

“Interdependence”

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Lawrence Park Community Church
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Have you ever struggled with your faith? Perhaps that’s not a good way of posing the question. Perhaps it would be better to ask if you always struggle with faith. Most ministers are aware that attending church is a complicated affair. There is rarely any consensus among congregants about who God is, or what counts as belief. Some may feel a deep connection to God, while others feel none at all. As one of our congregants has said to me “I don’t know who I am praying to.” I suspect all congregations have a mix of people who lie in different positions on the faith spectrum, but most churches don’t talk about it.

We live in tough times for faith. Recent surveys have found in Canada that about 30% of Canadians report no religious affiliation at all, which includes atheism and agnosticism. Perhaps more important, 67% believe that one can be a good moral person without believing in God. ^[1] We are in the midst of creating a society in which religion is increasingly seen as not really necessary at all.

I was at a conference two weeks ago in Waterloo, where the first speaker was Elizabeth May, the Leader of the federal Green Party.^[2]

The conference was trying to understand political polarization in Canada. Ms. May suggested that consumerism is no longer just a practice, but a philosophy we live by.

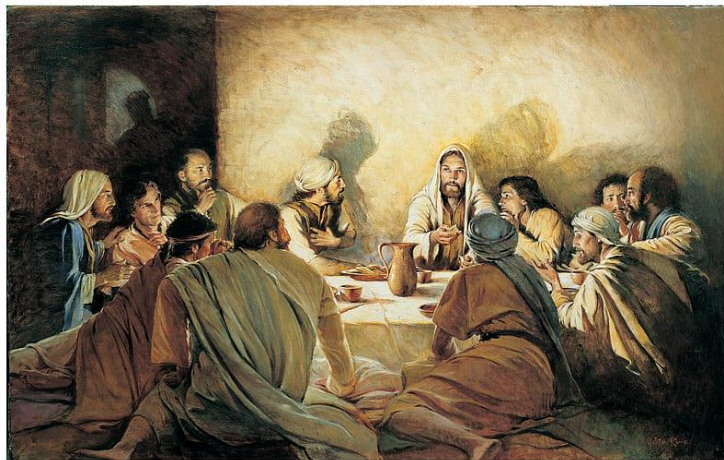
We see ourselves as consumers, and not just in stores. We are consumers of our government as well. Thinking as consumers, we pay for services from the government through taxes, and when we don’t get good service, we get angry, and that leads some to doubt the legitimacy of government. Elizabeth May argued that this drives political polarization.

I think we can see that same consumerist approach in our attitudes towards the sacred. We increasingly treat the planet like a store that should serve up goods

and services. The idea that any forest or jungle could be considered sacred, and therefore off limits to development, no longer makes sense to us. We dismiss protests from Indigenous people that a rainforest is sacred. Mountains, forests, and oceans are developed in the name of prosperity and consumerism. No other argument holds much sway, not even scientific ones related to climate change.

We act as consumers in our relationship to God, too. From time to time, we all have complaints about how our lives are going. Depression, marital problems, health issues, a loved one dying of cancer. All of us go through difficult periods when we would like relief, and if it doesn't come on time, we want answers. We want to make a call to customer service and have God talk to us directly, prove God's existence, and explain why things are the way they are. Many of us have spent hours waiting on hold to talk to Rogers or Bell when we have a complaint. Most of the time, someone finally picks up. But with God, no one picks up, there's no way to get a meeting with our service provider.

What kind of meeting would be proof God exists? Ideally, we would be able to sit down with God the way Jesus sits with his disciples in today's scripture reading.



Jesus has been telling his disciples that if you know me, you know God. He says this when they are sitting down at the last supper. Jesus is right there in front of them, eating and drinking with them.

He is so close they can smell him, see when food gets caught in his beard. For them, there is nothing abstract about Jesus. They had a God they could see, and touch, and complain to.

But we don't. No matter how much we talk about Jesus, He is never as real as the person sitting next to you. And that is frustrating. Because we want to talk to the manager of this establishment, we want that sit-down meeting. Our culture has created a standard of proof for what qualifies as truth that Christianity fails to meet. If we can't experience God directly, see and experience God with our senses, the door is wide open for doubt, and even dismissal. Many people wonder how any reasonable person could believe in a God who never shows up, so they reject the idea of God altogether. The world may be a store, but no one is in charge. So, we are free to keep consuming as much as we like, and no one will stop us.

All of this makes sense, in fact it sounds like *common* sense, but there's a problem. As Elizabeth May pointed out in her speech, this approach to life has been a disaster for the planet. If we are all consumers, then this planet will be ransacked for good deals and cheap raw resources. If we keep on this path, humans, and all species, will be faced by mass extinctions, storms, droughts, and famines that will be our fault.

