Climate Injustice, Truth-telling, and Hope

CYNTHIA MOE-LOBEDA*

God's Beloved Human Creatures: Called to Love

It is an astounding moment in time to be people who serve the God revealed in Jesus. We who stake our lives on the promises of this God have been given truths that shake the foundations of the world. The first—or beginning point—is God's love. Nothing is surer, no truth stronger than this breath-taking claim of Christian faith: that God—the Light of life, the creating, liberating, healing, sustaining Source—loves this world and each of us with a love that will not diminish, a love more powerful than any other force in heaven or earth.

Next, this God is at play in the world, breathing life into it. This Spirit is present within, among, and beyond us. But that is not all. We human creatures are created and called to recognize this gracious and indomitable love, receive it, relish it, revel in it, and trust it.

Finally, after receiving and trusting God's love—being claimed by it—we are then called to embody it in the world by loving as God loves. We are beckoned to join with God's Spirit of justice-making, Earth-relishing Love in its steadfast commitment to gain fullness of life for all.

According to a widespread understanding of the Christian story, this is the human vocation, our life's work. We are called and given this reason for being. Two millennia of Christians and the Hebrew

* Cynthia Moe-Lobeda is Professor of Christian Ethics at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, and Professor of Theological and Social Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and Church Divinity School of the Pacific. She has lectured or consulted in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and many parts of North America in theological ethics addressing matters of economic globalization, moral agency and hope, public church, faith-based resistance to systemic injustice, ethical implications of resurrection and incarnation, the Bible and ethics, theo-ethical method, and climate justice as related to race and class. This address was given on October 22, 2016 at the conference "This Fragile Earth: The Church Responds to Climate Change," at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California. Many parts of this presentation and this article have appeared in previous writings and in her most recent book, Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation (Fortress Press, 2013).
people before them have sought to heed this calling to “love the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). “Our responsibility as Christians,” Martin Luther King, Jr., declared, “is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.” What love is and requires in each new time and place is the great moral question permeating Christian history.

What does loving mean for the world’s high consumers if, through climate change, we are threatening the Earth’s God-given capacity to generate life? Never before in this three or four millennia-old faith tradition have the stakes in heeding our call to neighbor-love been so high.

Truth-telling

I am haunted by the contradiction between this reason for being—to love as God loves—and the hidden realities of our collective lives, what some call structural sin, especially in relationship to climate change. Entering into conversation and reflection on these realities and then daring to heed this contradiction draws us into a stark, seemingly godforsaken landscape—a terrain from which I for one would far rather flee. But hear me well: we will not stay in that stark terrain. We will move from it into life-giving hope. So we step with courage to look briefly at the unprecedented moral crisis facing the generations of people sharing life on Earth today, as a consequence of our collective lives.

The intimate Mystery that we call God must have an insatiable hunger for life and, moreover, for life that creates ever-more abundant and complex life. Indeed, the monotheistic traditions hold in common one reality: God created a fruitful Earth, a planet that spawns and supports life with a complexity and generosity beyond human ken. Fundamental to Christian and Jewish faith is the claim that it is “good” (Genesis 1). According to Genesis’ first creation story, “God saw that it was good.” The Hebrew tov, while often translated as “good,” also implies “life-furthering.” And God said time and again that this creation was tov—a good that is life-furthering.

Herein lies a harrowing theological problem. The primal act of God—creation—is not merely to create a magnificent world. This

1 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” in Strength to Love (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 48.

God creates a magnificently life-furthering world. The scandalous point is this. We are undoing that very tov, undoing Earth’s life-generating capacity. We—or rather, some of us—have become the uncreators. Indeed, one young and dangerous species has become a threat to life on Earth. The credible scientific community is of one accord about this basic reality, and hundreds of its widely respected voices have been articulating it for over two decades.

Less widely accepted, however, is a corollary point of soul-searing moral import. The horrific consequences of climate change are not suffered equally by Earth’s people. Nor are the world’s people equally responsible. Those least responsible for the Earth’s crisis are suffering and dying first and foremost from it.

Some time ago, I was invited to India to work with church and seminary leaders on matters of eco-justice. They gently taught me to re-see climate change as “climate colonialism.” “Climate change,” declared one Indian church leader, “is caused by the colonization of the atmospheric commons.” When powerful nations “extract from the atmospheric commons disproportionately,” they pollute the atmosphere and “emit greenhouse gases beyond the capacity of the planet to withstand.” At the same time, communities which do not emit such gases are “forced to bear the brunt of the consequences of global warming.”

