

## “A Green Theology”

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UCC at The Villages, FL  
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Jonah 2:10-3:10; 4:1-11

Mark 9:30-37

*[Jesus said,] “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me;  
and whoever receives me, receives not me but [the one] who sent me.”* Mark 9:37

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to listen for a ‘theology and a morality’ that makes sense in this world  
and shows us how you are moving in our time through Christ.

Help us help you as the One who can liberate each of us from the toxic waste  
that affects earth, sea, and sky, heart, spirit, and soul.

Amen

“You better not shout. You better not cry. You better not pout. I’m telling you why –  
Pope Francis is coming to town...”

Excitement has been building for the Pope’s visit to the United States  
as the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis.  
who will be going to Washington, DC, New York City, and Philadelphia.

I believe this is one Pope whose words and practice make him an ally  
with the United Church of Christ on many important issues.

One of them is his stand on the environment, acknowledging ‘climate change’  
as a real danger in our time, which he outlined in his latest encyclical –  
which is a letter like an epistle, that is circulated to all the churches.

Entitled, *LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore*, or “Praise be to you, my Lord”  
which is the first line to a canticle or prayer song by Francis of Assisi.

Pope Francis refers to this poem as a reminder for us that the Earth is  
‘our common home’... *‘like a sister with whom we share our life  
and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us...*

He goes on to say,

*‘This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her  
by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with  
which God has endowed her...’*

Pope Francis then cited his predecessors voicing similar concerns:

*Pope Paul VI referred to the ecological concern  
as “a tragic consequence” of unchecked human activity...*

*Pope John Paul II... warned that human beings frequently seem  
“to see no other meaning in their natural environment  
than what serves for immediate use and consumption”...*

*Pope Benedict XVI likewise proposed  
“eliminating the structural causes... [that prevent]  
respect for the environment”....*

Willard, p.2

[And like] *Pope John XXIII...[who 50 years ago]*  
*addressed his message Pacem in Terris to the entire “Catholic world”*  
*and...“to all men and women of good will”*  
*[Pope Francis seeks the widest audience when he writes,]*  
*‘Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration,*  
*I wish to address every person living on this planet.’*

In this encyclical, he seeks

*‘to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home’ –*  
that is to say, specifically to enter the conversation  
about the effects of climate change on our world.

Encyclical Letter, LAUDATO SI’ of The Holy Father Francis on Care For Our Common Home

This prompted one American politician and presidential hopeful to criticize him,  
saying, the Church would be ‘better off leaving science to the scientists’.

The funny thing is that this pope is a scientist –  
he earned a technical degree in chemistry

and actually worked as a chemist before he was ordained.

This politician then said the Church should stick to what it knows best –  
‘theology and morality’.

<http://www.motherjones.com/blue-marble/2015/06/dear-rick-santorum-pope-actually-did-study-science>

That is precisely why

this pope is speaking up.

The direction that Pope Francis is taking the Roman Catholic Church  
is where the United Church of Christ has already been for some time.

Dr. Benjamin Chavis of the Commission for Racial Justice of the UCC  
is credited with coining the phrase, ‘environmental racism’, as the deliberate  
‘targeting of ethnic and minority communities  
for exposure to toxic and hazardous waste sites and facilities,  
coupled with the systematic exclusion of minorities  
in environmental policy making, enforcement, and remediation.’

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin\\_Chavis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Chavis)

Under the direction of Dr. Chavis – who was ordained as a UCC minister in 1980,  
the Commission for Racial Justice published a landmark report in 1987,  
entitled, “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States”,  
which exposed the ‘*gross disregard for people of color*  
*as the placement of toxic waste landfills were sited in their communities*  
*throughout the nation’.*

This report was subsequently revised and republished in 2007.

Ben Chavis served time in prison in the 1970s for his civil rights activism  
when he was sent to help African-American students who were being harassed  
when black schools were closed in Wilmington, NC and  
that community resisted desegregation.

Willard, p.3

Chavis was one of the “Wilmington 10” who were suspected of conspiracy when a store was bombed in that town.

They served 10 years and were released

with help from Amnesty International, and they were later pardoned in 2012.

Dr. Chavis continued to work for civil rights and served in leadership roles with the National Council of Churches, the NAACP,

and he even helped organize the Million Man March in 1995.

He became a Muslim in 1998 and has since been working for interfaith cooperation.

It is disappointing that such a prophetic voice as that of Dr. Benjamin Chavis has left the United Church of Christ.

However, it was after his imprisonment and while he was still with the UCC that he linked social injustice with environmental pollution.

