

A Global Crisis of Belonging

A sermon by Molly Housh

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We are told that we were made in God's image.

I think that means that we started out as trees.

We are told that God is nearer to us than our breath.

I think that means that God was the soil that nurtured our roots and the rain that showered upon our leaves and the sun toward which we turned our branches.

Maybe, once upon a time, God was lonely in her rich earthen home, so she grew us up as great topiaries and trimmed our leaves down to reveal hands and shoulders and hips and faces, and maybe our hair was like weeping willow and holly and short needles of spruce.

She held us in the dark safety of her earth and we bathed our faces in the drenching light of her sun. Perhaps we talked with her in great rustling sighs and soft raspy whispers. And swayed in the wind and delighted together with God in the movement.

Then, maybe we longed to move more freely. Especially when the autumn came and our leaves began to fall and tumble away from us. Perhaps we wanted nothing more than to go with them.

I think one of us figured it out first-- that we could be pulled up out of the ground, roots and all. One by one we gently eased our roots up out of the soil. We delighted in walking and leaping and swimming and running and God delighted in watching us.

But then maybe every time we would rest, roots and tendrils would begin growing from our feet back down into the ground, and we would be afraid of getting stuck. Afraid of watching our leaves drift away, unable to follow.

So we made shoes and carpets and cars and planes to protect ourselves from the earth. We forgot the swaying and the rustling and the whispering. We wandered the sky and the seas and the earth, as lonely as clouds. We forgot what it was to be held by the earth, cradled in God's embrace.

Only sometimes... babies remember, when they eat the dirt. Mourners remember, when they fall to hug the ground and sob. Lovers remember, when they lie on their backs in the grass and stare up at the stars.

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The 18th century German philosopher and poet Novalis famously once said
“Philosophy is essentially homesickness – the universal impulse to be home.”

If there’s one thing a young adult possesses wisdom about, I think it must be existential homesickness. We are by nature between homes. Fully distinct from the homes of our childhood but not yet rooted in a home of our own, we long for some stable and constant ground of being that we remember from some time in our life (whether we were blessed with it in our childhood homes or elsewhere).

Yet we know we can’t go back (I’m pretty sure my parents were rather glad to have me out of the house). So we spend a good chunk of time trying to create home for ourselves. We are searching, as John O’Donohue puts it, for our inner ground, for a way of living and loving that makes us feel held.

The thing is, I suspect this homesickness doesn’t end when we buy a house, or settle down somewhere with a partner, or have a child. Particularly in a society when a rapidly increasing number of people move many times in their lives, we are a rootless people, searching for home.

However, just as much as this state is not a sole product of young adulthood, neither is it truly a product of our modern society. The ancient Israelites sat down by the river Babylon and wept for their earthly ethnic and transcendentally

religious home. The writer of the 23rd Psalm wanted nothing more than to *belong* to his or her God, like a sheep to a shepherd, and to *dwell* in the house of the Lord, home at last.

Part of the western religious situation seems to be that we feel we have fallen or walked too far away from the source. Pulled up from the roots, our spirits wander, lonely like clouds, longing for home.

Wherever we stand on the theological or religious spectrum, I think each of us can bring to mind the taste of that nostalgia. I remember when I was very small wanting to be in the presence of my parents so powerfully that I couldn't tell if it was a longing of the heart or a physical thirst.

At some point, however, I came to realize that my thirst was deeper, even, than my physical home and the love of my parents could satisfy.

I love walking and leaping and swimming and running, but I want to remember what it is to be held by the earth, cradled by the divine.

This is why we must grow roots where we can and where we are.

This is why we must find the people in our lives that can hold us in the way we once were held and why we must nourish our relationships with them.

This is why we need each other as a community of faith. This church is a dark, rich soil for building home. This is a place to belong.

It is not only for our own sake that we are called to find belonging... For our human rootless-ness is not just a spiritual impoverishment. It is also a global crisis. A global crisis of belonging.

You don't need me to tell you the extent of the climate crisis and of other forms of environmental degradation. What I do want to suggest is that humans have created these problems out of rootless-ness. Floating about the surface of the earth, we have ignored its concerns just as we casually fail to notice strangers on the street everyday. We treat the earth as a stranger.

But if we don't deeply belong to the earth, not only do we each feel an unnamable spiritual homesickness, but we also forget to treat the earth with the respect and love that belonging fosters.

