our wealth are beneficial to all. When reality seems “distorted and sinful, and seemingly Godforsaken...a theologian of the cross is not afraid to recognize reality for what it is.”^{xxxiii} In Luther’s words, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”^{xxxiv}

The late Joseph Sittler, one of America’s great theologians and a seminal thinker in eco-theology, expresses well the oddity of this message of the cross to the reason-seasoned mind. It “is so radically strange to the symbolic mentality of [our] time that one can scarce find hooks to hank it on, allusions to convey it with, or a matrix of association to bear it forth.”^{xxxv} Martin Luther claimed that human beings can know God through reason, but cannot by reason, know that God is *pro nobis* (for us) regardless of any circumstance. This knowledge, Luther claims, is offered by the cross alone. I am not sure that I agree with his “alone;” it limits the power of the Spirit. However, I find truth in his claim that the cross with resurrection indeed speak this reason-baffling claim about God’s saving presence that can be stopped by no force in heaven or Earth, including our own bondage to structural sin.

Cross Reveals Who We Are: Bearers of Indominatable Love

This second claim also concerns moral anthropology, yet makes quite the opposite point. While the first revealed our identity as participants in structural sin, this claim reveals us as dwelling place of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, and therefore as *subjects* of Christic love. Moral anthropology, who we are as moral beings, has been a central and contested concern of Christianity for two millennia. It is present in the Pauline corpus, the gospels, and the extracanonical early Christian writings. It was key in the theological struggles of the first centuries, including the gnostic, Donatist and Palegian controversies.^{xxxvi}

A widely accepted theological stream holds that baptized followers of Jesus Christ live in a paradoxical moral reality, corresponding to the “already and not yet” reign of God on Earth. This has been expressed diversely throughout Christian history. In sweepingly general terms: we are alienated from God and as a consequence of this alienation, we will, as individuals and as humankind, betray (to some extent) the ways and will of God; we will participate in sin, live as “selves curved in on self.” Simultaneously, we are saved by the work of God in Christ and Spirit. Salvation frees us for loving God, self, others, and this good Earth as “God so loved the world.” Clearly the connotations and denotations of these terms and the relative weight of “sinner” and “saved” in shaping human morality are highly contested.

Here I do not enter those debates. Rather I look for the moral agency implications of this paradoxical moral anthropology, as it relates to the cross. While we are implicated in cruel forms of oppression, we also *are body of Christ on Earth*. The living Christ and the Spirit of God abide within and among the people of God. Bonhoeffer, informed by his biblical scholarship and his context, is adamant that the love of Christ--revealed most fully in the cross--has chosen to “abide in” the church (although not only the church). For him, as for Luther, the finite bears the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*). The “finite” is all of creation. Yet, in a particular way, “the finite” is the church. “Christ’s relationship with the church is two-fold; he is the creator of its entire life . . .

and he is also really present at all times in his church, for the church is his body In the community, Christ is at work as with an instrument. He is present in it.”^{xxxvii} That Christ-presence engenders love for one another that is magnificent beyond comprehension, and is stronger than the threat of death itself.

In Bonhoeffer’s terms, Christ dwelling in the church “conforms” it to “the form of Jesus Christ,” God’s overflowing love incarnate as a believing community acting responsibly in the world on behalf of abundant life for all and against what thwarts it.^{xxxviii} That action requires recognizing social evil, naming it, and “putting a spoke in the wheel” of earthly powers that demand disobedience to God. The power to serve others and resist social structural evil, even when so doing is terribly costly, is the actual love of God as Christ taking form in the community of faith.^{xxxix} For Bonhoeffer, as for Luther, the wellspring of the church’s power for “participating in God’s mission” in the world is the crucified and living Christ abiding in and gradually, but never fully, transforming the community of believers.^{xl} Christians as objects of Christ’s love become subjects of that love. Faith is both “faith in Christ” and “faith of Christ.”^{xli} This is not, for Bonhoeffer, a matter of effort to “become like Jesus.” Rather, it is a matter of the Spirit working to unite human beings (as individuals and as humanity) with God in Christ. That God, in whom the church has its being and who abides in it, is a God utterly active in history in every dimension of life. And, *as revealed in the cross and resurrection*, it is a God whose life-serving love is indomitable, even when it appears to be defeated.