Climate change, I learned, may be the most far reaching manifestation of white privilege and class privilege yet to face humankind. What do I mean? Climate change is caused overwhelmingly by the world’s high-consuming people in economically “developed” nations, yet it is wreaking death and destruction first and foremost on the impoverished and vulnerable peoples of the world.

The estimated 600 million environmental refugees whose lands will be lost to rising seas if Antarctica or Greenland melt significantly will be disproportionately people of color, as are the 25 million environmental refugees already suffering the consequences of global warming. So too the people who will go hungry when global warming diminishes crop yields of the world’s food staples—corn, rice, and wheat. The 40 percent of the world’s population whose lives depend upon water from the seven rivers fed by rapidly diminishing Himalayan glaciers are largely not white people. As recognized in “The Future We Want,” the outcome document of the United Nations’ Conference

2 From a conversation with the Rev. Christopher Rajkumar, executive secretary of the Commission on Justice, Peace, and Creation, National Council of Churches in India.
on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, climate change and sea-level rise "represent the gravest threats to their survival" for some island nations, some of which could cease to exist in their current locations as a result of rising sea levels. The rising seas could also threaten more than 25 percent of Africa’s people, producing climate refugees. It goes without saying that these nations are composed predominantly of people who are not white.

Numerous studies link climate change to hunger. Oxfam’s “Extreme Weather, Extreme Prices” report declares: "Increased hunger is likely to be one of climate change’s most savage impacts on humanity." Large-scale Amazon dieback would drastically affect ecosystems, rivers, agriculture, energy production, and livelihoods. With global warming, dry places will become dryer and wet places wetter. If “free market” rules govern food prices, during droughts the poorest starve. Desertification, which will strike hard in the Arab world and southern Africa, also provokes war; it was a factor in the Darfur conflict.

Within the United States, too, economically marginalized people are most vulnerable to ongoing suffering from the extreme storms, illness, and food insecurity brought on by climate change. The Oakland Climate Action Coalition warns that between three and five thousand Oakland residents live in areas likely to be flooded with a 1.0 and 1.4 meter rise in sea levels. Nearly 90 percent of them live in areas that are low income, non-white, or non-English speaking. Environmental racism and white privilege strike again in climate change.


7 As defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “vulnerability” refers to “the degree to which a system is susceptible to, or unable to cope with, adverse effects of climate change.” IPCC Working Group 2, Third Assessment Report, Annex B: Glossary of Terms, 2001; http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/2010/ar4-glossary.pdf. I use “climate privilege” to indicate nations and sectors most able to adapt to or prevent those impacts, or less vulnerable to them.

benefit a few while damaging so many? A sense of inevitability may suck away our hope.

I speak straight from the heart here. As a young person I first learned about structural injustice through my church youth group. At a regional youth convention, I saw a film portraying the brutal exploitation of workers in the Dominican Republic that was committed by large global corporations in the quest to maximize profit. Soon I began to learn more and more about structural injustice, especially economic exploitation. Utterly appalled, I became involved in organizing teach-ins, demonstrations, and projects to address hunger. I longed for the churches to be more involved, and by the time I had finished high school I was deeply discouraged by what I felt was untenable disinterest on the part of the church. To make a long story short, I fell into profound despair that lasted for years. I know viscerally the despair that can come from looking honestly at structural sin and our engulfment in it. (I will say more shortly about how the Spirit has helped to lift me from that despair.)

However—and this is crucial—an alternative, justice-making response to the climate catastrophe is utterly possible. This crisis could catalyze far more equitable, democratic, and compassionate ways of living and organizing our life in common. If the body of Christ on Earth has any calling today—and it does—it is to insist with prophetic fervor and fierce love that our societal response to the climate crisis serves the good of the vulnerable rather than furthering climate injustice. This will mean faithful resistance, revisioning, and rebuilding.

Seeds of Hope and Moral Power

How then shall we live? Wherein lies the moral—spiritual power to embody neighbor-love in the world today?

At this—the testing point of human history—something new is asked of humankind: to forge ways of living that serve and protect garden Earth and that enable all to have the necessities for a fruitful life. Where something new is asked of humankind, something new is asked of religion: to plumb the depths of our traditions for wellsprings of moral—spiritual vision, hope, and courage, and offer these to the broader public. Christian traditions are fertile with theological seeds of this hope and moral—spiritual power. I will offer here just three seeds of such hope and power. They are only a beginning; there are so many more.

