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Ecotheology and the Parables of Jesus:  
Creative Re-readings of Parables In Light of the Environmental Crisis

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Capstone Essay  
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Abstract

In this paper I demonstrate how adopting a scriptural hermeneutic based in Rosemary Radford Ruether's prophetic principle can cultivate the ability of Christian communities to interpret Scripture based on their own community context. I will provide an interpretive framework for rethinking relationships between humans, nature, and the Divine that can serve as a correction for entrenched reading practices that reinforce Christianity's complicity in environmental degradation. I use reader-response theory to conduct literary-critical readings of three well-known parables from the Gospel of Luke. The parabolic structure of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation informs my view of the parables as inherently subversive and on the side of the marginalized and oppressed in society. I propose applying this reading practice to three parables with the goal of reorienting social norms to be radically inclusive: love, neighborliness and hospitality, thereby challenging the dominant paradigms of hierarchical binaries, anthropocentrism, and utilitarianism.

## Acknowledgements

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The 1967 publication of medieval historian Lynn White's classic essay "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" validated—for many ecotheologians—the idea that the modern environmental crisis is integrally related to religion and ethics. The charge that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" for irreversible ecological degradation has garnered both positive and negative responses from academic and religious sources.<sup>1</sup> Though White wrote that "especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," he did not discount the ability of Christianity to correct its path for the future.<sup>2</sup> White wrote, "more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."<sup>3</sup> Ecotheologians are still responding to this challenge from White with theories and practices that may yet produce a paradigm shift in contemporary Christian thought regarding the relationship between Christianity and ecology.

Over time, Christian Scripture and doctrine became a ready resource for justifying environmentally damaging practices, and therefore White's criticism is correctly placed. A religious response to these crises is imperative because "what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."<sup>4</sup> Sources of the environmental crisis in which Christianity is complicit are 1) the overarching privileging of human beings above nature as inherent in the chain of being model (hierarchical binaries); 2) the

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *Science* 155, No. 3767 (10 March 1967), 5. Accessed August 20, 2014 from <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>. For a discussion of the effects of White's thesis on Christian ecological ethics, see Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems," in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37 no. 2 (2009), 283-309. For a history of Christianity's relationship with nature and how White's thesis has affected Christian ecological discourse, see Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. In fact, White advocated that Christianity be part of the solution, following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who he suggests should be regarded as a "patron saint for ecologists" because "he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation." (*Ibid.*, 6).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

centrality of human concerns in history (anthropocentrism); and 3) regarding the Earth as a static object to be used at human discretion (utilitarianism).

A hierarchical binary is the valuing of different subjects in a gradation such that they are organized by rank. Dualisms and polarities result from hierarchies in that the extremes are set up as antitheses. For example, hierarchical binaries gave rise to the concept of the chain of being, which was used to justify the division of humanity from nature.<sup>5</sup> Human identity is relational, defined in relation to both Earth and God.<sup>6</sup> Humans bridge a gap of sorts, being both like and unlike the Creation and the Divine. Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, “the chain of being, God-spirits-male-female-non-human nature-matter, is at the same time the chain of command.”<sup>7</sup> God remained in control of the world, but humans were consistently placed above and apart from nature, serving God’s divine purpose by being an intermediary of sorts, “[behaving] toward animate and inanimate nature in the way God behaves toward the whole

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of the chain of being is based in Neo-Platonic thought, with origins in Plato’s idea of “the good” and Aristotle’s philosophy of the gradations of existence. The three main points of the chain of being are plenitude (the universe is conceived as “full” and “everything possible is actual”), continuity (each being shares at least one attribute with its neighbor) and gradation (beings range from the basest of creatures to God in hierarchical order.” This chain of being concept, along with other Neo-Platonic philosophy, affected Christian thought especially in the work of Augustine, who conceived that evil originates when the creatures at any level abdicate their specified role in the hierarchy. (“Great Chain of Being,” *Britannica.com*. Accessed 16 February 2014.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/243044/Great-Chain-of-Being>). See also Jonathan Marks, “Great Chain of Being” in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism* vol. 2, ed. John H. Moore (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA), 68-73, accessed December 10, 2013, <http://personal.uncc.edu/jmarks/pubs/Enc%20race%20GCOB.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Steward*, cited in Daniel T. Spencer, *Gay and Gaia: Ethics, Ecology, and the Erotic* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 145.

<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 79. Along with the pervasive dualism of humanity versus nature, the chain of being has been used to justify all sorts of binaries and polarities and authorize oppressive relations: male/female, black/white, Christian/non-Christian, Western/Eastern, urban/rural, first-world/third-world...the list goes on. See Kathryn Tanner, “Creation, Environmental Justice, and Ecological Justice,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, Rebecca Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, eds. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 114-115. See also Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936) cited in Jonathan Marks, “Great Chain of Being” in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism* vol. 2 (*the Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, ed. John H. Moore (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA), 68-73, accessed December 10, 2013, <http://personal.uncc.edu/jmarks/pubs/Enc%20race%20GCOB.pdf>.

created order.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, humans are seen as beneficent vicegerents of God on Earth, ranking the human story above all others and highlighting humanity’s special connection to God.

Anthropocentrism, the privileging of humans as central to the trajectory of history and of the Bible, is closely related to the chain of being authorized by hierarchical binaries. In other words, the world in all its different levels of being exists to submit to the will and pleasure of human beings. Theologian Kathryn Tanner writes,

[Humans] are parts of an immense whole arranged to suit God’s purposes, links in a great chain of beings held together by the way the qualities and activities that are natural to such beings have been coordinated by God to achieve a divine end...in its classic form, one is directed to consider the lower links of the chain as beings created to promote the functions of those higher up. And one is directed to consider the way beings higher up the chain affect lower ones by achieving the ultimate purposes for which those lower beings were created.<sup>9</sup>

The chain of being, Tanner concludes, “tends to be irremediably anthropocentric, since the centrality of human concerns will be thought of as part of the very nature of things...this stand stresses the idea that non-human existence is *already* ordered in a felicitous way to serve human ends.”<sup>10</sup>

Another facet of anthropocentrism is the centrality of human salvation in the New Testament. H. Paul Santmire examines the anthropocentrism of biblical texts through two lenses: the metaphor of fecundity, explained through texts in which the bounty and fruitfulness of the Creation is privileged; and the metaphor of ascent, which focuses on the importance of human salvation and connection with the Divine.<sup>11</sup> Santmire views one root of anthropocentric biblical

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<sup>8</sup> Tanner, “Creation, Environmental Justice, and Ecological Justice,” 104. The provision for man’s dominion over the earth can manifest itself positively in ethics of stewardship and watchful care, or in a negative vision of despotism.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>11</sup> H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 18-22. Here I am regarding “the Bible” as the Hebrew Bible (referred to as the

readings as the general subordination of the metaphor of fecundity to the metaphor of ascent. If all history is human-centered and all Creation is engaged in the work of assisting humans in achieving salvation, there is little need for concern for the state of life in this world; any such concern is overshadowed by striving to attain life in the next world.

Hierarchical binaries and anthropocentrism in biblical readings and theological discourse taken together compose a potent mix that results in an environmentally disastrous utilitarianism. Utilitarian ideology values resources only for what they provide or produce, allowing for and justifying overuse and exploitation.<sup>12</sup> Utilitarianism allows for the disregard of the natural world and oppressed peoples as members of God's good Creation, ignoring the inherent value and worth in all things. "Western civilization's advance at the expense of nature" is evidence of the mechanistic utilitarianism adopted and reinforced by Western Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

Utilitarianism turns social structures into power structures built on zero-sum models where there is always a group leveraging power over a group with less privilege and often trapped in subservience. This ideology, combined with the mechanism made possible by hierarchical binaries and anthropocentrism, denies the vitality of the Earth and conceptions of Earth as a caretaker, life-giver and mother.<sup>14</sup> Ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant writes, "[O]ne does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold, or mutilate her body. As

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Old Testament by Christians) and the New Testament together, with the canonical order of the Christian scriptures. The Bible is generally regarded as (in the least) a divinely inspired work written by human beings across hundreds of years and wide geographical locations. Being written by humans naturally gives the Bible a focus on human affairs, though there are multiple efforts from different groups of scholars to incorporate other marginalized voices in the Bible stories.

<sup>12</sup> The theological justification for utilitarianism is dominion theology, which promotes a reading of the creation narrative in Genesis 1 as God giving humans the Earth to use as they please. Dominion theology generally disregards any stewardship and co-creator interpretation of Genesis 1 in favor of viewing humans as the most important aspect of the Creation. This concept was reinforced by the mechanistic views of the Industrial Revolution.

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980), 143.

<sup>14</sup> See Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology for Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 16-18. Discussion of Gaia theory pg. 4. Discussion of pre-patriarchal goddess cultures and matriarchal cultures, 145-155. Discussion of the goddess: Ruether *Sexism and God-Talk*, 47-52.

long as the earth was conceptualized as alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it.”<sup>15</sup> This sentiment is an invaluable pushback against utilitarian ideology, and one that promotes a corrective ethic of understanding the Earth as a living being.

Some Christians disregard these manifestations of the separation of humanity and the natural world in the name of “human progress” and justify them with scriptural “proof-texts.” Others choose, as I do, to acknowledge Christianity’s complicity and examine it critically while proposing ways to free Christian community from these unhelpful patterns.<sup>16</sup> Because Christian teachings were misused to justify damaging practices, there must be a corrective appeal to the Christian scriptures and doctrine in bringing about a paradigm shift to redress the problem.<sup>17</sup> To

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<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* quoted in Spencer, *Gay and Gaia*, 79.

<sup>16</sup> Thankfully, there are many ecotheologians attempting to change the dominant paradigms I have enumerated. Proposals for changes are widely varying, ranging from calls for new scriptural hermeneutics to new homiletical ideas. Ideas include incorporating discussions of Christian pantheism and panentheism into sermons, seeing the body of Christ/God as the body of the Earth, using female as well as male gender pronouns for God in recognizing the diversity of created life, incorporating *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in understanding Jesus, attempts to use humor in preaching about difficult and problematic biblical texts and, always present, projects to recover the vitality in overused and overinterpreted texts. Christian ecological ethics, theology and hermeneutics include Dieter T. Hessel, ed. *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Daniel C. Maguire and Larry L. Rasmussen, eds., *Ethics for a Small Planet: New Horizons on Population, Consumption, and Ecology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998); Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997) and *Earth Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Christian environmental theology includes Ann Primavesi, *Gaia and Climate Change* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). Hermeneutics and biblical interpretation (not necessarily ecological): William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then The Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989); John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012); Douglas Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree: discovering humor and irony in the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Examining how nature is viewed in the Bible can shed light on how to approach bringing about this paradigm shift. Until recently, searches for a “biblical view of nature” have looked only at creation texts, such as Genesis 1 and 2. I choose not to use the language of a “biblical view of nature” in my work because it is often misunderstood, in my opinion, to suggest that there is one cohesive picture of how nature and the environment are understood in the Bible. In fact, there are many different images of nature in widely varying biblical texts. This high attention to creation texts is currently changing with increased attention to the wisdom literature, which is less disposed to anthropocentric claims. “Wisdom literature” generally refers to Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Qohelet/Ecclesiastes. Gene McAfee, “Ecology and Biblical Stories,” in Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *Theology for Earth Community: A Field*

cultivate change in a dominant culture beholden to damaging environmental practices, Christianity must lead the way by reinterpreting its own sacred texts.