As it turns out, Dr. Chavis – like Pope Francis, has an interest in science, too, and ‘reads books on chemistry, for pleasure’.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin\\_Chavis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Chavis)

Just as Ben Chavis spent time in prison,

Jonah is that original prophet who spent time in the “belly of the beast”, emerging to speak a word of hard truth to the people of Nineveh:

‘Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’

Much to Jonah’s dismay, the people of Nineveh responded with remorse – from the rich to the poor, everyone repented from their evil ways.

Jonah wanted nothing to do with this, from the very first,

because he knew God would forgive these enemies of Israel.

That is why he fled to the farthest corner of the known world at that time –

Spain which bordered the unknown waters beyond the Mediterranean...

I have wanted to preach on the Book of Jonah for a long time,

but it seemed like there was always some other theme I was working on and

I don’t recall it ever came up in the lectionary readings.

It is during Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement,

when the Book of Jonah is read by the Jewish community.

When I was at seminary, I did a graphic novel based on the story of Jonah

which has wonderful dramatic imagery and reads like an adventure story,

especially how the grace of God plays an active role in Jonah’s life.

I did the drawings in black and white, but if I was to do it again,

I would do it all in color, because in the process I realized the Book of Jonah

is all about how God used all of Creation to get Jonah’s attention.

Willard, p.4

When Jonah tried to escape God's mission for him, he gets in a boat to sail away,  
but God sends the wind upon the waters to create a storm  
like the Spirit hovering over the watery chaos  
'in the Beginning' of Genesis.

God sends the whale – or more accurately, a 'big fish' to capture Jonah,  
who prays to God with repentance and thanksgiving for the help  
he knows he will surely receive.

After Jonah proclaims God's message to the people of Nineveh,  
they repent, but Jonah goes to watch and wait for them to fail.

God sends a leafy plant to comfort Jonah with its shade –  
cooling him from the heat of the day,

However, God sends a pest to attack the plant  
and then God sends the Sun to finish off the plant with its withering heat.

The Book of Jonah ends with God confronting Jonah with the realization  
that he grew to care for a simple plant.

Then, God asks Jonah,

“Shouldn't I also care for a city filled with thousands of people  
who really don't know what they are doing,  
And shouldn't I care for their animals. too?”

'Red letter' Bibles refer to those Bibles with all the words spoken by God or Christ  
printed in red.

In 2008, a 'Green Bible' was published using green letters wherever  
there was a reference to the natural world and environmental issues.

Only a few verses of Jonah were printed in green,  
but doesn't the *whole* Book of Jonah reflect a “green theology”,  
that calls us into awareness about Creation and  
empathy for the creatures that live within it?

The Book of Jonah closes with God asking a question:

*“You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow,  
which came into being in a night, and perished in a night.  
And should not I pity Nin'evah, that great city,  
in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons  
who do not know their right hand from their left,  
and also much cattle?”*

This question is not just for Jonah, but all of us as it evokes the Golden Rule to  
“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”  
and Matthew 25's challenge to care for 'the least of these'.

This is also evident in our Gospel lesson today [Mark 9:37], when Jesus said,

*“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me;  
and whoever receives me, receives not me but [the one] who sent me.”*

Willard, p.5

This simple principle of justice is emerging as a transformative catalyst for change.

The 'powers that be' are being confronted more frequently with realities they cannot so easily deny any more.

We see it defiantly at work in those communities where the police have been unfairly burdened with enforcing a system that excludes and punishes people who cannot easily escape the system's racism.

We see it defiantly at work in traditional societies of Africa and the Middle East where women are steadily finding their voice like the unnamed women of the Bible.

We see it defiantly at work in Europe as thousands stream there to escape oppressive regimes, seeking the hospitality that first brought Christianity to those lands from the Middle East.

We see it defiantly at work as more and more churches follow society's lead by changing attitudes toward gender-specific people for a new normal of justice and what it means to be human.

We see it defiantly at work in the lives of people who are doing the research to bring awareness to damage we are doing to earth, sea, and sky that affects everyone and poor neighborhoods specifically.

We see it defiantly at work when churches and synagogues and mosques and temples and shrines are doing what they are best at – their respective equivalents of 'theology and morality'.

What I believe that Christians and non-Christians alike are seeing is Christ the Liberator slowly, but surely working through people of goodwill to bring about an emerging Kingdom of God as a Beloved Community that is possible on Earth as it is in Heaven.

To help bring this about, we must believe like children believe – that it is entirely possible to make a difference and save this beautiful world for us now and for generations yet to come.

Amen

*Our first scripture lesson today includes selected verses from Jonah;  
Many of us are familiar with the story of Jonah and the whale.  
Actually, in the Hebrew text, it is a 'big fish' that swallows Jonah  
to bring him back to continue God's mission for him.*

- 2:10 And the LORD spoke to the fish,  
and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.  
3:1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,  
2 "Arise, go to Nin'evah, that great city,  
and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."  
3 So Jonah arose and went to Nin'evah, according to the word of the LORD.