First is the resurrection promise: Life in God is more powerful than all forms of death and destruction.

I am tempted toward despair when I acknowledge the insidious nature of climate injustice and its consequences. A subtle voice within me whispers that things will continue as they are despite our best efforts. However, the cross and resurrection defy that voice and promise otherwise. This I believe with my whole being.

When as a young person I despaired in the face of structural injustice and its pernicious impacts I realized that I needed to talk with someone who was deeply aware of structural injustice and the massive suffering it causes, and yet who maintained hope, active efforts at social transformation, and a sense of joy in living. I thought of one person, a Lutheran pastor who was a leader in religious resistance to the Trident nuclear submarines that were stationed in Puget Sound. (I was living in Seattle at this time.) He—along with his eighty-five-year-old mother—had been in one of the small boats that were trying to block the passage of the submarines across the Sound. When I poured out to him my pain and despair, and asked him how he maintained his hope and laughter, his response was life-changing for me. He said, “You know, Cindy, I know the end of the story.” Instantly I knew what he meant: God’s life-saving, justice-seeking love is stronger than all else. In some way that we do not grasp, the last word is life raised up out of death. God “will not allow our complicity in this evil to defeat God’s being for us and for the good of all creation.”

We have heard the end of the story. In the midst of suffering and death—be it individual, social, or ecological—the promise given to the Earth community is that abundant life in God will reign. So speaks the resurrection.

In all honesty, I do not know what this promise means for Earth’s community of life. It does not lessen our call to build a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world; it does not, that is, allow us to sit back and let God do the work. That conclusion would be absurd, because God works through human beings. Nor does resurrection hope ensure our survival as a species in the face of climate change.

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It does ensure that the radiant Good beyond comprehension that is above, beyond, under, and within all, ultimately will bring all to the fullness of life. We are to live trusting in that promise and allow ourselves to be God’s “rusty tools” (the term is Luther’s) in fulfilling it.

A second wellspring of hope is the sacramental notion of creation that is central in Anglican tradition and in a number of other Christian traditions.

Indeed some streams of Christianity, from its earliest centuries, have affirmed that God, the One who is saving and has saved—this God—inhabits all of creation. This claim is particularly striking when uttered by theologians not commonly recognized for it. Martin Luther is one. “The power of God,” he writes, “must be essentially present in all places, even in the tiniest leaf.” Christ so “fills all things” that he is “present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water.” In these claims Luther is by no means alone. The assertion of God abiding in all of creation has been present in Christian theology since its beginning.

Fascinating to me and relevant here are the implications of this theology for moral-spiritual power. We know that the Spirit of God, wherever it is, is saving and renewing the world. If God is present within the trees, waters, winds, and creatures—human creatures included—then God is at play within us and our earthly kin to save and renew the world. We are called to hear the healing, liberating, and transforming Word of God in Earth’s creatures and elements.

Contemplate for a moment what it might mean to take seriously the Christian claim that God lives within the creatures and elements of this good Earth. How will we prepare leaders of the church to learn from a cosmos animated by the Spirit of the Living God? How will we—who may never have sought God’s saving presence in the trees and waters—cultivate that capacity in the leaders of the church? If Christ indwells the Earth, then our hope and power for the work of radical love may be fed by God incarnate in the created world.

A third seed of hope is grounded in the church’s commitment to community building.

This source of hope is theological anthropology. It means, of course, the question of “who are we?” Who we think we are matters. The Bible teaches that we humans are—in the words of my favorite second-century theologian, Irenaeus of Lyons—“mud creatures,” crafted from soil (humans from *humus*, Adam from *adamah*). Incidentally, in Genesis 2, this *adamah* is the same soil from which other animals are made.) Science concurs; we are children of stardust—the very elements that spewed forth some 15 billion years ago in the birth of the cosmos. Yes, this is crucial. We will understand ourselves as a part of Earth’s community of life—rather than apart from it—or we will not live long as a species. We are community beings or we are dead. Moreover, we are an utterly dependent species. Countless creatures enable our bodies to live, from the tiny animals that live in our guts to the breathing trees (our external lungs, you might say) that give us oxygen. Without them neither you nor I would have awakened this day. And finally, before we are anything else, we are beloved. Each of us is beloved by a love that will not diminish regardless of whatever we do or fail to do.