Jesus himself catalyzed such paradigm shifts throughout his ministry. He witnessed against both the inculcated doctrine of the Jewish priesthood as well as the domination of the Roman Empire. In his life and teachings, Jesus used parables to reach both his disciples and the surrounding communities. New Testament scholar and Georgia preacher Clarence Jordan preached, “The parable is never more powerful than when it is relating to an event or a [current] situation...it’s literary bait to get your people to listen and lay hold of truths that otherwise would be abstract and obscure.”<sup>18</sup> The purpose of parables was to disorient the destructive attitudes of the dominant culture and reorient them to be more inclusive and representative of God’s love on Earth. Parables function as a mirror of sorts—primed to demonstrate the proper way to behave and reflect God’s Kingdom. In the introduction to Clarence Jordan’s *Cotton Patch Gospels*, President Jimmy Carter writes,

The [parables] hold a mirror to modern Christians. In that mirror we see both our inadequacies and our potential for Christ-like lives reflected alongside the life and work of Jesus. That reflection...point[s] us in the direction we should go in the journey to which Christ calls us. Our humanity is reflected next to Christ’s

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*Guide* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 39. Other texts that have been used to positively reflect a ‘biblical view of nature’ in the New Testament are the Seed Parables (Mt 13:1-9, Mk 4:1-9, Lk 8:4-8, Mk 4:26-29), Jesus’ references to mustard seeds (Mt 13:31-32, Mk 4:30-32, Lk 13:18-19), weeds (Mt 13:24-30), lilies of the field and birds of the air (Mt 6:25-34), and fig trees (Mt 24:32-36, Mk 13:28-32, Lk 21:29-33). I am avoiding discussing these texts too much here because they are often used to prove that “Jesus was an environmentalist” simply because he used natural imagery, which I don’t think he was because there was no environmental movement in his historical context. He, like most of the people in that time period, lived close to the land and used language based in land metaphors and imagery because that’s what would speak to people. However, we can take hope from his words and his usage of natural imagery as we learn how to think about Jesus’ theology of place.

<sup>18</sup> Power from Parables, No. 1, Compact Disc, (Americus, GA: Koinonia Farms, n.d.) Clarence Jordan was a New Testament Greek scholar and founder of Koinonia Farm, an interracial, Christian farming community near Americus, Georgia. He was a powerful preacher and focused on transliterations of the Gospels for his preaching. He is the author of *The Cotton Patch Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2012), first published in the 1960s.

humanity, and we see the divinity—the presence of God—in both.<sup>19</sup>

This function of parables makes it possible to break down the divide between what Christians believe and what their actions truly are. In light of modern environmental crises, with many worn out voices debating the “truth” of issues such as climate change, I suggest that adapting this purpose of parables for today could catalyze important changes in doctrine.<sup>20</sup>

For the original recipients of Jesus’ teachings, parables provided another paradigm—narrative stories—for thinking about historical, sociopolitical and spiritual situations. Jesus used parables in just this way; these stories were (and remain) transformative because they destabilized the status quo. Similarly, I am not interested in telling people what to think or arguing for one “right” way to read the Bible. Propositions such as “climate change is real,” or “Jesus was an environmentalist,” can easily be hijacked by political prejudices and partisanship.

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<sup>19</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Introduction” to Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Gospels* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2012), v.

<sup>20</sup> However, doctrinal change is not always followed by hermeneutical practice. This can be accorded in part to the difficulty and slow pace of change in religious institutions, but also to the nature of the change. There is a great push and pull between conservative fundamentalist groups and the rest of mainstream Christianity concerning many issues, the environment and anthropogenic climate change among them. The difficulty of reimagining Christianity in light of the environmental crisis does not dissuade many groups from pursuing an active reading of Scripture that pushes back against the three pervasive paradigms discussed here. Christian organizations working on similar issues encompass Catholics, Protestants and evangelicals and range across denominations and geographical locations, involving both local church groups and non-governmental organizations. Groups such as the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) and both state and national branches of Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) provide advocacy and practical efficiency services for their communities at local and national levels. Environmental education institutions such as the Au Sable Institute work on educating Christian undergraduate and graduate students about environmental science while providing religious background as well. Organizations such as Earth Ministry, Faith in Place, Restoring Eden, the Catholic Conservation Center, Women and Theology, Ethics and Religion and the Evangelical Earth Network, in addition to the NRPE and IPL, provide resources for interested individuals and congregations on how to enrich the life of a religious community around environmental issues with sample sermons, projects, service ideas and Bible studies. Numerous Christian intentional communities with place-based, food and farm focuses have sprung up or come into view as collections of individuals who have made visible commitments to working for sustainability and community in their lives. These organizations place their deep concern for the natural world and the wellbeing of humanity alongside their faith in a good God. Regrettably, however successful these ministries are (and there are some amazing stories about their accomplishments!), overall they are not reaching the people in the pews as widely as hoped. As doctrinal change generally follows grassroots changes, it takes a long time for any significant theological re-shaping to take place. There remains a lot of work to do in marrying theory to practice in order to encourage an active reading of Scripture that will reorient Christian community toward a more holistic worldview that could provide new ways of thinking about our current environmental crises.

I seek to provide people with another *way* to think, addressing their preconceptions in order to combat prejudice. Certainly there is a hermeneutical question at hand, as there are a multiplicity of methods for reading and interpreting the biblical scriptures. Here I propose merely one way of reading the Bible for my time and place.

My contribution to this work is a reading practice that cultivates the needed values to reorient embedded patterns of reading Scripture. I will argue that what is needed is a theological and scriptural hermeneutic that cultivates a sort of reorientation—a deliberate move away from anthropocentrism. This new hermeneutic, or reading practice, can serve to soften or even shatter what are arguably pernicious reified theological binaries and so foster humans' connection to nature. To accomplish this I turn to some contemporary theological interpretations of Jesus' parables and, informed by these interpretations, offer a literary interpretation of the parables that cultivates the necessary reorientation.

To this end, I have described three dominant paradigms that justify a separation from nature with the purpose of reorienting them in the rest of the essay. In Section I I will explain how the subversive and inclusive nature of parables provides fertile ground for doing creative re-readings of several parables in light of current environmental degradation and climate change. I will discuss the definition of parables, characteristics of parables and the role of parabolic stories in constructing social values. Then I will discuss the use of parables as a pedagogical method in the narrative of Jesus and how they follow the plumb line of prophetic speech in the New Testament. In Section II I will crystallize a guiding hermeneutical principle for interpreting Jesus' parables based on reader-response theory and guided by Rosemary Radford Ruether's prophetic principle. Finally, in Section III I will apply this scriptural hermeneutic to three parables from the Gospel of Luke. These parables were chosen for their use in directly

addressing and reorienting the three paradigms enumerated in the introduction to this paper. The themes that I will disorient in order to expand them beyond the dominant paradigms are radically inclusive: family love, neighborliness and hospitality.

### I. Parables as Suitable Texts for Reorienting Christian Ecological Thought

Parables were the primary form in which Jesus spoke to the public. Jesus used parables not only to witness against unjust systems of oppression but also to propose a new way of being in the world—one that would bring people together, creating a community of hospitality, generosity, and love—namely, the Kingdom of God. Often Jesus used a parable in response to a specific question without directly answering the question itself. This practice illustrates the literal meaning of the word “parable,” which comes from the combination of the Greek *para* (“alongside”) and *bole* (“throwing,” “casting,” “beam,” “ray”), literally meaning “a throwing beside” or “comparison.”<sup>21</sup> Parable scholar C.H. Dodd writes, “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the reader by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”<sup>22</sup> Parables are surprising because they “introduce a note of extravagance in mundane, secular ways”; they take a normal cultural interaction and turn it upside down, or even shatter the social norms.<sup>23</sup> In this way a mustard seed becomes a lesson about cultivating faith (Lk 13:18-19) and a story about yeast becomes a message about the growth of the Kingdom of God (Lk 13:20-21). The surprising, radical, or arresting quality of parables is possibly the one most discussed in churches, as it is part of the sudden subversion of contemporary religious culture within the bounds of the metaphor.

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<sup>21</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parables*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 10.

<sup>22</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribners, 1961), 16.

<sup>23</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 44.

Jesus' use of parables as a means for delivering his message aligns with the tradition of prophetic speech in the Bible. The prophetic-liberating tradition is a "plumb line of truth and untruth, justice and injustice that has to be constantly adapted to changing social contexts and circumstances."<sup>24</sup> For Rosemary Radford Ruether "the God-language of the prophetic tradition is destabilizing toward the existing social order and its hierarchies of power—religious, social, economic...it is a vision of an alternative future, a new 'deal' of peace and justice that will arise when the present systems of injustice have been overthrown."<sup>25</sup> Overturning hierarchies of power is not enough—unless the structures of power and privilege that create inequality and marginalize certain groups of people are *shattered*, new and more just structures cannot take their places. The Jesus of the New Testament narrative certainly broke the rules and opposed the established Jewish religious institutions, as well as the Roman Empire, through his teachings. The Gospels present an image of Jesus that cares for the poor and needy and despises the exploitation of the marginalized by the privileged:

[The language of the last being first and the first being last, etc.] in the Gospels belongs to the tradition that criticizes existing power systems and places God on the side of the oppressed. But Jesus criticized the temptation to see this simply as a reversed system of domination and privilege. Rather, he pressed beyond the critique of the present order to a more radical vision, a revolutionary transformative process that will bring all to a new mode of relationship.<sup>26</sup>

According to biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias, Jesus not only told parabolic stories, but also performed parabolic actions.<sup>27</sup> Just like his subversive stories, Jesus' own behavior differed from what was expected according to social norms. Jesus invited outcasts over for dinner (Lk 14:1-24), allowed women to listen to his teachings (Lk 10:38-42), praised children's humility

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<sup>24</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1972), 227-229.

over his disciples' ambition (Mt 18:1-5), washed his disciples' feet (Jn 13:1-10), healed on the Sabbath (Mt 12:9-14), cleansed the Temple (Mt 21:12-13), brought the dead back to life (Jn 11:1-44) and ate dinner with his followers the night before his martyrdom (Mt 26:26-29). All of these actions are parabolic because they are in the same spirit as the parable stories. For example, because he healed a woman plagued by an evil spirit on the Sabbath, Jesus was rebuked by temple leaders for disobeying the law of observing the Sabbath in rest (Lk 13:10-17). As a well-known teacher who knew the Law, his actions would not have been expected; he surprised the temple leaders not only by healing her with his touch, but by doing it on the Holy Day, by claiming that he was releasing her from bondage to Satan, and by insinuating that any of the temple leaders should have known it was right to do so. His actions not only subverted social norms, but also carried symbolic value; the inclusive and subversive nature of Jesus' ministry foreshadowed the coming of the Kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup>

I am deeply indebted to ecotheologian Sallie McFague's understanding of parables as operating within a process of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.<sup>29</sup> Parables involve metaphorical meaning that depends on a literal, conventional base as a point of contact. To be able to move beyond the familiar social order so as to subvert it and reorient towards a new way of thinking, one must begin from the familiar and mundane orientation. Only then can one imagine and enact a new way of being, because one is aware of the difference from the old

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<sup>28</sup> The inclusivity of parables is due to the metaphorical nature of human language. Metaphor is also characteristic of the way humans conceptualize the Divine, the other-than-human. "The only legitimate way of speaking of the incursion of the divine into history, or so it appears to [Christianity], is metaphorically." (McFague, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 76). Metaphor is appropriate for the subject of connection with the Divine because the substance of God remains hidden, corresponding with the way it has been imagined throughout Judeo-Christian history. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, "Introduction" in *Divine Hiddenness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), <http://faculty.wvu.edu/howardd/hiddennessintro.html>, accessed 17 February 2014. By establishing the base of encountering God in metaphorical language, the message of parables becomes accessible to all, equalizing humanity.