So, what's the alternative to this consumerist mentality that seems to preclude a sense of the sacred? One solution could be to change the question we are asking. Instead of asking where is Jesus or God? perhaps we could start with something more basic. What is our relationship to the universe? To what's around us right now, right here. Air, buildings, trees, roads people, animals. The consumer mentality encourages us to see all the world as a store, existing for our shopping pleasure. But that's obviously a thin view of reality. The stars don't exist for us, neither do the clouds, the trees, or the coral reefs. They have their own reason for existence, it's not all for us. I hope that's obvious.

They have a being of their own, which we can feel from time to time. Most of us have been in forests or on hikes when we could feel the life force of the world around us.



A nice misty sunrise seen from a dock, the quiet of morning when it seems only the birds are awake.

The swirl of starlings flying in crowds at twilight. A whale cresting above the water. A view from a mountaintop. When we experience a sense of awe, we know that the rest of the world is having a life of its own. It is a life we are privileged to witness, but not something we possess, or that is for us.

On a purely material level, we are all children of the universe. We tell ourselves we are independent, but it isn't true. If we placed an airtight jar over me, I could be truly independent of the environment and my surroundings. But I would only last a few minutes before I would suffocate and die. True Independence leads to death. Life relies on interdependence. In the hour we spend in this room today, each of us will breathe in 400 liters of air. That's about the size of a standard refrigerator in your kitchen.^[4] In a day, you will breathe in 11,000 liters, which looks like this:



It takes a lot of air to keep us alive, even for just a day. The air you are breathing right now comes from plants.

Here at the church, some of the air we're breathing right now came from the trees in the courtyard, and from the trees in the surrounding neighbourhood. We are constantly in a state of interdependence with the plants around us as they produce oxygen. We exhale carbon dioxide, which they will breathe and turn into leaves.

We need the trees, and they need bugs and birds, water, and sunlight. And that sunlight comes from our sun,



150 million kilometers away, so this relationship of interdependence stretches far beyond even our planet. And even further out from the sun, billions of kilometers away,



is the birthplace of every atom in our bodies – stars that created the oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen we need to survive. Those atoms got here when those stars exploded long ago.

So, what we are as even just as a single human body depends on a web of interdependence which stretches out billions of kilometers and all across this planet. This is not poetry, but reality. We exist because we are in a constant relationship of interdependence with a web of connection that includes this whole planet and stretches far out into space. That's how we are kept alive, breath by breath.

Our sense of awe is our emotional reaction, our gut understanding of this interdependence, when we briefly feel part of something much bigger than ourselves.

We need to re-awaken this sense of awe and connection, to see the rest of the world as important in itself. As imbued with a value that cannot be measured only in human terms. We need to see that morality means more than just how we deal with our neighbours; it needs to include a sense of belonging and relationship to the rest of the universe. We need to be more than narrow minded consumers.

In today's reading, Jesus tells his disciples that because they have known him, they have known God, and because of this, God will live in them. He's speaking in the language of belonging, where there is no separation between God and human beings. We are on a continuum of interconnectedness. In other places, Jesus speaks of being the vine, and we are the grapes, still attached to the vine. That's an organic way of expressing this sacred interdependence.

In the scripture we heard today, Jesus speaks of his imminent return to God, and he says:

So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

"Before the world existed" – Jesus is saying he existed before the universe was even created. Jesus in John's Gospel is the life force of the universe, what brings it into being for God. Jesus of Nazareth is the temporary human manifestation of the cosmic force that animates and makes the entire universe possible from moment to moment. If Christianity seems too small, it is because we forget this cosmic dimension of the faith. Each of us is invited to use our entire being, our rational minds, our sense of awe, our inner child, our broken hearts, all of who we are, to be in relationship with a universe that cares for us with each breath we take. We are cradled every moment by this cosmos, which provides the air, light, water, and food we need to exist. We have never been alone, even when we have felt completely alone.

So how do we feel this sacred nurturing relationship? There are many ways, practiced by faiths all over the world. Most of them entail quieting our rational minds. Meditation, prayer, prayer with lots of silence, body prayers like tai chi and yoga. In most of them our thinking mind is turned way down so we can open up to a more intuitive and emotional connection to what surrounds us, material and spiritual. Perhaps the answer to the question, "who am I praying to?" is to rephrase the question. "Who am I praying with?"

You have never been alone. You are given life, over and over, every second. Our opportunity as human beings, is to have a conscience experience of this relationship to the cosmos, to choose to explore it, appreciate it, celebrate it. To feel that connection and be freed by it. To be with the life force that has existed since before the universe began. We can stop waiting for God to answer our call

to customer service. We can hang up. God was always here, helping us every second. We were never alone. Thanks be to God.

Amen