

Kathy Cochrane: The Most Recent 27 Years of Call

Sermon – Seekers Church

July 23, 2000

Kathy Cochrane

The Most Recent 27 Years of Call

Good Morning,

"Ah you who build house to house, who add field to field, until there is no one but you and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land." These are the words of Isaiah. (Isaiah 5:8) They have ecological, theological and social justice implications for us today who find ourselves participants in the church. Unfortunately since the 1500's nature in the reformation, tradition has been influenced by the natural sciences, the philosophy of Kant and modern industrialism. Nature became secularized and even by theological thinkers nature became a mere thing "and therefore a world which humans must constantly transcend if they are to be rightly related to God" as theologian Paul Santmire says in his book The Travail of Nature, The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology.

This industrial-mechanical view of nature has removed God from the picture. The exploitation of the globe becomes the end of the human's physical activity. Nature is handed over to the forces of secularism.

This is what we have inherited in our Christian tradition of faith: God and humanity apart from nature. Thus, it is that

people like me who have endeavored to keep God, humanity and nature together are often seen as suspect within the faith community, or we are seen as environmentalists. I have tried to be one of those Christians who have kept together all the symbols and norms of the Christian faith – God, the human and nature.

So, this morning I would like to share with you some of the actions and meanings that this has meant for me in my life of faith. [In April](#), I shared with you the first 27 or so years. Today, I will touch on the most recent 27 of a call that has spread over more than 50 years.

For me, a faith support for the earth is writing letters to Congress or others about earth care issues that need to be addressed. I remember one Congressman who heard from me so often started writing me about actions in which he thought I would be interested. Moreover, a friend who worked for a Congressman told me once. "Oh we hate to get letters from people like you because we know you know what you are talking about."

Since this was a faith action for me I was elated in 1992 when in James Nash's book Loving Nature, Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility he spoke about what I was doing – affirming what for me had been many years of faith action. He says, and I quote: "Thus, if Christian churches are committed to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, setting at liberty the oppressed, challenging the powers that be, the churches dare not ignore the political and economic contexts of these concerns. Every political issue that affects biospheric welfare – whether it is the nuclear arms race or the unemployment rate, starvation or pollution, racism or extinctions—is simultaneously a moral and spiritual concern, and therefore, a challenge to love. If we are to deal with social causes and not merely individual symptoms, these issues in their political settings must be items on the agenda of a truly catholic, evangelical and reformed church." (p. 193)

Along with this letter, writing grew my concern for social and environmental responsibility in investing money. This is a complicated area, but it is another where we can and must endeavor to speak for the earth and others.

Another way in which I endeavored to put my faith into action was responsibly caring for the property entrusted to our keeping. I have tried to do earth care using organic methods or something akin to integrated pest management. When I designed our property 31 years ago, I kept many of the native plants. Doug, Andrea and I rescued native species in areas scheduled for development. I would call the real estate agent and get permission to collect these plants and rescue them to live at our place.

I put my faith into action in my neighborhood; first, as a pro-bono landscape architect, I designed a small park. Then the activist started working. From involvement with the plans to onsite inspections on the job at 6:30 am, I did "unpaid" work for more than three years on a sewer project that was going through our neighborhood and park. This was and is God's work—caring for the earth, and was and is just as important as the other church work that goes on in or out from the church. Because of my arguing for the preservation of trees, the county agreed to change the right-of-way from 50' to 40'. Over a number of miles quite a few trees are living today that would have fallen to the axe in the woodland. I convinced the county to realign the sewer in order to save some specimen trees. Neighbors and I moved native plants from this site and got permission to plant them in a nearby park.

Things happened on the job that were more profound than I realized. Sixteen years after its completion the supervisor on the job called me to tell me all of the things he had learned from me – that he has never looked at the earth the same way since that time—that many a project he changed to save trees. When I commented to him that the work that I had done was faith work he replied that that had been evident in the way I

did the work. I was grateful for that feedback from Charlie.

"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." [Micah 6:8]. Because my central call is to care for the earth, this does not mean I have ignored the human. Actually in my life, I have called the Church to extend justice to humans in need. In adult classes I coordinated, I emphasized issues like homelessness, the poor etc. I would bring in people to speak in class who were dealing with these issues. Often, because of these classes the church would then start supporting the particular work. Care of the earth is not separate from the rest of the "justice" call of God.