It is an ancient faith claim--that God’s love in Christ is “flowing and pouring into all things” and there offers creating, saving, and sustaining power for the healing of a broken world.^{xlii} Incarnate mystery lives in and among us as justice-making, self-honoring neighbor-love. The church today is called to rekindle that ancient faith claim, to breathe and live in the promise that indeed this God is incarnate in us—mud creatures of the earth,^{xliii} gathered to praise God and “participate in God’s mission”—and, in us, is hungering and hastening toward the restoration of this precious and brutalized world. This vision breathes power to open our hearts and minds to the “data of despair”—including our implication in ecological and economic violence--and not drown in it, but rather enter into it on behalf of life abundant for all. In the face of hopelessness or despair, herein lies hope and power for living as body of Christ.

My feminist and womanist sensibilities and commitments flare, and rightly so, in a least two senses. Is this “conformation with the form of Christ” a reification of servanthood, the state to which women, especially women of color, historically have been thrust and imprisoned? And is it a glorification of self-sacrifice, the “virtue” historically imposed upon women? At first glance, so it appears. And yet, I think not. On the first count, Bonhoeffer’s theology subtly defies the assumption that one sector of society is primarily to serve the other. For him, the state of “being *for* one another” is given only in the context of also “being *with* one another.”^{xliv} That is, he presupposes faith community in which one not only serves the well-being of others, but receives the same from others. This *miteinander* and *fureinander* is so deep and real that, his death pending, Bonhoeffer calls to a brother to *live* for him: “Brother, when the sun turns pale for me, then live for me.”^{xlv} The message for us is not an elevation of servanthood, but a declaration that daring to stand for life in the face of ecological or economic violence--despite the risks entailed--is not work of individuals; it is the work of people woven by the Spirit into a body in which all give and all receive. On the second count, conformation with the form of Christ, for Bonhoeffer

is not formation toward self-sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice *per se*; it is formation toward a freedom to live as whole person, to be fully human, to be “the creator’s creature,” and to help enable that freedom and fullness of life for all. If, in the service of life--rich and full life for all including self--one is called to action that may endanger life, then that cost is not to be shunned.

Cross Ends in Resurrection Hope

The cross speaks hope in the face of despair. For many people, as noted above, moral inertia in the face of ecological and economic violence is born not of failure to see it, but of hopelessness; the forces of wrong seem too powerful for human beings to impact. Resistance and work toward alternatives appear futile. Despair is sown by a deep sense that things will continue as they are in this world.

The cross and resurrection promise otherwise. The power of God liberating all of creation from the bonds of oppression, destruction, and death is “stronger” than all forces that would undermine God’s promise that all shall have life and have it abundantly. We have heard the end of the story, and it is resurrection. Soul-searing, life-shattering destruction and death is not the last word, in this moment or forever. In some way that we do not grasp, the last word is life raised up out of brutal death. In the midst of suffering and death—be it individual, social, or ecological—the promise given to the Earth community is that life in God will reign. God in Christ and Spirit is restoring the Earth community and will redeem human beings from living as its enemies. God’s future for creation is life abundant for all. So speaks the resurrection.

This message of hope also bears danger. It may lead people to abdicate responsibility for public morality, leaving it in “God’s hands.” Bonhoeffer’s startling dialectic between ultimate trust in God, and unwavering critique of liberal Christianity’s *deus ex machina*, demands otherwise.^{xlvi} His ethic of responsible action to disclose and confront evil is grounded in absolute dependence on God and trust in God. “I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil,” he writes, “even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose [God] needs [people]....I believe that God will give us all the strength we need to help us to resist in all time of distress....”^{xlvii} Yet, Bonhoeffer denounces religion’s pervasive proclivity for reducing God to “a machine for fixing life’s problems” and for leaving action to the agency of God alone. He insists that God’s power on behalf of the world is not that of a fix-it machine, but rather is located in God’s embodied presence in and with responsible actions by human beings on behalf of life.

Christ Present in “All Things”

Multiple streams of Christian tradition, from its earliest centuries, affirm the *mysterium tremendum* that God dwells within not only human beings, but all creatures and elements. Hear that incarnational claim in a voice not widely recognized for it, Martin Luther. “...the power of God...must be essentially present in all places even in the tiniest leaf.”^{xlviii} God is “present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being....”^{xlix} God “is in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all...”^l “...everything is full of Christ through and through...”^{li} “...all creatures are ...permeable and present to [Christ].”^{lii} “Christ...fills all things....Christ is around us and in us in all places....he is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water...”^{liii}

If indeed Christ fills Earth's creatures and elements, then the Earth now being "crucified" by human ignorance, greed, and arrogance is, in some sense, body of Christ. Followers of Jesus the Christ, in every age are charged with asking Bonhoeffer's question: "Who is Christ for us today?" Where is the cross today? Where are we lured into denying Christ crucified today? If Earth, as habitation of God, as body of Christ, is cruciform, and if believers took seriously this christological claim, might we be motivated to treat this Earth differently?

