

The Heart of the Earth

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This past Tuesday evening our pulpit and sanctuary was graced by the words and spirit of Sr. Joan Chittester. She was sharing with us her own evolving conceptions of God and she used the concept of evolution as a way to frame the relationship between God and humanity.

At one point she used Jesus' reference to the old bible story about Jonah. She used the story as a way to characterize God's work in the world. The bottom line is that you can tell if something is from God if it is healing, inclusive, and reconciling. After all, Jonah's mission was to bring the vilest and godless people known into a relationship with God so that they would not perish. That is the story and that was Sr. Joan's point. However, I want to invite you to think about another juicy tidbit in Jesus' use of the story.

“For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.”

I want to lift up the phrase “in the heart of the earth.” And it is important to me that you know something about me; I do not lift up this phrase because it is our earth day celebration. I do not lift it up out of context and use it out of convenience. It does not have an earth day connection in its original use then I would not make reference to it. I believe it is important to have integrity with the Word About Life and part of having integrity is letting it inform me and shape my life in accordance to its eternal wisdom.

Think about that phrase and the context of which it was spoken. In the heart of the earth makes reference to a deep place not where death happens but where rebirth happens. Whether it be in the belly of a whale or in the heart of the earth it is an abyss where life is renewed.

It points out that there is a deep spiritual connection between us and the earth. Why not? From the dust we came and to the dust we shall return. We should not think of this just when there is a death. We would do well to think of this always and let it shape our spirituality which is our orientation toward life and all reality.

Instead we chose to forget our place of birth, return and rebirth. Instead of understanding the heart of the earth as a spiritual place of renewal and transformation we see it as a treasure to be plundered and a source to feed our addiction to goods and services.

Our objectifying of the earth is absolutely necessary in order for us to exploit the earth. It is in our nature to objectify and de-humanize in order to justify. It has been done to people who have been conquered. It has been done to people who have been enslaved. It

has been done to people who are on the receiving end of genocide. It is being done right now to people who we don't want to share power; women, children, and the immigrant. We have taken this human tendency and made it a fine art when it comes to drilling, digging, cutting, burning, using and abusing. Every time we objectify someone or something we are denying our connection and our relatedness to everyone and all things. When we deny our relatedness and inter-dependency we diminish ourselves. We become a little less human.

A little less human is an interesting phrase as well. An article in *The Word Watcher* written by Fred Ruof tells us that...

the Latin *humus* for soil; and we have the Greek *hamai* for ground or earth. And both these words look to their common origin the truly ancient Sanskrit word, *hsam*. It seems our long-ago foremothers and forefathers were quite in touch with their humble earthy origins.

Did I say "humble"? Yes; and why not? *Humus* gives us some wonderful words that are intimately related to human. The human person is truly a humble person, because the humble human knows the truth about herself and her earthy origins. Very appropriately the holy woman Therese of Lisieux used to ask: "Why do people so mix up the meaning of humility? Humility isn't at all about denying one's abilities and accomplishments. Humility is simply knowing the truth about yourself, and about where you come from, and about Who gets the ultimate credit."

Maybe, just maybe, the classic Romans became so great because they knew the truth of their nation's grounded beginnings. The Roman word for man is *homo*—a direct variant of *humu*—s. The Romans, after all, were famous for having their feet on the ground.

Then there is the word *humor*. How I love this connection. To be human is to know *humor*. And to have *humor* is to have the ability to see through things. It's the knack, as it were, of seeing two different or conflicting things at once, which when brought together are simply funny. The classic example of this is the elegant-looking gentleman in top hat and tails slipping on a patch of ice and falling on his tail.

So *humor*, like its cousin *humility*, is a truth thing. The deeply human being is the person who is good at being truthfully humble about himself. And she gets a big humorous kick, too, about the whole human comedy.

We could not exploit the best around us without first denying the truth about us. Our spirituality is earth connected and truth grounded but it may require us to return to the heart of the earth to renew it.