Theologian Gordon Kaufman posits that that which is ultimate in our universe, what he would call God, is creativity. He points out that this creativity was the origin of our universe with the big bang, and that this creativity is the force most evident in the continuing development of life through evolution. Thus it is that earthly creativity from which all of creation, including the human, has come.

He further states that the exact same creativity that birthed us now bubbles up in us and makes itself known in the human capacity for ideas and art and invention and love.

I find this theological system resonant in part because of the way that it plants human beings in the earth. We arose from it, and now even those things that arise through us- that we might ascribe solely to ourselves- are a part of that same abundant ground of earthly creativity.

Of course, with the advent of invention and ideas simultaneously arises the human call to responsibility. We are fully capable of thinking ourselves separate from our earthly origins. Indeed, much of our theological and intellectual history does just that. We are also capable of inventing ourselves into oblivion. We have come close to that as well. This is where our inborn capacity for responsibility becomes necessary. This is where we must know that we are deeply responsible to the earth because we *belong* on it, to it, in relationship with it.

Instead, we seem to have decided somewhere along the way that we do *not* belong to the earth or each other, but rather to ourselves and our imaginations alone. Our disembodiment has reached startling proportions. At one extreme, some people live out their lives virtually online. At a more common level, all of us too often forget that our bodies and the greater terrestrial body to which we

belong *are our home*, are the only things that we have to inhabit. We have forgotten what it was to have roots reaching deep into the soil, to sway and rustle with the rhythms of the earth.

In doing so we have devalued bodies, the human body and the earthly one, and we have created the toxic situation in which we now find ourselves. Therefore, we have the responsibility, the mandate, to remember that we belong to the earth.

This forgetting of our earthly roots has become an acute and global crisis of religious proportions. The manual for the Green Sanctuary certification program upon which we are now embarking puts it well, saying: “Religious leaders from most of the world’s faith traditions have claimed that global climate change, resource depletion, pollution, and species extinction together may be the greatest moral challenge facing humankind in the twenty-first century. Some suggest that religions may be the only human institutions still able to respond to the challenge.”

Religions are suited to this work because they look at the world with the same breadth and magnitude that this global crisis requires. Religious communities are in the business of lifting up our ultimate values. As feminist activist and social critic bell hooks tell us in her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*: “Being in the church is also about being in the body. Religion so often determines which

body will be seen as sacred, as worthy of life. It takes us right back to the earth.” Or it should.

We hear this over and over again, but we need to internalize the message that the earth is what is sacred. Whether we came about as rooted trees or as monkeys in the branches, we do not live upon the earth, but we *arose from it and are still arising*, and are thus called as religious people to revere it as such.

This reverence can come from a deep need that we already have inside of us—the need to belong. **The answer to our existential homesickness may turn out to be just the answer to the global climate crisis.** It is the call to create among us a culture of belonging to the earth, to realize that we already have the deep home we long for literally right under our feet.

According to hooks, this culture of belonging is: “an intimate connection with the land to which one belongs, empathic relationship to animals, self-restraint, custodial conservation, deliberateness, balance, generosity, mutuality, playfulness, inclusiveness, and openness to spirit” (Hooks 2008: 13)

These things, this culture of belonging, are the calling of the program upon which we now embark to green our congregation, and I think they also make up the deepest calling of our prophetic faith, which at its best feeds the soul *and*

heals the world. That is the call to create a religious community that feels most basically *at home* in the world, that belongs to the world and treats it as such.

It's an overwhelming prospect, but blessedly it starts with each of us, with one step forward, and with the everyday life of this community. Home is a local thing. Change happens one act at a time, and what we have to do now is foster belonging in our own hearts, and in this one community.

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Here's how I hope the story ends...

Eventually the human topiaries remembered that we were once babies who ate the dirt, once mourners who hugged the ground, once lovers who lay on their backs in the grass.

Perhaps one of us remembered first the joy of deep roots and tall swaying branches, and took off her shoes, and felt the tendrils grow down from her feet into the earth.

And then more of us began to remember the embrace of the earth, instead of fearing it. And we grew ourselves roots again.

Still sometimes we would pull them up, for there is a need to dance and walk and run and swim. But always we would find a place again to belong, to stay and sway in the wind and have rustling conversations with God.

Since roots hold us close and wings set us free, we became a people of rooted hearts and boundless, winged souls.

Our wondrous faith settled deep in the earth, and then rose up, green and leafy, to bring us a new day.

May it be so.