My raising the justice issue of solidarity with the poor in Latin America brought out the right wing power in the church. I invited a Princeton Seminary student to speak in adult classes on liberation theology. I was threatened with trouble if I ever brought him back to the church for more teaching. This, my friends, was a young man who had to flee Argentina because of his human rights activity. To the powers in the church, this man was a "communist" because he taught liberation theology.

Theologians and economists are now articulating the connection between oppression of the poor and oppression of the earth. Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff discusses the relationship in his book Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor, published in 1997. He quotes Hallmann and Derr when he says that liberation theology and ecological discourse start from two bleeding wounds. The wound of poverty breaks the social fabric of millions of poor people worldwide. The other wound, the systematic assault on the Earth breaks down the balance of the planet as it is destroyed by development as practiced by contemporary global societies. Yes, these two concerns are connected.

When the church came out against my Argentine friend, two

theologian friends who were professors in Latin America called me a prophet. That stunned me. As I have continued to call for justice not only for people but also for earth, I have heard myself described this way by others. One, who is a Seeker, Jackie, handed me a book one day—Bruggeman's The Prophetic Imagination and said, "Do you know why I am giving you this to read?" To which question she answered by saying, "Because you are one. " This naming of my gift and call is both humbling and terrifying. I believe it is also why now as I struggle with so much physical pain and fatigue that I grieve over not being able to articulate the prophetic voice for creation in a continuous manner.

Those of you who are interested in pursuing the connection between earth, faith, liberation, ecology, justice, economics etc. might want to read among others Liberating Nature by King and Woodyard, theologian and economist.

In my devotional life, I have used various pathways like Bible studies, devotional books, writing poetry and journaling. Elizabeth O'Connor's books, especially her Eighth Day of Creation, were helpful.

At other times, I use more active modes, as spoken of in Parker J. Palmer's book The Active Life. At these times, my walks for exercise remain spiritual journeys with God and creation. Throughout my life, I have engaged in the aspect of prayer for others as I pass them – "flash prayers" Frank Laubach calls them.

In the summers, I was blessed with the joy of spending time on the Chesapeake Bay in a small cabin called "Treetops." There the three of us visited my aunt Ebeth. It was restorative in every dimension. Waking to the song of a Wood Thrush, long walks watching birds in the morning, canoeing Churn and Still Pond Creeks, swimming in the early afternoon in the Bay, journaling and praying on the beach, precious conversations with Ebeth on the porch as we listened to night songs of

insects after supper, on the porch. God was present in these Holy times by the Bay.

About 22 years ago, I chose to sharpen my painting skills to express my love for God's earth. I started studying watercolor painting. My paintings are prayers of thanksgiving and praise for God's creation. At times, I also include my poetry on my paintings. I was in a Gallery in Chestertown Maryland for nine years and another gallery in Alexandria for a while. I have had other individual shows. My brother-in-law, a pastor of a Baptist Church in Seattle, requested one of note. Inspiration for this show was a handmade book of my paintings, poems and photographs that I had given him and my sister in 1964. In looking at it again some 28 years later he wanted others to see it, as well as some of my more recent endeavors. Therefore, I showed examples of my landscape architecture drawings, paintings and poems in the small gallery in the church – and the book was out for viewing at the opening.

In the late 70's, I studied liturgical dance with Kathryn Fredgren. I then taught this art form, at times using my paintings as part of the teaching picture. I loved this means of expression – of praying and teaching and worshiping with the body. For a time, all three of us did this – Doug, Andrea and me.

When Andrea was in high school, I photographed and painted dancers in her dance school and company. I also photographed and painted athletes in track and field and cross-country. I sold photos and paintings of these kids to them, their moms and dads, girl and boy friends. I did not just take photos. I interacted with these teens. I urged them to go with the gifts God had given them as athletes and not to throwaway their lives in destructive things that teens are urged to do. I began to realize that for some, I was the only affirming, loving person in their life. I gave them "attagirls" and "attaboys." I was to find out later that my presence had been a very positive force in some of their lives.