Furthermore, God as boundless justice-seeking love, living and loving not only in human beings, but also in the rest of creation implies that *other-than-human creatures and elements embody Divine agency toward creation's flourishing*. Earth embodies God, that is, not only as creative and revelatory presence, but also as teaching, saving, sustaining, empowering presence...as agency to serve the widespread good. How might moral agency--power to resist social and ecological destruction and to move toward just, sustainable lifeways--be fed and watered in human beings by this God-presence and God-power coursing through "all created things"?^{liv}

These two notions--of Christ crucified in a crucified Earth, and of God's saving power and presence indwelling the created world--indeed may render moral motivation and moral agency for the long and uncharted journey toward a world in which humankind is not toxic to our planetary home and in which none amass wealth at the cost of others' impoverishment. Pursuing these theological possibilities at the intersection of cross and indwelling Presence, may be key to a theology of the cross capable of enabling moral agency in the face of ecological and economic violence today.

In Sum

"If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Chris." Today, ways of life that we assume to be "good" are destroying Earth's capacity to sustain life as we know it, and are generating a massive gap between those who have too much and those who have too little for life or for life with dignity. Two long-standing Christian claims--that God loves creation actively, and that God's people are called and empowered by the Spirit to receive that divine love and bear it into the world--when held together, are "attacked" by those purportedly "good" ways of life.

In this context, and in line with Luther's words, confessing the faith means witnessing to the truth of those claims. We do so by living *as if* they are indeed true. That is, we witness through conversion or re-formation toward ways of being human that nurture rather than threaten Earth's health, and that re-structure political-economic systems that buy wealth for some at the expense of life for others. Douglas John Hall's interpretation of "confessing the faith" rings true: In today's context, North America Christians of economic privilege "confess the faith," when, by contemplating life as we know it in light of the faith tradition, "we are thrust into an active engagement with that which threatens the life of our world."^{lv}

This confession of faith, this ongoing conversion or eco-reformation, this quest for Earth-honoring justice-making ways of being human, I have suggested, may be enabled by a lived theology of the cross. This essay queried: “How might the cross enable eco-reformation toward lifeways that nurture Earth’s health and that build economically just relations with neighbors far and near?” In response, we first noted four key factors that may dissuade us from that lifework, four dynamics that breed moral inertia: 1) the tendency not to recognize our own participation in social structural sin; 2) the tendency not to recognize who we are called and empowered to be as participants with God in God’s work on Earth; 3) a sense of powerlessness in the face of systemic forces that seem beyond human agency to impact; and 4) an anthropocentric understanding of God’s indwelling presence. Finally, we challenged a Lutheran theology of the cross to overturn those barriers, turning for guidance to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and to the ancient Christian understanding that God abides within God’s creation. The latter opens doors to sources of moral motivation and agency obscured by more anthropocentric notions of God’s indwelling presence. Bonhoeffer’s lived theology of the cross and resurrection reveals who we are as both perpetrators of systemic sin and bearers of God’s liberating and healing love. And it offers assurance that--by the grace of God--our being the latter ultimately will triumph over the former.

ENDNOTES

ⁱThe term is from Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Christian Dogmatics of Disbelief* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994).

ⁱⁱThe New Testament word translated into English as “tradition,” was, in the New Testament, used first as a verb, to tradition ??????????????????, meaning “to pass on” as a tradition is passed on. However that verb also means “to betray” that which is to be passed on. It is, for instance, is the verb translated as “betray” when Judas betrayed Jesus into the hands of the Roman soldiers.

ⁱⁱⁱSee Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997).

^{iv}For this insight, I thank Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Anne Parker, keynote address at the Annual Dinner of the Rauschenbusch Center, Seattle, WA., Nov. 28, 2005. The material is from their forthcoming book, *Saving Paradise*.

^vJoseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 106.

^{vi} John Cobb, Jr. and Herman Daly, *For the Common Good* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, 1994), 21, 21.

^{vii}Statement by World Meteorological Organization, United Nations Environmental Programme, and Environment Canada at The Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security Conference, Toronto, June 1988.

^{viii} See actionbioscience.org/environment/worldscientists (a website of the American Institute for Biological Sciences.)

^{ix}Ministry of Home Affairs, Housing & Environment, Maldives, March 11, 2003.

^xGeorge Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, UK, cited in Guy Dauncey with Patrick Mazza, *Stormy Weather: 101 Solutions to Global Climate Change* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2001).