But who are we as moral beings? Theologies throughout the ages teach that we are paradoxically two opposing things at one time. First, we are sinners, in bondage to sin, including structural sin. Yet we are also the body of Christ on Earth, called to love as God loves. We are lovers. The God whose life-giving love is more powerful than all else abides within and among us. Said differently, we are bearers of the divine Spirit—*Ruach* in the ancient Hebrew—that force of God’s being that God pours into the human creature despite whatever else we are.

Biblical faith insists that this face of our being (body of Christ on Earth) is *more truly* us, and ultimately will prevail. This is an ancient faith claim, that God’s love in Christ lives in and among us as justice-making, self-respecting, Earth-honoring love. This love is the counterpoint of structural sin, including climate sin. This is a word of hope for us, given the irrefutable perils of climate change and our implication in it.

We are both structural sinners and bearers of divine love. The way forward is to feed and water the one side of our being while we repent of the other. For this feeding and watering, I offer an image,
again from Irenaeus of Lyons. According to Irenaeus, our task as mud creatures is to remain moist with the dew of the Holy Spirit so that the two hands of God—Word and Wisdom—can mold us, and through us all of creation, into our destiny of union and communion with God. In our congregations and communities, we will ask: What practices of liturgy, prayer, eating, transportation, organizing, Bible study, community-building, advocacy, celebrating, and more will keep us moist and feed our being as God’s beloved who love with God’s love? We will not do so alone, but rather as communities, as people working as a body. I no longer think about what I can do, but rather about what we can do.

Christian traditions offer countless seeds of hope and moral-spiritual power. I have noted only three: (1) God’s liberating and healing love, made flesh in—but not only in—a dark-skinned Jew on this fragile planetary speck called Earth, is more powerful than all forms of death and destruction; (2) God’s life-saving presence is coursing through all of creation; (3) While we are indeed complicit in structural sin, we also are—as communities—the abode of God’s justice-making, Earth-honoring love. For this we know: “neither death, nor life, . . . neither things present, nor things to come, nor powers, . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

Closing

Our moment in time is breathtaking. It is pivotal. The generations alive today will determine whether life continues in ways recognizably human on this beautiful and broken planetary home called Earth. May Christians bring the gifts of our faith traditions to the great moral-spiritual challenge of the twenty-first-century—forging ways of living that Earth can sustain and that build justice among people. Doing so will mean holding raw anguish and joy in one breath. It will mean seeing good and evil tangled up together, with no person or system being either all good or all bad. And it will mean savoring the sensuous delights of life in this good garden Earth, while letting holy rage serve the call to love.

Holy Communion without Bread and Wine

Ebenhaizer I Nuban Timo*

The use of bread and wine in Holy Communion has been a tradition for more than twenty centuries and is accepted as a common practice among churches. Bread and wine are basically the primary food for Middle Eastern and European people. However, Indonesian people’s staple food is rice. This is the main reason why local churches in Indonesia replace bread and wine with their local cuisines. Gereja Kristen Indonesia Dagen-Palur in Central Java uses turmeric rice and syrup for Holy Communion. Many young clergymen in Timor also experiment by replacing bread and wine with ketupat (Indonesian traditional food; rice cake) and mineral water.

In October 2016, one of the assemblies of the Evangelical Church of West Timor (Gereja Masehi Injili di Timor or GMIT) on Rote Island, the southernmost island in Indonesia, conducted Holy Communion in a unique way. In the Communion, bread and wine were replaced with local cuisine. The participants were also allowed to eat and drink more than once. A majority of the congregation participated in that celebration. The pastor shared the story of this worship service, accompanied by photos, when we rode a speedboat from Kupang to Rote. This article is a critical-contextual study of this practice from the perspective of Jewish-Christian Easter celebrations in the scriptures.

There were about eighty members of the congregation at this service. Seating was arranged based on kinship. Each group sat around one table, and all participants belonged to one of these groups. Some hak (traditional drinking cups made of palm tree leaves) were placed on each table. The participants were asked to bring their own hak from their own houses. Fresh nira (palm wine) was used to replace grape wine for Holy Communion, and was contained in a huge hak

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* Ebenhaizer I Nuban Timo has been a minister of the Evangelical Church in West Timor since 1990. He has taught dogmatic theology for six years at the Theological Faculty of the Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga, Java, Indonesia.