<sup>29</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 46. Orientation, disorientation and reorientation originated with Paul Ricoeur in "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 94-112, but McFague's understanding of this process is most useful to me here.

way.<sup>30</sup> In his teachings, Jesus used examples from the lives of common folk. In a well-known story, a “Good Samaritan” stops on the road to help a person, presumably a Jew, who has been beaten and lies in a ditch (Lk 10:25-37). This constitutes the orientation phase, where the recipients of the parable recognize a familiar base of contact—the audience would have recognized the setup of a moralistic story. However, when Jesus says that a priest and a Levite coming down to Jericho from Jerusalem neglect to stop and in fact pass by on the other side, the readers are disoriented: surely the priest or the Levite, members of religious orders, will help the person in the ditch! Instead, they have to accept that a Samaritan performed the positive action. The reorientation phase occurs when Jesus affirms the Samaritan’s actions by telling his audience to “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37 NRSV). This is completely unexpected for the recipients of the parable—most likely Jews—who were oriented to the current social order that designated an in-group (Jews) and an out-group (Samaritans).<sup>31</sup> They were then forced to decide which was more important, showing mercy to someone in need or obeying the Law? They could no longer adhere to the social order without thinking about Jesus’ words; the choice before them meant choosing to be a part of and reorienting to a new social order.

Parables are transformative because they exist on multiple levels; they have both a surface level and a deeper structure. This necessitates that one must make the conscious choice to embrace both levels of meaning, especially when they establish a paradox. Parables exemplify what philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls the “is and is not” quality, in which there is a view of the familiar though it possesses a quality beside itself that makes it not quite itself. Using the

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<sup>30</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 39. Paul Ricoeur suggests that the “the trait which invites us to *transgress* the narrative structures is the same as that which *specifies* the parable as a “religious” kind of “poetic” discourse. This trait is...the element of extravagance which makes the “oddness” of the narrative, by mixing the “extraordinary” with the “ordinary.”” (Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 99).

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott notes that “the enmity between Jew and Samaritan was proverbial. ‘He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one what eats the flesh of swine’” (*b. San. 57a*). (Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 197).

example of “war is like chess,” McFague explains that in metaphor both subjects are altered by the comparison; one subject cannot be regarded in the same way as before having encountered it through a different lens that is the other subject.<sup>32</sup> War is war (is itself) but it is also like chess (something apart from itself, but still similar); it both *is* and *is not* the same as before the comparison.<sup>33</sup> In this way, a common parable, such as the story of the Prodigal Son, is a story about the mundane occurrence of disagreements between parents and children. However, it is also much more in the subversion of the expected outcome and the deeper message that can be taken as a spiritual metaphor for God’s love (Lk 15:11-32).

Moving beyond an expected outcome requires a conventional point of contact for a metaphor to take hold as it subverts the common understanding in favor of making the familiar unfamiliar.<sup>34</sup> This process of “defamiliarizing the familiar” takes place within the reader as expectations established based on cultural understandings and norms are affirmed through a reader’s identification with a character, only to be shattered by the subversion of those expectations (by the rebuke of a commendable character or the praise of an uncommendable character).<sup>35</sup> The reader is then caught in a gap between the expectations and the need to modify

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<sup>32</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Pastor and Greek New Testament scholar Clarence Jordan proposes that parables are “literary Trojan horse[s]...the parable is a way of concealing one’s truth to get it by apparently impregnable defenses...then after it is beyond the defense, it releases its point, its truth and now the people who are on the defense are caught by it.” (*Power from Parables*, Disc 1). Jordan likens Trojan horse parables to the story that Nathan tells King David to get him to realize the consequences of his having Uriah killed and stealing Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1-14). ““Old King David, he’s looking and looking,” taught Jordan, “but don’t [sic] hear any-thing. He’s listening and listening, but doesn’t see anything.”” (Joel Snider, “Hearing Parables in the Patch” in *Parables: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2006), 83). By letting the Trojan horse parable loose Nathan caused David to see the error of his ways and repent; it was letting the Trojan horse in that caused David to understand the consequences of his actions. With Jordan’s humor, “there was nothing for David to do but go out and write another psalm.” (*Power from Parables*, Disc 1). Similarly, Jesus’ parables made it possible to convey important spiritual matters in small tidbits that forced recipients of the stories to reimagine how they lived their lives.

<sup>34</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> James L. Resseguie, “Reader-Response Criticism and the Synoptic Gospels,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 no. 2 (June 1984), 309. The literary devices used in de-familiarizing the familiar by Jesus in the parables are multiple: rhetorical questions, analogies, contrasts and the recalling of Hebrew scriptures. Use of rhetorical questions: garners response from the opponents in the text as well as the reader; analogies: finding a

the expectations to align themselves with the teaching of Jesus. This modification of expectations—based on the experience of suddenly being thrust into a situation where the existing cultural norms and behaviors are *not* approved—forces the reader to examine the underlying assumptions within the text and within their own life.<sup>36</sup> Being able to reimagine how life could be, how relations with God could be, follows McFague’s process of reorientation. Her view of parables suggests how this might work:

“a parable of Jesus is not only an interesting story; it is a call to decision...it is a way of believing and living that initially seems ordinary, yet is so dislocated and rent from its usual context that, if the parable “works,” the spectators have become participants...The secure, familiar everydayness of the story of their own lives has been torn apart; they have seen another story—the story of a mundane life like their own moving by a different ‘logic,’ and they begin to understand (not just with their heads) that an other way of believing and living—another context or frame for their lives—might be a possibility for them.”<sup>37</sup>

The idea of “an other context or frame for their lives” that “might be a possibility for them” is incredibly powerful, since it suggests organizing one’s life around a whole new worldview. The

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commonality in the situation at hand and the story given by Jesus; contrasts: usually the correct norm/behavior is demonstrated by an unexpected character, casting light on the incorrect behavior or norm reinforced by the expected character; use of Scripture: “for the reader to concretize the text, he needs to bridge the gap between the two events and to find the motives underlying the negation of the norm.” (Ibid., 311).

<sup>36</sup> The transformative element here is the agency of the readers who have a decision to make when taking in these stories from Jesus. “The original parabolic point was the arrival of the Kingdom of God upon the hearers in and through the challenge to utter the unspeakable and to admit thereby another world which was at that very moment placing their own under radical judgment.” (John Dominic Crossan, “Parable and Example in the Teaching of Jesus,” *Semeia* 1 (1974), 77). Crossan proposed that the parables represent Jesus’ understanding of his relationship with God, proclaim the Kingdom of God as well as reveal something about eschatology, and reveal insights about the temporality of the Kingdom of God. John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973), 31. The Kingdom’s “three modes of temporality” are exemplified by three types of parables, elaborated upon in Crossan’s *In Parables*: “its *advent* as gift of God, its *reversal* of the recipient’s world, and its empowering to life and action.” (Ibid., 36). The emphasis is on the choice to enter the parable/Kingdom and the implications of that choice. The importance of action in addition to belief is elaborated upon in many biblical texts and is intimately involved in discussions of eschatology and the Kingdom of God. Perrin writes, “The Kingdom of God is in the power of God expressed in deeds,” valuing a sort of bridge between a realized eschaton in the fashion of C.H. Dodd and a progressive eschaton such as the one set forth by Joachim Jeremias. (Ibid., 23-24). Crossan proposes that Jesus was proclaiming a collaborative eschaton, “not a realized, but a realizable eschaton...*God’s kingdom is here, but only insofar as you accept it, enter it, live it and thereby establish it.*” (Crossan, *The Power of Parable*, 127).

<sup>37</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 78-79.

leap of faith from the surface level of the parable—where the outcast helps the injured insider who is a stranger—to the deeper level—where the spiritual lessons about hospitality and the radical nature of God’s love are learned—is a wide chasm. Ricoeur proposed that parables provided two ways of being in the world: the conventional and the kingdom.<sup>38</sup> The important choice is which to engage—a choice that is made available when confronting parables in a way that opens up a dialogue with the text.

A central feature of parables is the way in which the reader collaborates in the creation of meaning. A parable is not imbued with a certain pre-determined meaning by the author, as would be true of allegories—which have direct parallels to recognizable subjects—but rather the text of a parable provides a starting point that calls the reader forth to respond and fill in the meaning. It is open-ended, with neither the author of the text or the reader defining the parable’s full meaning; it is a dialogical relationship between the two parties. The point of the parabolic form is “not to create one particular meaning, but *to create the conditions under which the creation of meaning can be defined and examined by each perceiver.*”<sup>39</sup> Given that the parables do not have logical, step-by-step arguments that define the meaning in one way such that it limits interpretation to an “original meaning,” Susan Wittig suggests that the “omission of detail...invite[s] the reader to establish his own connections...when the text does not offer it.”<sup>40</sup> This function of parables provided the recipients of Jesus’ teachings the opportunity to come forth and collaborate in the creation of meaning through their community context.

Because parables are centered around reversals of commonplace norms and behaviors, transformation may occur once the reader makes the choice to enter into the parable with their

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<sup>38</sup> Discussion of Ricoeur’s two ways of being in McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Wittig, quoted in Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 518. His italics.

<sup>40</sup> Wittig, quoted in Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 518.

whole being. Mary C. Boys recalls Parker Palmer's saying that "you don't think your way into a new kind of living, you live your way into a new kind of thinking."<sup>41</sup> This captures the complexity of doctrinal change and hermeneutical practice at the grassroots level—the way of life impacts the theology instead of the other way around. As a pedagogical form, parables can open up a dialogue with people from diverse experiences to create a wide array of meanings. Boys suggests characteristics of topics that lend themselves to being taught parabolically: "topics involving reversal and reorientation of ones' way of living; topics engaging us at the level of our entire being; topics which open up for us the strange graciousness of God" are those into which parabolic ways of thinking can provide insight.<sup>42</sup> Boys uses feminism and the resurrection as examples of topics that exemplify a parabolic structure, and I would advocate thinking about humanity's relationship to nature in this way as well.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Boys' suggestions for teaching parabolically are based in the fundamental knowledge of experience are realized, as it is from the mundane materials of life (namely, the environment surrounding us) that the parables themselves are constructed.<sup>44</sup> Parabolic teaching should never be didactic, as it undermines the goal of the

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<sup>41</sup> Parker Palmer, *Promise of Paradox*, quoted in Mary C. Boys, "Parabolic Ways of Teaching," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* XIII (July 1983), 86.

<sup>42</sup> Boys, "Parabolic Ways of Teaching," 87.

<sup>43</sup> Taking feminism as an example of how Boys applies parabolic teaching methods, adopting a feminist worldview engages one at the level of their whole being, questioning the hierarchy of people and nature as a means to confront gender hierarchy and inequality. Feminism does involve significant reversals of one's way of living in the world due to new methods of understanding relationships and dialectics. "As a contemporary exemplar of a Copernican shift, feminism has, as do all such revolutions in perspective, exacted a terrible emotional price. For many in religious circles, the pain stems not only from learning new ways of male-female relationships, but also from being confronted with a new image of God. Hence the appropriateness of parabolic modes in teaching about feminism: to learn what feminism means involves more than simply receiving new information, engaging in social analysis of participating in debate. It entails accepting a new set of images and of moving through a process of surprise, insight and decision." For Boys, the gift of feminism is "the pressure to re-image God" once one has had the opportunity to rethink traditional images of God informed by a patriarchal culture and used to reinforce the use of violence perpetrated against "the other." This in itself is a radical reorientation of a way of understanding the world, when images of God must be traded in for new ones, making it "more difficult to speak of God" "as our struggles with pronouns somewhat humorously indicate." Parabolic teaching provides the option of "provoking without polarizing," as the stories sought in parabolic questions arise from personal experiences that bring forth imaginative responses rather than attacks and criticism. (Boys, "Parabolic Ways of Teaching," 88).