^{xi}George Monbiot, *The Guardian Weekly*, Feb 10th 2000.

^{xii}Fred Palmer, Western Fuels Association, cited in Dauncey.

^{xiii}The United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1998* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29-30, using data from *Forbes Magazine* (1997).

^{xiv}Jon Sobrino, Jesuit priest at the University of Central America, San Salvador, in conversation.

^{xv}Bernardino Mandlate, in a presentation to the United Nations PrepCom for the World Summit on Social Development Plus Ten, New York, February, 1999.

^{xvi}Oxfam America, *Oxfam Education Report*.

^{xvii}Michael Holman and Quentin Peel, "Debt: Too Much to Bear," in *Financial Times* Saturday Jun 12, 1999.

^{xviii}Oxfam America, the Oxfam Education Report.

^{xix}For brief inquiry into these "dangers," see Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 13.

^{xx}"Great work" is the term coined by Thomas Berry referring to the ecological dimension of this two-fold undertaking. See Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999). Some have called the move to sustainable Earth-human relations the fourth great revolution in human history, following the agricultural, industrial, and technological revolutions.

^{xxi}Moe-Lobeda, ch. 1-3.

^{xxii}Figures provided by the United Nations and public health physicians at Columbia University.

^{xxiii}Paul Hawken, *The Ecology of Commerce* (San Francisco: Harper Books, 1993), 22 .

^{xxiv}David Tracey, public lecture at Seattle University, 2005.

^{xxv}Sharon Daloz Parks, a lecture delivered at Holden Village, Washington, Sept. 2004.

^{xxvi}Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a leading German theologian martyred for his leadership in the movement to resist Hitler and fascism. For many and complex reasons, any foray into Bonhoeffer's life and works, for the sake of faithful Christian praxis today, must come with cautionary notes that space precludes elaborating here. They include the following: Rethink his centralizing of suffering, in light of feminist and womanist critiques of that centerpiece. Contextualize his christocentrism. Heed his later self-criticism of his earlier work, specifically his misgivings regarding *The Cost of Discipleship*. Wayne Floyd, in "Revisioning Bonhoeffer for the Coming Generation: Challenges in Translating the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works *Dialog* 34: 1 (winter 95), 35-36 suggests additional cautions: Avoid quick answers or reductionist questions regarding Bonhoeffer. Don't try to make obvious or overt what is cryptic or obscure in his writing. Don't try to make his knowledge of the plight of the Jews and of Christian anti-Semitism greater or more insightful than it was.

^{xxvii}Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, partly because it is inherently contextual and experiential, develops over time.

^{xl}This sense of the form of Christ taking form in and among the faithful is expressed most explicitly by Bonhoeffer in elaborating the third approach to ethics, “conformation with the form of Christ,” seen in his *Ethics*, ch. III, esp. 81–89. Throughout Bonhoeffer’s work, the process of “conformation with the form of Christ” entails obedience to the will of God and responsibility in the world. In the last year of his life (from the time just before his imprisonment when the last “approach” in *Ethics* was written), the nature of “conformation with the form of Christ” develops from active proclamation to a form of faithfulness in a “season of silence,” characterized by silence, waiting, and preparation for the time when once again the redeeming renewing Word may be proclaimed. The language of “Christ dwelling in” is present also in Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 303, although that work is not our primary source here.

^{xli}Note that the New Testament Greek generally translated as “faith in Christ,” in many instances, also may be translated accurately as faith “of “ Christ.

^{xlii} Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 26, as cited by Larry Rasmussen, “Luther and a Gospel of Earth,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 51, no. 1–2 (1997), 22.

^{xliii}“Mud creatures,” is the English translation of the Greek term used by Irenaeus of Lyons, second century leader of a severely persecuted Christian community, to translate the Hebrew word, usually rendered Adam in the Genesis creation stories.

^{xliv} This is expressed explicitly in Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 134. Here he is explicit also that this “being with and for” is given by Christ.

^{xlv} Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 355.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, 281–82, 341, 361.

^{xlvii} *Ibid.*, 361.

^{xlviii} Luther, “That These Words of Christ, ‘This is My Body,’ etc. Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics,” *Luther’s Works* 37:57.

^{xlix} *Ibid.*, 58.

^l Luther, the *Weimar Ausgabe* 23.134.34, as cited by Rasmussen, “Luther and a Gospel of Earth,” 22, citing Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 129.

^{li} *Ibid.*, 387.

^{lii} *Ibid.*, 386.

^{liii} Luther, “The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics,” in Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 321.

^{liv} Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper,” in Lull, 397.

^{lv} Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Faith in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 2.