



Creation as Neighbour
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Season of Creation
Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-22 | Luke 10:25-37
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Two men are sitting peacefully outside their houses, reading their newspapers. They live next door to one another, and all seems perfectly well. That is, until a flower grows.

It appears right on the boundary between their two properties. At first, both men admire it. But very quickly, they begin arguing over who the flower belongs to. Each decides that it must be his. And things escalate spectacularly. Fences go up. The neighbours become increasingly hostile. Eventually, their argument over this one little flower destroys almost everything around them.

This is the plot of a wonderful little film from 1952 called *Neighbours*, made by the Canadian animator Norman McLaren. The film was made as an anti-war allegory.

But there is something about that flower, growing in the space between these two neighbours, that seems particularly relevant to our Gospel reading. Neither man planted it. Neither man made it grow. And yet almost immediately the question becomes: who does this belong to?

Which is, in its own way, not so far from the question the lawyer asks Jesus: "Who is my neighbour?" It sounds like a straightforward question. But it is also a question about boundaries. Who counts? Who falls within the circle of my responsibility? And where does that responsibility end?

Jesus doesn't give the lawyer a definition. Instead, he tells him a story. A man is beaten and left beside the road. A priest sees him and passes by. A Levite sees him and does the same. Then a Samaritan comes along. He sees the wounded man, draws near, tends to his wounds and makes sure that he receives further care.

At the end of the story, Jesus turns the lawyer's question around. The lawyer has asked, "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus asks which of the three became a neighbour to the wounded man. The difference is subtle, but important. Jesus moves the question away from drawing a boundary around the people I am

responsible for, and towards the shape of a life. Rather than asking who qualifies as my neighbour, Jesus asks what it looks like to become one.

And during this Season of Creation, I wonder what happens if we allow that question to shape the way we think about our relationship with the earth. There is a movement in biblical scholarship called the Earth Bible Project, which asks what happens when we read Scripture with the earth in view. Rather than assuming that the natural world is simply the setting for the human story, it asks us to pay attention to Earth as part of the story itself.

The project offers six principles for doing this: intrinsic worth, interconnectedness, voice, purpose, mutual custodianship and resistance. We don't need to work through all six today, but together they ask us to reconsider the place we imagine ourselves occupying within creation.

We tend to talk about “the environment” as though it is something around us: human life here, nature over there. But our lives don't really work like that. The air we breathe is shared. The water we drink moves through rivers, rain, soil and living ecosystems. Our food depends upon plants and animals, insects and microorganisms, seasons and weather. We live within relationships with forms of life that most of us barely notice from one day to the next.

The Earth Bible calls this interconnectedness: Earth is a community of interconnected life, and human beings are members of that community rather than standing outside it. And perhaps that gives us another way of hearing the question, “Who is my neighbour?”

Here in Aotearoa, this way of thinking is not entirely unfamiliar. Within te ao Māori, relationships with whenua, awa and maunga can be understood through whakapapa and kinship, rather than simply ownership. Our law has begun to reflect something of this too: Te Awa Tupua, the Whanganui River, is recognised as a legal person, an indivisible and living whole, with its own identity.

So perhaps when we speak of creation as neighbour, we are not simply extending a human category to the natural world. We are questioning the assumption that human beings were ever as separate from the rest of creation as we have sometimes imagined ourselves to be. Another Earth Bible principle is intrinsic worth: the recognition that the earth and its creatures have value in themselves. A forest is more than timber. An awa is more than a source of water

or electricity. Whenua is more than property. The world does not exist simply for us.

And there is a humility in recognising that which sits rather well alongside the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan does something remarkably simple: he sees. Of course, the priest and the Levite see the wounded man too. But the Samaritan allows what he sees to interrupt him. He draws near enough to recognise what is happening, and then allows that encounter to change what he does next. Perhaps becoming a neighbour begins there. With paying attention.

The Earth Bible has another principle called voice, which invites us to listen to the ways the earth speaks through its flourishing, but also through its suffering and resistance. A polluted river tells us something. A damaged ecosystem tells us something. A disappearing species tells us something. A changing climate tells us something about the relationships within which life is sustained.

And listening to those voices is inseparable from listening to our human neighbours. Because ecological harm does not affect everyone equally. Those who have contributed least to environmental destruction can experience its consequences most sharply. Communities whose lives and livelihoods depend directly upon land, water and stable seasons can experience changes long before many of us do.

Care for creation, then, is not separate from love of neighbour. Our human neighbours depend upon the same earth that we do. But neither is the earth valuable only because human beings depend upon it. Intrinsic worth asks us to resist that conclusion too. Creation has value beyond what it can provide for us.

And this is where I find the Samaritan particularly helpful. Because the scale of ecological problems can be overwhelming. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, damaged waterways, disappearing species, it doesn't take long before the problems become so large that our own responses seem almost absurdly small.

But the Samaritan doesn't solve every problem on the road to Jericho. He doesn't eliminate violence. He doesn't make the road safe for everyone who will travel it after him. He responds to what is in front of him, doing what he can

with what he has. There is a humility in that too. We don't need to believe that we can solve everything before we can respond to something.

Next week, people will gather to march for nature. Whatever we might think about marches, or about the particular political questions surrounding them, there is something significant about the decision to stop and pay attention. To say: look at this. Listen. This deserves our attention. A march is one way of doing that. There are many others.

The invitation is not necessarily that every one of us becomes an environmental activist, nor that we somehow achieve perfectly sustainable lives. It is an invitation to see differently: to recognise the relationships in which we already live, and to allow those relationships to shape how we act.

Which brings us back to that flower. The tragedy of *Neighbours* is that the two men can only imagine their relationship with the flower in terms of possession. Mine or yours. My side of the boundary or yours. They become so consumed with establishing the boundary that they destroy the very thing that first brought them delight.

The lawyer who approaches Jesus is interested in boundaries too. "Who is my neighbour?" Tell me where the line is. Tell me who is inside and who is outside. But Jesus refuses to draw the line for him. Instead, he tells him about a Samaritan who sees, draws near and responds.

And perhaps the Earth Bible gives us a way of extending that invitation during this Season of Creation. We belong within a community of creation whose members have their own worth, whose lives are interconnected with ours, and whose flourishing and suffering deserve our attention.

So perhaps the invitation isn't simply to care more about creation. I suspect many of us already know that invitation. Perhaps it is to see our relationship with creation as part of what it means to become a neighbour. To pay attention. To allow what we see to interrupt us.

And to recognise that before we ever begin deciding where the boundaries of our responsibility lie, we are already living within relationships that bind our lives to one another and to the earth. The question is not simply, "Who is my neighbour?" It is: How will we become neighbours?