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Spencer suggests an exercise for getting students (or congregants) to think critically about how sociopolitical and economic forces, as well as their own family or community religious traditions have shaped their

parables: to open up new understandings and constantly subvert the meaning of the current situation of the world. “Questions should be imaginative and linked with experience...allowing time and silence for reflection,” a process which is conducive to McFague’s “reorientation,” as it acknowledges that the way of living—the praxis of everyday life—is part of the transformation that must take place.<sup>45</sup>

## II. Reader-Response Theory as Cultivating Hermeneutic Competency

My interpretive method for reading the Bible relies upon a reader-response theory that concerns the agency of the reader and the collaborative nature of the creation of meaning that is particularly well suited for interpreting parables. The creation of meaning is done in community and is always changing and dialectical. The reader, striving to complete the interpretive process, can view the text as a form of communication. Jouette Bassler observes that multiple opportunities for interpretation are made possible due to the open-ended nature of a text whose “meaning is created and re-created in every act of reading and is thus inseparable from either text or reader.”<sup>46</sup> The meaning that is created by the reader is not formulated in a vacuum. Each reader encountering the text carries their political, cultural and social experiences; in essence, their community context is always accompanying them.

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relationship to the land. Students write an “environmental autobiography” with these directions: “Consider your own family’s and/or primary community’s history and place in society going back three to five generations (and farther if you can). What have been some of the important historical, social, cultural and economic factors that have shaped your family’s and your attitudes toward the land and environmental issues. Why? How did your families and/or communities use the land and relate to nature? Factors: Economic, Historical, Race, Geographic, Cultural, Religious... What large events—wars, depressions, revolutions, social movements—shaped their lives? Have these had any influence on their/your values, attitudes and behaviors? Which of your family’s values have you retained? Which have you revised or rejected? Why? What insights do you gain from this exercise on how you have been shaped to view the land and environmental issues? Are there any implications from this for globalization and/or social change?” This exercise is adapted from Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Cited in Daniel Spencer, “Pedagogical Issues and Teaching Models for Eco-Justice,” in Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 221.

<sup>45</sup> Boys, “Parabolic Ways of Teaching,” 86.

<sup>46</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, “The Parable of the Loaves,” in *The Journal of Religion* 66 no. 2 (April 1986): 159.

Similarly, the parables themselves have a community context. Ricoeur proposes reading the parables as part of a “corpus” that must be taken together because “the inner clues for a metaphorical understanding of the parables...are too elusive and dubious to be identified only on the basis of a *single* parable.”<sup>47</sup> One parable read alone cannot possibly contain all of the meaning able to be conveyed about social or political relations, let alone divine-human relations and the nature of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, there is “no hermeneutics of a parable, but of *the* parables.”<sup>48</sup> Ruether’s prophetic principle (to be discussed later in this section) serves as a guide for interpreting parables within a community. This interpretive method results in an increase in the reader’s hermeneutic competency, or the freedom they experience interpreting the text.<sup>49</sup>

In reader-response theory, the status of the reader and the reader’s process is elevated as they experience the text in a dialogical way.<sup>50</sup> Reader-response theory suggests that written words call forth some understanding from within the reader, affecting the way the reader conceptualizes their world. The conversation between the reader and the text is continuous, focusing on the aspects of the text that speak to the reader during the reading process. Literary scholar Wolfgang Iser’s critical assumptions for reader-response theory are instructive in understanding the dialectic. First, the relationship of the reader to the text is dialectical: it establishes a conversation that is not static or pre-determined by the author. Second, the identity of the reader as an individual with their own experiences of cultural norms and behaviors is

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<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 100.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>49</sup> “Hermeneutic competency” is a phrase borrowed from liberation theologian Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987). It refers to the freedom the reader feels in interpreting the biblical text. For example, if a reader is beholden to a particular interpretation of the Bible, they might experience a low hermeneutic competency. Hermeneutic competency is desirable in my view because it encourages readers to take ownership of the text and interpret it through their own life events and experiences of the Divine. However, one cannot do whatever they want when interpreting—there must be guidelines that are in line with the spirit of the interpreting community.

<sup>50</sup> I will use “reader” to refer to any recipient of the text, whether visually or aurally.

assumed instead of expecting the reader to abandon all experiential knowledge when confronting the text. Third, the text is assumed to be familiar territory, pertaining to shared cultural norms. Fourth, the communication between the reader and the text always reveals something new, so the process of interpretation is continuous instead of residing in just one meaning being culled from the text.<sup>51</sup>

The reading practice I propose has two components: flexibility of community interpretation and a guiding interpretive principle. Stanley Fish suggests that reading in community is an integral part of reader-response theory in that meaning is not only constructed collaboratively by the reader and the text, but it is also collaborative within a community of readers who encounter the text with shared cultural and social knowledge.<sup>52</sup> The collaboration of an “interpretive community” of readers imbues a great amount of flexibility in the meanings gleaned from a text because of the many experiences people carry with them while interacting with Scripture.<sup>53</sup> Fish disputes the idea of there being an intrinsic meaning to a text—if readers come up with the same reading of a text, it is because they have been trained to read in a way that will call forth that particular meaning from the text.<sup>54</sup> Using the example of Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*, which contains a “rule of faith”—a reading strategy that suggests that Scripture points only to God’s love—Fish shows how effective interpretive communities can be in reproducing the same text over and over. By following Augustine’s Rule of Faith, readers would relentlessly question a scriptural passage that does not line up with their reading strategy

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<sup>51</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 69.

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, cited in Resseguie, “Reader Response Criticism and the Synoptic Gospels,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 no. 2 (June 1984), 316.

<sup>53</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 171.

<sup>54</sup> Whether or not texts have an “intrinsic meaning” in general falls outside of the scope of this essay. I limit my argument to the literary interpretation of Jesus’ parables.

and “scrutinize it ‘until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced.’”<sup>55</sup>

Therefore a community that affirms the same values in a reading practice would summon meanings that align with those values, and for an interpretive community of faith, this carries a great deal of power. By this model,

meanings are not extracted but made and made not by encoded forms but by interpretive strategies that call forms into being. It follows then that what utterers [authors] do is give hearers and readers the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies.<sup>56</sup>

In the case of parables, it is not the *meaning* that is reproduced over and over; as I have argued, parables exist to expand the recipients’ hermeneutic competency instead of producing one “original meaning.” The set of strategies that arise from the interpretive community are necessary for the reading practice to take hold. In my project, interpretive communities are a group of progressive Christians who read the Bible in continuity with what Ruether describes as the “prophetic principle.”<sup>57</sup>

This interpretive principle suggests that equality and justice are main themes in the Bible, in line with the liberation tradition in Christianity.<sup>58</sup> The following themes of the prophetic-liberating tradition of biblical faith will be used as a guide for defining the interpretive community I am engaging:

(1) God’s defense and vindication of the oppressed; (2) the critique of the dominant systems of power and their powerholders; (3) the vision of a new age to come in which the present system of injustice is overcome and God’s intended reign of peace and justice is installed in history; and (4) finally, the critique of ideology, or of religion, since ideology in this context is primarily religious. Prophetic faith denounces religious ideologies and systems that function to justify and sanctify the dominant, unjust

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<sup>55</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 170.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-173.

<sup>57</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

social order. These traditions are central to the Prophets and to the mission of Jesus.<sup>59</sup>

I suggest that Christians adopt this prophetic principle as a guide in the reading process, forming the basis for an interpretive community. By encouraging everyday people to experience greater “hermeneutic competency” in their reading practices, the structures of power within the Christian tradition that have resulted in spiritual knowledge being solely concentrated in ministerial staff are challenged. Applying the prophetic principle in this way contests the “ideological deformation” of the prophetic tradition to reinforce structures of power. One cause of this deformation is the

socioreligious group’s movement from powerlessness to power. When the religious spokespersons identify themselves as members of and advocates of the poor, then the critical-prophetic language maintains its cutting edge. When the religious spokespersons see themselves primarily as stabilizing the existing social order and justifying its power structure, then prophetic language becomes deformed in the interests of the status quo.<sup>60</sup>

As Christianity went from being the belief of a marginalized group to being the state religion of an empire in a mere four hundred years, this tradition of prophetic speech was lost, covered up and replaced with codifications of this ideological deformation. The flexible application of the prophetic principle to different contexts is situational and depends to some extent on the social, political and economic status of the dominant group of biblical interpreters.<sup>61</sup>

In using the prophetic principle to question the relationship of humans to nature, I seek to reorient the tradition to include the environment as a victim of oppression and a place yearning

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<sup>59</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. Ruether examines the application by feminist theologians of the prophetic principle to women. To do this, she appropriates the prophetic liberating tradition to speak to the experiences of women in a faith dominated by patriarchal doctrine. By examining biblical texts and finding “resources for the critique of patriarchy and of the religious sanctification of patriarchy” to use as a means for denouncing the system instead of covering up that history, there is a use of the prophetic principle that rejects the normative nature of patriarchy and allows for a more just system to be imagined (*Ibid.*, 22-23). This presses the critique of hierarchy to become a critique of patriarchy, since the silencing of women in the biblical tradition was done through the lens of patriarchal culture.

for healing and reconciliation.<sup>62</sup> The first principle of God's defense and vindication of the oppressed speaks to the way God shows solidarity with the oppression of the Creation. The second principle of critiquing dominant power structures is a necessity when confronting environmental issues, as many of the hierarchies currently privilege organizations and practices that are degrading the Earth. The systems that justify the current unjust order are the same ones that oppress via hierarchy: patriarchy and domination of nature. The third principle of envisioning a more just coming age calls for an understanding of the history of social movements and of the oppression of marginalized groups, including the history of environmental degradation. This is invaluable if there is going to be any social change and progressive movement forward. This fourth principle of critique of ideology applies directly to the reimagining and reorientation that are necessary for including the environment in the reach of the prophetic-liberating tradition. With these three aspects of the reading practice, we can now take up a dialogue with Scripture.<sup>63</sup>

### III. Reading Familiar Texts With New Eyes: Applying the Prophetic Principle in an Ecological Context

Three well-known parables from the Gospel of Luke—The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and the Great Banquet (Lk 14:1-24)—can be engaged through a prophetically attuned reading practice to rethink some issues regarding Christianity and the environment. I do not pretend that this reading practice will finally reveal the “true

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<sup>62</sup> Other guiding principles for being mindful of eco-justice issues when reading Scripture or teaching ecological education theologically share this sentiment. See Daniel Spencer, “Pedagogical Issues and Teaching Models for Eco-Justice” in Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *Theology for Earth Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 210; Nancy G. Wright and Beryl Ingram’s Introduction to Section 6: “Spiritual Formation and Liturgical Reform” in the same volume, 237-238; Nancy G. Wright, “Christian Spirituality: Mending the Web,” in the same volume, 239-249; Beryl Ingram, “Eco-Justice Liturgies,” in the same volume, 250-264.

<sup>63</sup> From here onwards, I will use “we” to refer to my audience as an interpretive community of Christians basing their hermeneutics on the prophetic principle.

meaning” of the texts. My method simply aims to reorient common Christian interpretations of these parables to apply the ethics therein to a context beyond the scope of the parables’ historical/temporal setting. This method follows in the footsteps of many Christian communities before me, and I am taking up this task with the purpose of further opening up dialogues with the parables.

My project takes up a strange process: disorienting the reading of texts that were created with the purpose of disorienting. The values found in the parables are on the side of inclusivity, equality, and vitality, but they are anthropocentric—many of the stories directly implicate humans. I aim to take the values in the parables and push them one step further. Instead of just applying the changed social values to our individual lives, what would it look like to apply them to a wider environmental view? How would our relationship with the parables change if we saw ourselves in the background role instead of the subject role?

Common readings of these stories do not enter the subversive deeper structure of the parables to the extent possible. The revised ethics parables offer can be applied to social and political relationships, but they can also reorient Christian communities’ thinking about environmental issues in church contexts. This reorientation involves drawing away from considering humanity as the focus of the parables without leaving them out of the equation completely, which would only serve to reify the boundaries between divine-human-nature relations. By encouraging Christian communities to approach the parables with the intent of creating a dialogue with the text, there are new interpretations to be discovered.