Now Nin'evah was an exceedingly great city,  
three days' journey in breadth.

- 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he cried,  
"Yet forty days, and Nin'evah shall be overthrown!"  
5 And the people of Nin'evah believed God; they proclaimed a fast,  
and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.  
6 Then tidings reached the king of Nin'evah, and he arose from his throne,  
removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.  
7 And he made proclamation and published through Nin'evah,  
"By the decree of the king and his nobles:  
Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything;  
let them not feed, or drink water,  
8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth,  
and let them cry mightily to God;  
yea, let every one turn from his evil way and  
from the violence which is in his hands.<sup>9</sup>  
Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger,  
so that we perish not?"  
10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way,  
God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them;  
and he did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

- 2 And he prayed to the LORD and said,  
"I pray thee, LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?  
That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish;  
for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil.  
3 Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee,  
for it is better for me to die than to live."  
4 And the LORD said,  
"Do you do well to be angry?"

- 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city,  
and made a booth for himself there.  
He sat under it in the shade,  
till he should see what would become of the city.
- 6 And the LORD God appointed a plant,  
and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head,  
to save him from his discomfort.  
So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.
- 7 But when dawn came up the next day,  
God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered.
- 8 When the sun rose, God appointed a sultry east wind,  
and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he was faint;  
and he asked that he might die, and said,  
“It is better for me to die than to live.”
- 9 But God said to Jonah,  
“Do you do well to be angry for the plant?”  
And he said,  
“I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”
- 10 And the LORD said,  
“You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow,  
which came into being in a night, and perished in a night.
- 11 And should not I pity Nin’evah, that great city,  
in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons  
who do not know their right hand from their left,  
and also much cattle?”

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words...*

Mark 9:30-37

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee.

And he would not have any one know it;

31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them,

“The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”

32 But they did not understand the saying,

and they were afraid to ask him.

33 And they came to Caper'na-um; and when he was in the house he asked them,

“What were you discussing on the way?”

34 But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest.

35 And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them,

“If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

36 And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them;

and taking him in his arms, he said to them,

37 “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me;

and whoever receives me, receives not me but [the one] who sent me.”

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Many of us are familiar with the story of Jonah and the whale.  
Actually, in the Hebrew text, it is a 'big fish' that swallows Jonah  
to bring him back to continue God's mission for him.*

- <sup>2:10</sup> Then the LORD spoke to the fish,  
and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.
- <sup>3:1</sup> The LORD's word came to Jonah a second time:  
<sup>2</sup> "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it  
the proclamation that I am commanding you."
- <sup>3</sup> And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD's word.  
(Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.)
- <sup>4</sup> Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out,  
"Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!"
- <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God.

They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes,  
from the greatest of them to the least significant.

- <sup>6</sup> When word of it reached the king of Nineveh,  
he got up from his throne, stripped himself of his robe,  
covered himself with mourning clothes, and sat in ashes.
- <sup>7</sup> Then he announced,  
"In Nineveh, by decree of the king and his officials:  
Neither human nor animal, cattle nor flock, will taste anything!  
No grazing and no drinking water!"
- <sup>8</sup> Let humans and animals alike put on mourning clothes,  
and let them call upon God forcefully!  
And let all persons stop their evil behavior  
and the violence that's under their control!"
- <sup>9</sup> He thought,  
Who knows? God may see this and turn from his wrath,  
so that we might not perish.<sup>[a]</sup>

- <sup>10</sup> God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior.  
So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn't do it.
- <sup>4:1</sup> But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry.  
<sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD,  
"Come on, LORD! Wasn't this precisely my point  
when I was back in my own land?  
This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier!  
I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God,  
very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy."  
<sup>3</sup> At this point, LORD, you may as well take my life from me,  
because it would be better for me to die than to live."
- <sup>4</sup> The LORD responded,  
"Is your anger a good thing?"

- 5 But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city.  
There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade,  
to see what would happen to the city.
- 6 Then the LORD God provided a shrub,  
and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head  
and saving him from his misery.  
Jonah was very happy about the shrub.
- 7 But God provided a worm the next day at dawn,  
and it attacked the shrub so that it died.
- 8 Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind,  
and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint.  
He begged that he might die, saying,  
"It's better for me to die than to live."
- 9 God said to Jonah,  
"Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?"  
Jonah said,  
"Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!"
- 10 But the LORD said,  
"You 'pitied' the shrub, for which you didn't work and which you didn't raise;  
it grew in a night and perished in a night.
- 11 Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city,  
in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people  
who can't tell their right hand from their left,  
and also many animals?"

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words...*