

“Christian communities struggle to talk about life on earth and life with God.” So begins *Ecologies of Grace* (Oxford, 2008), an important new book about Christianity and ecology by professor Willis Jenkins, an environmental ethicist – and Episcopalian – who teaches at Yale Divinity School. Dr. Jenkins examines what he calls “ecologies of grace,” or ways that Christians can use our faith tradition to talk about how life on this earth (ecologies) matters for life with God (grace).

Jenkins offers, in summary, three distinct “ecologies of grace,” theologies which the Earth Care Ministry at St. Paul’s Cathedral in Burlington has found to be an excellent foundation for the deepening exploration of “earth care” we are experiencing in our parish, in this diocese, and throughout the Church. We thought a brief sketch of these ecologies of grace might extend this theological foundation throughout the diocese.

Sanctified Biodiversity: “Wild beasts and all cattle, creeping things and winged bird... let them praise the name of the Lord” (Psalm 149, vv. 10, 13). Here the psalmist gives the rationale for the first ecology of grace: all of God’s creation, from beasts to birds and hills to trees, is intrinsically sanctified because it comes from God and praises its Creator. An intimacy with God’s creation, therefore, ineluctably draws humans into a relationship with God. Each species, each ecosystem, each forest, invites us to know God, source of all life and light. The more we can preserve whole, thriving ecosystems, the more we can promote biodiversity, the more human beings can live in the midst of intact communities of place, the more it is that God the Creator draws us, through creation, to Godself.

Stewardship: While the intrinsic sanctity of creation gives a reason to honor the earth and its biodiversity, we are left to wonder how human beings can be “creative” – farming, building, creating communities, taking the resources needed for life – without violating the sanctity of the earth. The second ecology of grace, “stewardship,” addresses this question by describing human beings as “stewards,” people entrusted by God with care of the earth. The theological rationale for this ecology is the idea of redemption, where God in Christ has taken away our sin and called us to walk in the way of Jesus. Since conversion to Jesus requires faithful stewardship in all things, then care of the earth, as one piece of being a responsible steward, becomes central to Christian identity. The faithful steward manages the earth as a gift and works, as Adam in the garden of Eden, to “till and keep” the land (Gen 2:17).

Transfiguration: Stewardship, therefore, provides us with powerful language for discussing and evaluating human creativity. Yet the track-record of people acting as “stewards” – say, for example, “stewards” in the parables of Jesus, or our stewardship of the earth in our times, too – is less than stellar! Our third ecology of grace, therefore, centers on how grace can “transfigure” the human soul and guide all of our creativity in godly ways. All human beings, in this view, carry *within themselves an ecological consciousness*, a sort of creative soul of the natural world. When we live according to the gospel witness of sacrificial love, our intrinsic ecological spirituality channels our creativity to “divinize” nature. When faithful Christians use natural resources, build cities, and farm the land, these very creative endeavors draw creation to God precisely because grace transfigures the inner ecological consciousness common to all humanity.

Each of these ecologies of grace offers ground that is both fertile and firm in which to nurture ideas for how Christians can live on this earth and live with God. We

believe at the very least that these “ecologies” represent the workings of the living God, who is always transfiguring our hearts and minds. We hope that some of the theologies contained in this discussion resonate with you, wherever you find the presence of God in the natural world.