The themes which I am disorienting in order to reorient them beyond the anthropocentric realm are radically inclusive: “family love,” “neighborliness,” and “hospitality.” By family love, I mean both a feeling and praxis of extending love beyond the borders of one’s own identity and

immediate location. Neighborliness refers to creating a community that does not exclude some beings from experiencing expressions of love and justice by expanding the understanding of responsibility and accountability to beings for which one does not usually feel accountable. Hospitality draws these concepts together to create a vision of love and justice that does not exclude on the basis of difference, but seeks to establish active inclusivity in all aspects of individual and community life.

Theme 1: Family Love  
Parable 1: The Prodigal Son  
Luke 15:11-32<sup>64</sup>

The Prodigal Son is one of the most well known parables of Jesus. Numerous clergy, theologians, poets and artists have read this story and have brought new interpretations to light. This story, following the parables of the lost sheep (Lk 15:3-7) and the lost coin (Lk 15:8-10), is told after “the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Lk 15:2 NRSV). Jesus answers their complaints about his denial of the social order with three stories about something being lost and then found again, and the joy with which the owner welcomed the return. This story validated the life experiences of the very sinners and outcasts that Jesus was being criticized for hanging out with. The theme of family love shown through wholeness and restoration in this story pushes back against the dominant paradigm of hierarchical binaries and the pervasive dualisms that arise from them.

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<sup>64</sup> Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32 NRSV).

11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’” 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. 25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

The Prodigal Son is a story of unconditional family love. The story centers around a father and his two sons. The younger son prematurely demands that his father, still living and presumably in good health, give him his share of the inheritance. One interpretation is that the son was saying about as much as “I wish you were dead,” because an inheritance was not usually dispersed with until the death of the father and the transfer of estate to the progeny.<sup>65</sup> Readers familiar with the Hebrew Bible stories of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph would recognize the departure of the son on a journey as indicating a test—one that he will surely pass by using the inheritance for honorable purposes, following in the footsteps of his ancestors.<sup>66</sup> But this time, the younger son goes off and squanders all of the money in “dissolute living” (Lk 15:13 NRSV). A famine comes upon the land in which the son is living and the desolation increases, causing him to seriously reflect on his actions. After realizing what he has done, finding himself stooping so low as to work with pigs—ritually unclean animals—the younger son decides to go home and humble himself before his father, asking forgiveness and to be allowed to work as a servant in his father’s house.

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion,” signifying that his father was expecting—or at least hoping for—his return (Lk 15:20 NRSV). The father runs to meet his son, hugging and kissing him and not even letting the son ask to be considered a servant. Those listening to Jesus’ story would not expect the son to be welcomed back so grandly after dishonoring the family, shaming the father’s life, and taking the inheritance while the father was still living—and neither do we.<sup>67</sup> Instead, the opposite of expectations

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<sup>65</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 111.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>67</sup> This parable was likely addressed to people who were in opposition to the gospel as an appeal toward their conscience. “The parable of the Prodigal Son is therefore not primarily a proclamation of the Good News to the poor, but a vindication of the Good News in reply to its critics.” (Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 131).

occurs as the father calls for the vestments of honor to be given to his youngest child.<sup>68</sup> The father killed the fatted calf and invited neighbors to join in the celebration for the son returned home. He could not stop sharing his joy and relief at his son coming back to life.

But there is another part of the story, one that is often overlooked. The older brother, out working in his father's fields, learns of the party and is angry about the celebration for his younger brother, given all of the bad things he assumes his brother has done.<sup>69</sup> He refuses to take part in the celebration for his brother, full of righteous indignation. His father comes out of the party and pleads with his son to come join them, who answers, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (Lk 15:29-30 NRSV). The elder son is expressing frustration that he, who has lived righteously and believes he has done all his father asked, has not received even the smallest thanks. He distances himself from his brother by calling him "this son of yours," which almost drips with disdain in the text. They are suddenly of two families, showing the distrust and dishonor with which the older brother considers the younger's actions.

The father's response to his elder son also models grace and forgiveness. The older son thinks he has behaved perfectly and has honored his father, but his words betray the distrust and lack of love in his heart. He is not living up to his call to love the outcasts and practice forgiveness as modeled by his father. The father assures his firstborn that he loves him, using a

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<sup>68</sup> The father bestows honors of distinction upon his son. The robe denotes the coming of the New Age, the ring signifies the bestowal of authority, the shoes are a luxury worn only by free men (showing that the son does not have to lower himself as a slave) and feasting upon meat was reserved only for festive occasions. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 130.

<sup>69</sup> How does the elder son know that his brother has done dishonorable things if he has been out in the fields since he returned? There must be some history between them that causes him to assume a negative posture against his younger brother.

verbal construction that is especially affectionate because “[my dear] Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (Lk 15:31-32 NRSV).<sup>70</sup> Grace and forgiveness are modeled in the behavior of the father towards the indignant older son as he listens and affirms his son’s feelings but explains that the outcast also has value and thanks should be given for his restoration. God is often regarded as the father figure in this story, welcoming the sinners back no matter what, even if they have brought significant shame and dishonor on the family of God.<sup>71</sup> Jeremias recognizes this story as an apologetic story in which Jesus is vindicating his conduct of embracing sinners against his critics, claiming that “in his actions the love of God to the repentant sinner is made effectual.”<sup>72</sup>

The celebration was thrown because of the transformation from death to life and the restoration of things that had been thought lost forever. Jeremias paraphrases Jesus’ message in the parables about lost things: “Behold the greatness of God’s love for his lost children, and contrast it with your own joyless, loveless, thankless and self-righteous lives. Cease then from your loveless ways, and be merciful. The spiritually dead are rising to new life, the lost are returning home, rejoice...”<sup>73</sup> This story of God’s extravagant grace is manifest with the message that there is nothing that we can do to take God’s love away from us. We will always be welcomed back, no matter what.

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<sup>70</sup> NRSV uses the translation “Son” but other translations use “my dear son,” which is closer to the affectionate Greek term. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 131.

<sup>71</sup> There is a corresponding rabbinic story: “A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of a hundred days; his friends said to him, ‘Return to your father’; he said, ‘I cannot.’ Then his father sent to say, ‘Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way.’ So God says, ‘Return to me, and I will return to you.’” (C. Montefiore and Loewe, *Rabbinic Anthology*, 321; quoting from *Pes. R.* 184b-185a. Quoted in Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parables*, 117).

Schotroff writes this about God being seen as the father figure: “The history of the interpretation and influence of this parable has imposed on today’s Christians not only the heritage of an anti-Jewish and triumphalistic reading, but also the divinizing of the patriarchal father and the romanticizing of the patriarchal household.” Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 150.

<sup>72</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 132.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Thus, the parable suggests we should work towards and celebrate the restoration of things that have been taken away, desecrated, or defiled. The father celebrates his son's return because the son "was dead and has come to life"; the relationship was lost and then restored in some way.<sup>74</sup> Upon the forgiveness and return of the son, the father proclaims to his community that he will celebrate the return of his youngest son and the restored wholeness of his family. The unity of the two sons—"this brother of yours" as he reminds his older son—and of the family, is the primary concern of the father.<sup>75</sup> Speaking to the elder son, the father explains the necessity for the celebration honoring the younger brother. Wholeness and vitality are the themes that show the love is inclusive of the histories, hurts, and recoveries all present in the restored family.

What can this inclusive love and hope for renewal teach about our response to environmental degradation? There are events occurring that are causing rifts in the wholeness of the Earth family, disturbing the vitality that is found through biodiversity as well as the diversity of culture and experience. The polar ice caps are melting, causing unprecedented sea level rise around the world. Island nations have already begun disappearing due to loss of land. Storms are more intense and more frequent on land and at sea. These events are happening all around the world, affecting people and places many of us will never see or know. The outcome is undetermined, though the signs do not bode well.

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<sup>74</sup> The younger son has the right to both possession and disposition of the property, though the elder son only has the right of possession. This could be another reason for the elder brother's indignation. See Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 120 and Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 143-144. The relationship was not completely restored because the inheritance could not be returned. Thus the younger brother could have been embraced back into the family group but would hold a different place because he would not be able to inherit a second time.

<sup>75</sup> Schotroff questions the positivity of the father figure in this parable because he is always bound by the expectations of patriarchy. The message Schotroff gleans from this parable is that God's love is inclusive and magnificent, but it does not disrupt the relationships within the patriarchal order of society. The father has absolute control and power within the household, "defin[ing] what is just and merciful." This is not to say that Schotroff does not recognize criticism of the patriarchal order in the Gospel of Luke, which she does. Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 144.

This Earth is a closed system, with matter and energy cycling constantly, shared among many different beings. The Earth has been pillaged and desecrated, reduced to a lowly servant instead of a partner in the renewal of Creation. There is no way to reverse the effects of human habitation and industry on the natural world. It is past the time when the beneficiaries of affluence must humble ourselves and recognize the destruction and degradation in which we are complicit. Although restoration of what has been lost is paramount, in many ways it may be impossible. Scientists are telling us that we are past the point of no return, that there honestly is no way for us to return to pre-anthropocene times.<sup>76</sup> By discussing this dire situation, I am not suggesting that humans wait on God to deliver the Earth and restore it via the second coming of Jesus Christ. I am also not suggesting that we dismiss scientists' concerns and deny that the environment is in peril—I believe it is. I am asking us to consider the question all characters in this story ask: “In light of what has happened, how do we act?”

I am advocating that we instill some hope into this situation by viewing the restoration, or at least mediation, of the Earth as possible. This reorientation towards hope follows the prophetic principle of envisioning a new and just age to come. Christians can be inclusive in the relationships we build, individually and as a church, welcoming people no matter what experiences and histories they carry with them—this inclusivity and family love is a direct correction of hierarchical binaries that rank people based on meaningless divisions. Though his son left home abruptly, the father still watched and waited for his return, believing his youngest would be restored to him. The Prodigal was not absolved of all his sins and wasteful living upon returning home. He still carried that history with him—presumably it affected his relationship with his older brother. Similarly, the history of misuse and abuse of the Earth will always be with

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<sup>76</sup> Paul J. Crutzen and Christian Schwagerl, “Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos,” *Yale Environment 360 Online* (January 2011), [http://e360.yale.edu/feature/living\\_in\\_the\\_anthropocene\\_toward\\_a\\_new\\_global\\_ethos/2363/](http://e360.yale.edu/feature/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos/2363/).

those of us in Western nations that have been complicit in the power structures making this degradation possible. This history, like the other incidents of exploitation and violence in the Bible and Christianity, will always affect how we act; it is up to us to make the decision to change our ways and exemplify family love to the world. Viewing the Earth as part of our family and as a partner in renewal should become the basis for relations in the future.

Now, what can we learn from the older brother in this parable? His feelings of righteous anger are certainly part of current discourse surrounding climate change. He had assumed one role all his life and never thought that his relationship with his father and with his father's land could be different. He thought he was fulfilling his purpose by always being at his father's side, while his little brother was off gallivanting and destroying the family's image. There are plenty of communities around the world that have not contributed significantly to environmental degradation. Thus conversations that focus around changing individual lifestyles and social norms and behaviors to fit a more sustainable lifestyle are alienating, as they assume one normative experience—the Western normative experience. This spreads the guilt to individual human beings, and does not take into account the large industries and institutions that have perpetrated the bulk of destruction. This necessary critique of the dominant power structures in the form of industries is in line with the prophetic principle. Individual humans cannot frack shale to release natural gas by themselves, polluting watersheds and endangering the health of local residents. Industries do that.

Righteous anger is not necessarily bad—the choice of how to employ the emotion is the important thing. In exegeses, it is generally agreed that the older son represents the grumbling scribes and Pharisees, the people who struggled with understanding God's inclusive love for the marginalized people in society. Interpretations of the older brother as angry turn him into a

negative foil for the younger brother, who, in reality, has his own demons. Ironically, “readers of Luke’s Gospel have identified with the younger son, while insisting with Luke that an audience of scribes and Pharisees would have identified with the elder son.”<sup>77</sup> Christians have used this to reinforce their self-understanding as “younger” sons of God, in opposition to the “elder” sons, the faithless Jews.<sup>78</sup> Christians who see themselves as following the faith of the younger son should therefore embrace the fullness of others’ redemption from wrongdoing and darkness.