One of the young men that I had photographed and talked to came to my studio to pick out photos since he had given away all his originals. This was two years after graduating from high school. He told of some of the unfortunate ways the athletes on scholarship were treated in the university and said quite bluntly to me, "Mrs. Cochrane, I don't want to mess up my life." He picked out the photos he wanted. I got copies and sent them to him at school. When he sent me his payment check he also put in a note: "I appreciate everything you've done for me, but most of all for your kindness, wisdom and friendship." Ministry comes in all forms. Loving the earth includes loving athletes. God calls us to call forth the gifts in others. I continue to pray for this young man.

After the events with my Latin American friend, I withdrew from active teaching and Coordinating in the church for a number of years. In 1990, however, I agreed to teach a six-week class using the Presbyterian Church's book and study guide – Keeping and Healing the Creation. We ended this class with suggestions for putting our faith into action. A number of us began getting together calling ourselves "Friends of Creation" .We started recycling and collecting recyclables at the church on the second Saturday of the month. We published every other month an Ecological-theological paper called "Till and Keep" which addressed ecological issues like toxics in Fairfax County, Saving the Bay, Endangered species, etc. I wrote the theological piece in each of these papers.

We started a Creation Awareness Center called the "Living Cathedral" on the 31-acre woodland and grass area, and changed a large area of lawn into a meadow to cut down on the pollution from mowing and to increase bio-diversity. We worked with the adjacent school, letting them use our center .We developed a trail guide for the center with markers to meditate on both creation and God. People of all ages worked together on maintenance days in the Cathedral. A similar center existed in Colorado. However, it was not to be – the power structure

there continued to fight this whole movement both overtly and deceptively even though it had been approved by the session. The stories I could tell about this are pathetic. After five years of the fight, I left. Interesting—a woman took over coordinating the creation center after me. She lasted a year – the victim of men bent on showing their power.

I had thought that given the Presbyterian Church's national concern for ecological issues that the local church would come along. That, also, was not to be. Twenty-five years after I had wanted to start an eco-group as I mentioned in my last sermon this place was still keeping concern for and care for creation outside of their theological framework.

I also coordinated another activist action in my neighborhood. Endeavoring to prevent development of a unique large lot which contained a pond, large trees and the beginnings of a wetland, we saw two contractors withdraw their proposals because they couldn't answer our questions. The project was finally approved; however it is interesting that the retention pond – finished in 1995 still has not been accepted by the county—something I warned about years ago because of the soil, water and springs in the area.

I continue to raise issues that need to be addressed in my community. Most recently has been the need for repair of several portions of National Park Service trails near my home. Last summer one portion was redone after several years of dialogue with headquarters. I have recently updated the plan for the neighborhood park – some 25 years after doing the original plan. There are other issues that need to be addressed: like the destruction of the forest locally on NPS property by the alien invasive species English Ivy. In addition, the news, just as I finished this sermon of a proposed by-pass at Mt. Vernon – sure to destroy habitat of neo-tropical migrants like my Wood Thrush friend, and not really solving anything for humans – only making it worse. I also dream of exhibiting a new series of paintings. They will

speak for a small forest in the Cascades of Washington state.

Given the non-support of earth care by the church down through the years, I have been grateful for the advocacy support of Seekers to the earth care work of the American Farmland Trust and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. The participation in the potting party, when we pot up tree seedlings for planting on stream edges has also been a plus.

So where does Seekers go from here? I would propose that Seekers take this earth care matter a step further. In the Steward's Member Statement of Commitment, I believe earth must be included. The line speaking of "foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor" needs to include "foster justice for all of God's creation which includes the natural order, be in solidarity with the poor". I trust Seekers can make the break on this issue too.

For me, now in my life with fibromyalgia, pain and fatigue, osteoporosis that has gotten worse, problems with my right foot, I must work at keeping myself alive. For now, I will observe God more clearly in creation around me. I will also do that part of the gospel reading for today (Mark 6:31) which I portrayed on this wall hanging more than 25 years ago. But I will do the going to a lonely place to rest awhile with the awareness of the verses that follow: that often, on the other side of the lonely (and needed) place for rest there is the call to serve, to articulate Christ's gifts as they have been given to me. Yes, I know that that call to serve has already begun again as I met this week with a friend and Doug to start yet another activist action, "Save our circle – stop the bypass" at Mt. Vernon. I pray I will have a continuing measure of restoration to put my faith into action living my call for caring for God's Earth.