The Prodigal Son’s return did not concern only the younger son and the father. The older brother, the servants, all the members of the household and presumably the surrounding community got involved in the response. This was not an interpersonal issue, only to be sorted out between parent and child. The father called everyone to celebrate the restoration of the family, teaching the love that recognizes all histories and actions in restoration and renewal. The “most important aspect [of Jesus’ conflicts with the Pharisees] is Jesus’ table fellowship with toll collectors and sinners. This table companionship is part of Jesus’ call to everyone, the whole people, to return to its God.”<sup>79</sup> Such a gracious community response should be prime in our consideration of addressing environmental issues, as it exemplifies the prophetic principle of God’s vindication of the oppressed.

Jesus’ call to family love must be extended to embrace all geographic locations of Mother Earth and all areas of experience. However, in the words of Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum “We won’t save the places we don’t love. We can’t love the places we don’t know. We don’t know the places we haven’t learned.”<sup>80</sup> What does it take so that we learn about the places

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<sup>77</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 100.

<sup>78</sup> Scott accords this to “Christian arrogance,” which serves as a warning for taking the biblical stories completely out of context. (*Ibid.*, 125).

<sup>79</sup> Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 146.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Ched Myers, “From ‘Creation Care’ to ‘Watershed Discipleship’: An Anabaptist Approach to Ecological Theology and Practice,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and Society for Biblical Literature, Baltimore, Maryland, November 22-25, 2013).

far from us that are receiving the fallout of our actions in the West? To some extent it means “thinking globally and acting locally,” since we cannot personally address all of the ills occurring all over the world. This may mean learning the heritage of our material goods, the energy we use, and the water we drink, since many of these things arrive to us carrying the baggage of privilege leveraged over marginalized groups—including the nature that can’t speak for itself. Knowing “the story of stuff” that we take for granted will help us understand the affects our comparatively affluent Western lifestyle has not only on the less privileged living among and alongside us, but also on the rest of the world.<sup>81</sup>

The characters in the story are not purely good or bad, they are *human*. They give us hope that when we fail or fall down or run away, we can always return and strive to repair our brokenness. A pastor friend calls this parable the story of the Prodigal Sons, recognizing that neither son has his life all figured out and both seek redemption.<sup>82</sup> Neither son is perfect, and both have much to learn. The ending of this story is not told clearly—it ends after the father’s speech to the elder son—and that serves us well. If it ended with a reconciliation between the two brothers, then everything would have been good and this story would have been tokenized as a mere “happy ending”—in fact, sometimes it has been. There is also the possibility that this story could have ended sadly, with the brothers continuing to reject each other and the father mourning the loss of his broken family.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> The Story of Stuff Project. <http://storyofstuff.org/>.

<sup>82</sup> Mary Hammond, co-pastor of Peace Community Church—American Baptist in Oberlin, OH, conversation with the author, March 29, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Douglas Adams writes “The story ends with the father and older son arguing outside. As with most parables of Jesus, there is no ending. As James Breech has detailed, when there is no ending, there is no final judgment. Any of these characters may yet change. Endings normally include what happened to each person: The good person went to heaven and the bad one to hell, for instance. In contrast, Jesus’ parables are cliff-hangers like the episodes of a soap opera. Will John return to Mary? Will Bill get the promotion? We do not know. Without endings, there are many possibilities. . . . Jesus honors the intelligence and activates the imagination of the hearers when he does not supply one for us.” Adams’ congregation has come up with many endings for the story, spanning the gamut from total hatred

I believe the open-ended nature of this story is worth paying attention to. As it is, we will all identify with all of these characters at different points in time.<sup>84</sup> When we turn against sustainable actions though we know better, we are like the younger son. When we hold out hope for redemption, we are like the father. When we express anger at feeling taken advantage of by industry, we are like the elder son. Just as the father and his two sons are complex and unfinished, so are we. Without significant closure to this story, we are called to imagine the ending for ourselves. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is invaluable to us in the search for ways to shatter the hierarchies that inform our thinking and actions everyday.

At the same time, Western nations must remember that being welcoming and affirming, no matter what history one carries with them, no matter how broken and downtrodden a situation has become, is of the utmost importance. We must extend this grace, in the form of inclusive love, towards each other as part of the family of the Earth. We must bless each other and wash each other's feet—at once holding each other accountable but also striving towards a new way of living. A parabolic reading of the Prodigal Son cultivates a sense of the wholeness and vitality needed to subvert hierarchical binaries. Such a response affirms unity, life, and love on a large scale.

Schotroff writes that the story of the Prodigal Son “awaits a continuation in the lives of the readers...they should understand that the people of God can only live *together*. The joy of the elder son over the rescue of the younger son in the parable story is yet to come.”<sup>85</sup> Western nations must accept that history of resource depletion and outsourcing industry to third-world nations with grace and peace while rededicating ourselves to moving forward sustainably. We

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and alienation to reconciliation to leaving the family altogether. (Douglas Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 17-18).

<sup>84</sup> David Dorsey, conversation with the author, March 29, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 148.

must make reparations to and reconcile with those that we have harmed. We must gain the courage to abandon the damaging structures and practices that have led to the huge gap in the standard of living between first- and third-world nations. This critique of ideology in favor of more just religious structures is prophetic in nature and galvanizing in action. Just like the Prodigal Son, the father and the elder son, the question “Given what has happened, what will my further actions be?” is before us. The story awaits continuation in our lives.

Theme 2: Neighborliness  
Parable 2: The Good Samaritan  
Luke 10:25-37<sup>86</sup>

A lawyer wonders how to gain eternal life. Jesus advises him to look to the Law, affirms the lawyer’s answer as correct, and prepares to move on. But hoping to trap Jesus in a legal snare, the lawyer poses another question: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with a parable.

There’s a traveler on the road who gets beat up and all of the clergy passing by, people who readers believe should help him, turn a blind eye and walk past. Then, the Samaritan (part of an “out group” to the original Jewish recipients of the parable) walks by, stops and pities the person in the ditch. He treats the person for his injuries and takes care of him, paying an innkeeper to watch over him until he returns. After relaying this story, Jesus asks the self-

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<sup>86</sup> Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37 NRSV).

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ 26 He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ 27 He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ 28 And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’ 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ 30 Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ 37 He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

righteous lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”<sup>87</sup> The lawyer says, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus responds positively: “Go and do likewise.”<sup>88</sup> Instead of meeting the lawyer with a stock answer, Jesus asks a question in return, shifting the subject from “Who am I responsible for?” to “Who am I willing to help?”

This sounds like a very tidy story to many of us today. The lesson to be learned sounds easy: we should be nice to those in need, even if they identify differently from us. It is often preached in congregations as Christians identifying with the Samaritan: Christians have the means to show mercy to the one in need. But the first century Jews identified culturally with the person in the ditch, one of Jewish heritage.<sup>89</sup> The priest and the Levite walk by, defying the Jewish readers’ expectations by not pausing to assist the one in pain. The readers then have to allow themselves to be helped by someone they don’t like—that Samaritan.<sup>90</sup> But it is he who is

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<sup>87</sup> Jeremias notes that it is odd for a theologian (the lawyer) to ask a layman (Jesus) about the way to gain eternal life. While Jeremias writes that the lawyer had probably “been disturbed in conscience by Jesus’ preaching,” the NRSV notes that “a lawyer stood up to test Jesus” (Lk 10:25), which connotes a more self-righteous attitude than Jeremias credits him with (Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 202). Schotroff sees this trajectory of translation as part of anti-Jewish rhetoric that refuses to see the discussion between Jesus and the lawyer as an interaction that corresponds to Jewish learning. Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 132. Here I do not focus on the preconditions for the discussion as much as the contents of the discussion and story, so I choose to use the NRSV translation and acknowledge the existence of anti-Jewish sentiment that affected the writers of some Gospels and the tradition in which they were transmitted.

<sup>88</sup> Scott describes the form-critical debate about the originality of the connection between the question of “neighbor” posed by Jesus and the lawyer and the parable itself (See Binder, “Das Gleichnis vom barmherzigen Samariter,” in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 15 (1959), 176; C. Montefiore, *Synoptic Gospels* 2 (London: Macmillan & Co., 1909), 465; Creed, *Gospel according to St. Luke* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1930), 151; and Ramaroson, “Comme ‘Le bon samaritain,’” *Biblica* 56 (1975), 533, enumerated in Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 192). Scott contends that there must have been something about the story that caused Luke to link it with the lawyer’s quiz. The meaning of the story shifts based on the audience, which is why it is important to know the fictional and implied audiences.

<sup>89</sup> “The man is unnamed and remains anonymous throughout the story, although he must be Jewish, for a Jewish audience would naturally assume that an anonymous person was Jewish unless other clues were given.” (Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 194). “A major component of Luke’s perspective is the breakdown of the division between Jew and Gentile, almost the transfer from Jew to Gentile. In Luke’s narrative the fictional audience is the Jewish lawyer who responds to Jesus’ leading questions. But Luke’s implied audience is Gentile. From the point of view of the fictional audience (i.e., the Jewish lawyer), the sense of “neighbor” shifts. From the point of view of the Gentile audience, no such shift ensues, for the Gentile can and does identify with the Samaritan as one who loves (i.e. the subject).” (Ibid., 192). See also Funk, “The Good Samaritan as Metaphor,” in *Semeia* 2 (1974), 79.

<sup>90</sup> “According to the triadic form of popular stories, the audience would now have expected a third character, namely, after the priest and the Levite, an Israelite layman; they would hence have expected the parable to have an

moved with the compassion to help the one in need; the Samaritan does not turn away because of their differences. Consequently, the one in the ditch probably regards Samaritans more positively after being helped by one of their number. Jeremias writes, “hence it is clear that Jesus had intentionally chosen an extreme example; by comparing the failure of the ministers of God with the unselfishness of the hated Samaritan, his hearers should be able to measure the absolute and unlimited nature of the duty of love.”<sup>91</sup>

All this is done in the context of the question “who is my neighbor?” At the first use of this word, the “neighbor” is defined as the person whom the lawyer should love as himself, answering Jesus’ question about what is written in the Law. As a teacher of the Law, the lawyer already knew the requirements for eternal life via the Law; he is really concerned with “Who should I be nice to? Who should I consider my neighbor in order to bless them with the excess of my privilege?” Jeremias interprets the lawyer’s question this way: “Jesus was not being asked for a definition of the term ‘friend’ but for an indication as to where, within the community, the limits of the duty of loving were to be drawn. How far does my responsibility extend?”<sup>92</sup> Jesus’ story urges the lawyer to think about neighborliness as a matter of beneficent generosity. “Jesus’ question changes the definition of *neighbor* from one who is the object of kindness to one who bestows it.”<sup>93</sup> There is a mutuality of terms here that precedes a mutual relationship of love and respect; a two-way street of loving “your neighbor as yourself.” Jeremias bridges the lawyer’s question and Jesus’ answer:

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anti-clerical point. It would have been completely unexpected and disconcerting for them to hear that the third character, who fulfilled the duty of love, was a Samaritan.” Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 204.

<sup>91</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 204.

<sup>92</sup> The ‘friend’ referred to here is found in some translations of Lk 10:29. The translation used for this project is NRSV, which translates the word as “neighbor.” Jeremias notes that “the import of the story is obscured if [the Greek word] in Luke 10:29 is translated ‘neighbor.’ The Christian conception of the ‘neighbor’ is not the starting-point of the story, but that which the story was intended to create.” (Ibid., 202).

<sup>93</sup> David L. Tiede, Notes on the Gospel of Luke, edited by Christopher R. Matthews, *HarperCollins Study Bible, Revised Edition (NRSV)* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 1785.

While the scribe's question (v. 29) concerned the object of the love (Whom must I treat as a friend?), Jesus in v. 36, asks about the subject of the love (Who acted as a friend?). The scribe is thinking of himself, when he asks: What is the limit of my responsibility? (v. 29). Jesus says to him: Think of the sufferer, put yourself in his place, consider, Who needs help from me? (v. 36). Then you will see that love's demand knows no limit.<sup>94</sup>

In contemporary sermons, God is often represented by the Samaritan. This would have been offensive to first century Jews, comparing their God as the chosen people with a group labeled "other." But it is not out of the question for modern Christians, as our God *should* be the one helping those who have fallen—or been taken—off the path into destruction. God pulls us out of the ditch, having been robbed and beaten down by the world, dusts us off and gives us into the protection of others who help us find our way again. However, Christians cannot continue to identify only with the figure in the ditch, lamely waiting on God to save us. That does not honor the full potential and complex agency of the humanity with which God has blessed us. If we see ourselves in the role of the figure in the ditch, we have to also question why and how we got in such a state and the factors contributing to our not being able to get out.

In light of the priest and the Levite passing by the figure in the ditch, we must question not only their morality, but ours as well: When do we choose ignorance? A historical-critical view would advise that the priest and the Levite were possibly concerned about ritual purity and did not want to contaminate themselves with a human being who was severely beaten and possibly dead. That would render them ritually impure and unable to attend to their liturgical duties, being on the way to the Temple in Jerusalem to practice worship; this interpretation absolves them of bystander's guilt.<sup>95</sup> Whatever the historical circumstances, these characters can

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<sup>94</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 205.

<sup>95</sup> Jeremias writes, "The question has been raised whether Jesus really intended to describe the priest and the Levite as callous and cowardly, and whether it is not more probably that he had in mind the Sadducean prescription which strictly forbade a priest to defile himself with 'a dead man by the way'...it must then be supposed that the priest and

be read as those who “don’t have time” to help someone, who are preoccupied, who are prevented from helping in some way, or who plain just don’t want to, blinded by the damaging effects of toxic discourse and difference. They could be those to whom Christians turn up their nose and say, “Well, they didn’t notice, but *I* did.” I find Schotroff’s view of the priest and Levite’s dismissal of the sufferer in the ditch useful:

I consider the answer to the question of why the priest and the Levite look away to be closely bound up with Jesus’ challenge at the end: Go and do likewise—do just as the Samaritan did (v. 37). It is not said whether the Torah scholar [the lawyer] did so, because what is important is how the story continues in the hearers. They can answer the question of why the priest and the Levite looked away when they should have paid attention because they themselves have already looked away. Now they must take the next step: in their own lives, to look and to act.<sup>96</sup>

To answer this question of responsibility, we must recognize and come to terms with those times when we witnessed injustice and continued to pass by on the other side, pretending not to see it. If we question the times when we did not further the goodness and love of the Kingdom of God by pretending “those circumstances don’t apply to us,” then we are forced to think on those times in our lives when we have chosen ignorance over action. Are we responsible for and complicit in the pain that we do not intervene to alleviate?

Jesus disoriented his readers with this parable, forcing them to expand their view of “the other” to those they did not readily associate with. Today, we can see that the moral of the parable becomes more complicated than “being nice to people” (not to diminish that ethic!) when expanding the view of the “neighbor” to organisms and geographies across the world. Instead of

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the Levite regarded the unconscious man...as dead, and avoided contact with him on Levitical grounds.” He then notes that while priests were always forbidden from contact with a corpse (Leviticus 21:1), Levites were only required to observe ritual cleanliness in the course of his liturgical duties. Thus the Levite’s moral status in the story depends somewhat on the direction of his travel: if heading towards the Temple in Jerusalem he would have had to be ritually pure, but if traveling away from Jerusalem after his ritual practice, he was absolved from ritual cleanliness rules. (Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 203).

<sup>96</sup> Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 135-136.

placing humans at the forefront of the story as the figure in the ditch, in need of help but constantly passed by, or as the perpetually generous Samaritan, we could instead see ourselves as the figures who are doing the passing by and are therefore complicit in the pain felt by the figure in the ditch.

The ethics found in this story can and should be extended beyond the meaningful words that have become platitude: “loving your neighbor as yourself” is far more radical than many treat it today. There is the surface element of regarding others as worthy of notice, even across difference of identity. Generosity towards the needy should not be diminished since it was a central value of Jesus’ life and ministry. But there is also the deeper level of the parable. What does the parable teach about the Kingdom of God? In the context in which I am writing, I am asking not only “Who is my neighbor?” but “*What* is my neighbor?” with the assumption behind it being that I have a responsibility to treat all beings outside of myself with grace and mercy.

To understand how these ethics can be applied in non-anthropocentric ways, imagine this: there are millions of species that are endangered and many that have already gone extinct, and people continue to pass them by.<sup>97</sup> Even though biodiversity is inherently linked to the wellbeing of any ecosystem, they are overlooked and eventually disappear. They lacked someone to pull them out of the ditch, to acknowledge their role in up keeping the vitality of the planet. They lacked someone to spare that two denarii and pay for the room in the inn so that they could recover—there was no mercy for them. They lack someone to pay the bill for a situation they did not cause. This is reminiscent of the residents of West Virginia and the Gulf Coast who are shouldering the burden for environmental damage they did not initiate in the form of chemical and oil spills; the question is whether the companies responsible will step up and foot the bill for

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<sup>97</sup> Ira Flatow, “Mass Extinction Event on the Horizon?” an episode of *Science Friday*, August 15, 2008, radio broadcast, National Public Radio, <http://www.sciencefriday.com/segment/08/15/2008/mass-extinction-event-on-the-horizon.html>. Interview with Paul Ehrlich.

the environmental and human costs of Western capitalism's expansion? We must question: What are the forces that are keeping them from being noticed, that are keeping people continually walking by and yet not seeing?<sup>98</sup> Responding to these questions necessitates a critique of dominant power structures and the ideology that keeps powerholders in place, following in the pattern of prophetic speech and action that Jesus' words galvanize in the life of the recipients of parables.

If the grace of God is to reorient our social structures by mirroring that grace all over the world, we must consider our impact on *all* the beings we pass by, as all of the Creation is special to God in some way.<sup>99</sup> In resisting the temptation to be bystanders, we are affirming the inherent value of the lakes, rivers, soil, organisms, sands and forests around us as members of God's divine Creation. By taking humans out of the subject role and de-anthropomorphizing the parables, we are affirming the wholeness of Creation. Moving from an individualistic and anthropocentric reading—primarily concerning human spirituality and life experiences—to considering an ecological view changes the whole dynamic of the story. This movement is an example of the prophetic principle of critique of dominant systems of power at work, pushing back against the anthropocentrism embedded in our Western way of being in the world.

An interpretation of the Good Samaritan that I am proposing responds to the question “Who is my neighbor?” by reorienting it beyond the human realm. Jesus uses the word “neighbor” in two different contexts in this story, referring both to the man in the ditch and the person who comes to his rescue. I find meaning in the mutuality of this term—not only do we

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<sup>98</sup> Scott describes the anonymity of the sufferer in the ditch: “The man is stripped and left half-dead. Robbers do not always strip their victims, but since the man is left naked beside the road, he now lacks identifying clothes and those passing on the road will be unable to tell to what class, village, or nation he belongs. . . ‘Half-dead’ implies that he is only barely among the living and could be taken for dead.” (Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 194.) The inability of passerby to identify the sufferer based on societal distinctions that would signify the appropriate behavior towards an “other” can be read as a marginalizing social force.

<sup>99</sup> God saw the Creation was “good” in Genesis 1, affirming the intentional creation of all aspects of the Earth.

have to question who we are obligated to help, but when we are in the position to help others, we have the same term applied to us. Though it is not possible for humans to imitate God fully, Schotroff advises, “one should follow the actions of the Holy One. As he clothes the naked...so shall you also clothe the naked.”<sup>100</sup> “The naked” in an environmentally oriented reading takes the shape of the mountains laid bare by mountaintop removal, pelicans in the Gulf covered in oil, and lonely lingering members of species. “Clothing” these means reorienting social norms towards taking actions on behalf of and in solidarity with these suffering beings. These actions are examples of the prophetic principle of God’s defense and vindication of the oppressed. Actions that are parabolic arising from reading parables can galvanize us toward radically inclusive neighborliness, as well as the Kingdom of God.

The figure in the ditch can be read as the beings, people or places that are not privileged by the current power structure. By critiquing the dominant system, we must also consider ourselves in different roles if we find ourselves in a position of power where others do not share in the agency we are privileged to have. Scott writes,

As parable the story subverts the effort to order reality into the known hierarch of priest, Levite, and Israelite [the expected third party]. Utterly rejected is any notion that the kingdom can be marked off as religious: the map no longer has boundaries. The kingdom does not separate insiders and outsiders on the basis of religious categories...so here the Samaritan is not converted.<sup>101</sup>

With this elimination of divisions comes an erasure of the separation between humans and nature. Humans are not separate from Creation in enjoying the benefits of the Kingdom of God. A person in North America can no longer disregard the suffering of the landless in the Maldives because *all* are neighbors on this planet. “NIMBY” (“Not In My Backyard”) is stripped of its meaning in the quest for renewal and communion of all creatures, human and non-human. I

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<sup>100</sup> Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 137, quoting *b. Sotah* 14a.

<sup>101</sup> Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 201-202.

propose expanding the definition of “neighbor” beyond people we immediately identify with to people and places we don’t know, and even the Creation itself.

Reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan with a prophetically informed reading practice reorients the values of anthropocentrism towards a radically inclusive neighborliness. Raising questions is part of the answer; by questioning we collectively envision the potential of a new age to come, one in which injustice is overcome in favor of God’s peace and justice—a prophetic reimagining. What does it mean for a mountain in West Virginia coal country to be our neighbor? How do we live differently seeing ourselves as the passers-by? How can we be a neighbor to the Earth that is crying out for attention, assistance and renewal? Do we want to be complicit in the degradation of the holy ground on which Jesus walked?

It is the responsibility of Christians, and all people, to respond to the environmental challenges before us with neighborliness that breaks down the anthropocentrism written and read into Christian scripture. In our interpretation of this story we must be on the side of life; in a closed system where all energy and matter is recycled in a constant, never-ending flow, we must think about how best to enliven all creatures, human and non-human. God’s Creation, the sacred ground of being that is our planet and our physicality, has an inherent worth that is “groaning” and “crying out” (Romans 8). If God is on the side of helping us gain life, physically or spiritually, we must reimagine those narratives with interpretations that speak to the ecology of our world.

Theme 3: Hospitality  
Parable 3: The Great Banquet  
Luke 14:1-24<sup>102</sup>

The narrative of Jesus' life and ministry contains many images of hospitality. From Jesus kneeling at his disciples' feet to wash them in a gesture of humble servitude illustrating his mission to the world—as well as the Kingdom of God—to lifting up the knowledge and faith of children over that of his learned disciples, he emphasizes hospitality in his stories and actions. The very figure of Jesus is an illustration of divine hospitality in itself. An environmentally competent reading of the Great Banquet cultivates the hospitality that is imperative in environmental justice. Radical hospitality encompasses radical love and radical neighborliness, the very values that reorient all three dominant paradigms of hierarchical binaries, anthropocentrism, and utilitarianism.

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<sup>102</sup> Parable of the Great Banquet (Lk 14:1-24 NRSV).

1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. 2 Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. 3 And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, 'Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?' 4 But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. 5 Then he said to them, 'If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?' 6 And they could not reply to this. 7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' 12 He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.' 15 One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' 16 Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. 17 At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." 18 But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." 19 Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." 20 Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." 21 So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." 22 And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." 23 Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. 24 For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

The setting for one of the most famous banquet stories is a Sabbath dinner with the Pharisees at a community leader's house. Jesus heals a person with dropsy in front of the watchful religious leaders, to the bewilderment of his company, since healing on the Sabbath is outlawed. He goes on to tell the guests at the dinner a parable about hospitality, noticing that many guests chose places of honor in the seating chart.

Jesus advises that the guests are honored to receive an invitation in the first place, since not all people have the means to provide a good Sabbath meal for their friends and families. Therefore they do not need to exalt themselves more than their host was going to, thinking themselves more important than other guests and taking the seats of honor without being invited to do so; the guests should not embarrass themselves by making more of themselves than they ought to. The example for right relations in this situation is Jesus' humility, always taking the lowest seat and then being exalted by the host of the dinner. If the host has the power and privilege to invite others to share in their prosperity then they will create an appropriate seating plan.

The host is then advised not to invite people that he knows will repay him, thinking at once of what he will get for the invitation he extends. Schotroff reads this as a rejection of the righteous Pharisees and teachers of the Law:

Jesus makes it clear to them that doing the Torah [following God's will] demands more than they have heretofore been willing to comprehend. Jesus has a more radical understanding...the refinement of cultic purity in daily life, such as washing hands before eating (11:38), is in Jesus' eyes another sign of an inadequate praxis of Torah—not wrong, but inadequate as long as justice and love for God are not being lived (Lk 11:42).<sup>103</sup>

Here, Jesus' prophetic speech critiques the dominant power structures and those who hold power by leveraging certain cultic practices over other forms of religious devotion. Therefore, in order

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<sup>103</sup> Schotroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 147.

to live up to this example of divine love, it is not refined behavior that exemplifies faithfulness. Instead, the host should invite the “poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Lk 14:13-14 NRSV). Here the host is advised not to do things for others expecting something in return; selflessness will be rewarded in the next life. By inviting those to the table who are never invited because they are outcasts from the community, Jesus affirmed their existence and their role in the community. This exemplifies the prophetic principle of defense and vindication of the oppressed. Jesus alludes to those outside of the nation of Israel (i.e. Gentiles) in his continuing parable of the great dinner by describing the host of the banquet in the parable as saying “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled” (Lk 14:23 NRSV).<sup>104</sup> Having outcasts at one’s table and freely giving to those who do not ask and who are not able to reciprocate brings honor both to the guests and to the host.

The host is generally read as representative of God; he is the owner of the house, the person who is able to bless people by their generosity and hospitality, and the one who has enough to give away freely. The “party” or the “banquet” represents either eternal life or the Kingdom of God, sometimes both used together or interchangeably.<sup>105</sup> The guests are primarily seen as the Jews, but Jesus in Luke often reaches out to the Gentile community as well, not differentiating between people of Israelite and non-Israelite heritage for inclusion in the message of God. The guests attend the banquet because it is a wedding banquet, an important marker of life and an image often associated with heaven. On a spiritual level, the guests attend because

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<sup>104</sup> Tiede, “Notes on the Gospel of Luke,” 1793.

<sup>105</sup> Here the allegory approach to understanding parables breaks down. When we don’t like the message—invite the poor into your banquets—we theologize the story to mean something larger than life, because it’s easier than dealing with the uncomfortable reality that maybe Jesus meant that example literally *as well as* figuratively. Thanks to Wes Bergen for discussion suggesting this point.

they are being “fed” and taking part in the divine celebration that is the Kingdom of God. The seat of honor at a wedding banquet could be read as the literal seat for someone older or more socially connected, or it could be interpreted spiritually as someone who has a more intimate relationship with God taking the seat closest to the host. Then arises the question: what is the need for honoring some people over others? Therein is the question of equality of grace and place in the Kingdom of God. Does God love some more than others, or count some people’s spirituality as more important than others’?

Including marginalized communities in the dinner conversation validates their experiences. This can be considered as parallel to the guests at the banquet who humble themselves initially and seat themselves in the place of least honor. This has implications for the environmental justice movement. It is common knowledge in many activist communities that all stakeholders should be present at the discussion table when considering projects that directly impact marginalized communities. For example, instead of people in corporate headquarters and city hall making decisions about Detroit’s future as a post-industrialist, hemorrhaging city, the people remaining in the city should be brought into the discussion. They should be allowed to *start* the discussion. What would it mean for the grandparents living in poverty because they refuse to leave the city where they were born and raised to be asked about how white flight and the crash of the auto industry affected the ethos of the city? Or the teenagers who are dropping out of school to be a resource for talking about the severely ineffective education system?

We should also question why certain groups are the ones to humble themselves, and if they are expected to do so by dominant forces. They could have been conditioned to that behavior due to their position as determined by sociopolitical forces outside of their control. The social order could be so internalized that they invalidated their honorability and took the seat of

least honor without anyone even asking. Surely the outcome of the dinner conversation will be different if the outcasts and people on the margins are asked their opinions; for example, think how it could change conversations about the refuse from the tar sand mining being illegally dumped in an existing toxic waste site in the city of Detroit.<sup>106</sup> If the people who are invited to the table regularly, the owners of the companies, for example, are the only ones involved in decision making they might overlook important questions about the effects of the dump on communities of color in that area. “Everyone is an expert in their own life,” as my grandfather would say, and the knowledge and history that resides in marginalized communities is invaluable. Those experts need to be asked their opinions in order to move us forward in combating further ecological degradation. The health of “the least of these,” both human and nonhuman, is intimately linked to the health of Creation.

This dialogue between Jesus and the people at the Pharisee leader’s house for Sabbath dinner concerns hospitality. The law of the land reinforced social practices of exact reciprocity, always requiring payment. While there did exist the idea of a sabbatical year in the Hebrew Bible, most of the time compensation and reciprocity was expected (Deut. 15:1-18). But here Jesus is directing the host of the banquet to practice a radical hospitality: “do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors” but invite the refuse of society, the ones left behind. He is asking for us to trust that the righteousness, grace and mercy shown to others in this temporal world will be “repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Lk 14:14 NRSV). Hospitality shown to those who do not often receive welcome and validation requires a willingness to risk reputation and go against the social order of the day. Such a reimagining of

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<sup>106</sup> Austen, Ian, “A Black Mound of Canadian Oil Waste Is Rising Over Detroit,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2013, accessed December 13, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/18/business/energy-environment/mountain-of-petroleum-coke-from-oil-sands-rises-in-detroit.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/18/business/energy-environment/mountain-of-petroleum-coke-from-oil-sands-rises-in-detroit.html?_r=0).

the social order critiques the ideology that justifies dominant unjust social orders and envisions a new age of peace and justice, following the tradition of prophetic speech in the New Testament.

When churches think about practicing a radical hospitality, there are practical actions and conversations they can have. The practice of actively looking for the stories not often heard and providing a space where those voices can be heard instead of overlooked is crucial. Thinking of water runoff more than congregational attendance when considering building a new parking lot, buying from fair trade vendors when planning coffee hour, and finding alternatives to endangered hardwoods when constructing sanctuaries are just beginning thoughts about actions that enact hospitality that are available to congregations.<sup>107</sup> Placing other species' wellbeing before human wellbeing, or considering it at least as of equal importance, will open up the discussions and provide ample opportunity for creative reimagining. Biblical scholar and Mennonite pastor Ched Myers writes about the idea of "watershed discipleship," which requires an understanding and connection to the bioregion in which a congregation is located.<sup>108</sup> Cultivating a place-based Christianity is in the heritage of our religion as descended from Judaism, originally a place-based religion. Honoring connections to the land can allow congregations to take ownership over their religious practice and tailor it to the cycles of nature they witness, always being in conversation with the cycles of life and death that are integral to understanding Christianity.

Hospitality ethics in religious environmental situations can be read with God being the host of the bountiful earth, and we humans merely guests invited for a certain length of time. The ecosystem itself is also a the host, providing the bountiful biodiversity that sustains life. As

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<sup>107</sup> I understand that not all congregations have the means to do these things, but there are affordable and least-intrusive ways of living these values as a community of faith. Interfaith Power and Light houses many resources for becoming a more sustainable congregation. <http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/>.

<sup>108</sup> Myers, "From 'Creation Care' to 'Watershed Discipleship,'" 9.

Western Christians, we carry the burden of being First World resource-gobblers. The industrialized nations in the Western hemisphere constantly place our wants above the basic needs of other parts of the world, and far above concern for the health of the life-forms that are part of the ecosystem in which we live. We are constantly being embarrassed by the host when we are asked to step down from the place of honor that we do not deserve, and we refuse to step down. In many ways, humans are not the most important beings inhabiting this planet. We have chosen to be top predators but we are not instrumental to the functioning of ecosystems the way kelp or other keystone species can be.<sup>109</sup> It is time that humans humbled ourselves in deference to the air, water and soil that make our existence possible. The Jewish midrash on *Beresheit*, the Hebrew name for the book of Genesis, proves illuminating on the subject of man's humility:

“Man was created last...  
Why was he created last?  
So that he not become haughty. He is told: A gnat preceded you in  
the act of creation.”<sup>110</sup>

Humility on the part of humans makes space for other voices in Creation to be heard—an act of radical hospitality. In this parable, Jesus directs the host in this situation to reorient the idea of hospitality to include people who are not usually included. This can lead to an important reimagining of the social order and a questioning of the deep structure of social and political relations in a society. Just asking the questions is an important start. Just asking questions is calling for a reorientation towards a pedagogy that is less didactic and more embracing of big questions with many answers. The only questions that truly matter are the ones not easily answered.

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<sup>109</sup> Keystone species are members of an ecosystem that play an important role in keeping the balance of the ecosystem, such that if they were gone, the ecosystem would be changed dramatically. Prairie dogs and kelp are examples of keystone species for their respective habitats. “Keystone Species.” *National Geographic*. Accessed 15 December 2014. [http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/encyclopedia/keystone-species/?ar\\_a=1](http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/encyclopedia/keystone-species/?ar_a=1).

<sup>110</sup> Rav Chaim Navon, “Man’s Place in the World,” in *Theological Issues In Sefer Bereishit Yeshivat Har Etzion*. Accessed 12 February 2014. <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/bereishit/07bereishit.htm>.

## Conclusion

I started by naming three dominant paradigms that Christianity has reinforced through doctrine and dogma that contribute to its complicity in environmental degradation. I argued that Christians need to utilize a new hermeneutic in their interpretation of Scripture, one that pushes back against theological justifications for enacting hierarchical binaries, anthropocentrism, and utilitarianism. I proposed parables as a case study for reorienting these damaging concepts, explaining the inherently subversive nature of this narrative style and the role Jesus' use of parables played in his ministry. I then applied a scriptural hermeneutic for interpreting parables in light of Christianity's complicity in environmental degradation to three well-known parables from Luke's Gospel that include values that critique the paradigms enumerated.

Parables in spirit and technique serve to unsettle us and help us see things to which we've been blind. I see the Christian message for today being one in which the values found in these three parables have great potential for reorienting Christians' interaction with Scripture and doctrine in light of current environmental degradation. Utilizing reader-response theory guided by the prophetic principle to create a dialogue with the text makes possible interpretations that are liberative for both human relationships and the Earth. Exploring parables in relation to environmental issues is one way to engage readers, disarm them, and thereby shake up our world so as to progress beyond Christianity's historical role in environmental degradation. The values in the retellings I have proposed bear witness to a vein of Christian spirituality that is radically loving, neighborly and hospitable to all creatures, responding to and correcting the blatant anthropocentrism with which Lynn White charged Western Christianity. The parables teach us to go forth now and disorient to reorient, moving forward to reclaim a Christianity that recognizes the hospitality of Creation and responds by mirroring that hospitality to the rest of the world.

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I have adhered to the Honor Code in this essay. –Anita L. Peebles