

*Based on *Genesis 2:8-9, 15-16. An Earth-Based Creation Story.*

**incarnational translation below*

In addition to celebrating National Coming Out Day this week, we are invited to honor **Indigenous Peoples Day**, as a corrective to the Columbus Day holiday that many in our nation will observe tomorrow.

Here in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia, we honor the Massawomack, who occupied this particular land mass before the European conquest. In maps of the mid-1600s, the Massawomack primarily resided in what became West Virginia, although some permanent villages were in western Maryland in areas that later formed Garrett County. The Massawomack were a highly mobile tribe, conducting extensive trade among other tribes and European settlers. Trade routes ran east into Maryland, north to Canada, and south into Virginia.

Following conflicts with other native tribes, the Massawomack eventually scattered from the area and mainly were absorbed by the Iroquois. According to the 2010 Census, the Massawomack population then totaled 220 people.

And that is just about all we know about the Massawomack. We can assume, given what we do know, that God's Gift Economy – where goods and services are not purchased but are instead received and traded as gifts of the earth – was their way of life before Europeans arrived. This way of life relates to the land as “God's Gift on Loan,” its fruits available to all who would receive and reciprocate. Owned by no one. Belonging to everyone.

Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the concept of gift economy in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, the current book study of our own Presbyterian Women circle here at SPC. In her childhood, it was wild strawberry patches growing in the fields beyond her house that shaped her understanding of this way of life. They were a generous gift scattered at her feet, ripe for the plucking.

“A gift comes to you,” Wall Kimmerer says, “through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning. A gift “is not a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present.”

A gift keeps on giving. A relationship is established between the giver and the recipient, a relationship of reciprocity. For example, as Wall Kimmerer describes, in her gratitude for the strawberries, she weeds out patches for them to extend their runners each season, enabling them to expand their generosity, even as she shares the gifts of their generosity with the rest of her family.

Along come the Europeans, in a tragic misapplication of their – and our – Scriptures. And here we are, centuries later, enduring the consequences of our destruction. And we are scrambling for indigenous wisdom to save us – and the entire planet – from the way of life we forced upon them.

It was one of my spiritual teachers from the Diné – or Navajo – tradition who taught me the generosity of the apple, as I shared with our First Pew. Womaning Standing Shining is how she refers to herself, and she delights in sharing the wisdom of the gift economy with all who will listen. But there is a tension between sharing the wisdom and inviting cultural appropriation from mostly White students who have little grounding in the way of life that produces this wisdom.

Instead of appropriating Native religion, my teacher suggests, how about revisiting your own? If you go back far enough, every religion is at some level “earth-based.” There is no need to appropriate my religion, she says, you can reclaim your own.

Which is what I suggest we do together today, beginning with this much maligned story of Creation from Genesis 2 about a garden and forbidden fruit and the fall of humankind all because of that blasted woman.

Or is that really what Genesis 2 is about?

If we revisit Genesis 2 from an indigenous perspective, what we see instead is, undeniably, the myth of an ancient earth-based culture describing the gift economy. We have a creature formed from the earth, *adam* from the *Adamah* in Hebrew. Infused with divine breath, planted in a garden, with every beautiful and fruitful tree that exists sprouting from the soil. The trees and the fruit, indeed the entire garden is a gift! The human does not have to create the garden. The human does not have to earn the garden. There is nothing the human has to do to deserve the garden.

A relationship of reciprocity is established. The fruit is free! And if the human tends the garden and protects the garden, the way Robin Wall Kimmerer tends and protects the wild strawberries, the gift will keep on giving, and all will be fed.

There it is! Right there in our Scriptures. God’s Gift Economy in our own ancient earth-based religion.

But the tree, Pastor Gusti! I can hear you grumbling right now. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why would God be so mean as to put a tree in the garden that we could not eat? And why shouldn’t we pursue knowledge? You do know this congregation includes an above average collection of PhDs!

So let’s look at that tree. From an earth-based perspective. From a gift economy perspective. Do not forget this is a tree of the knowledge of good *and evil*. The kind of evil, as I described last week, that flies airplanes into buildings. The kind of evil that delights in torture. The kind of evil that perpetuates four hundred years of White supremacy on this land mass and around the world. The kind of evil that stokes an armed insurrection in the world’s oldest democracy.

Do we really want to know that kind of evil? Aren’t we really kind of sorry that we do?

Perhaps it would help to place this gift economy story of Creation from our ancient earth-based ancestors in the context of climate change. Look at this amazing garden God has given you to tend, our ancestors are telling us. What a gift! And yes, if you dig deep enough in this good gift of a garden, you will continue to find fossil fuels.

But don't dig! Just. Don't. Dig. Anymore! *"Eating from that tree will bring death and destruction to you and to the rest of the garden."*

And hasn't it? And aren't we really kind of sorry that it has?

The truth is God's Gift Economy, as generous as it is, requires accepting limits. You can eat the strawberries as much as you want, but once you dig up the fossil fuels, you risk the strawberries and the raspberries and the walnuts and the rivers and the Gulf Stream and the air quality and eventually the entire gift is ruined.

God's Gift Economy, as generous as it is, requires accepting limits. It is like sending us all to the grocery store as prices keep rising and saying you can have all the fruits and vegetables, bread and meat you want, for free, but don't you dare go for those chips and cookies. They'll kill you!

We struggle with limits, I know, I do, too. As we shared in our Teach the Preacher conversation this week, humans are by nature curious creatures. Of course we are going to reach for the one thing we should not have instead of celebrate the one thousand things gifted to us freely. But there really are some things in God's Gift Economy that harm the garden as a whole, and we really do need to avoid those things.

Which is why we return every week to the font of identity to remember who we really are and to whom we really belong. Which is why we return every week to the Word of Hope to remember what really matters and recommit ourselves to it. Which is why we return every week to the bread of life that feeds us in body and soul so we no longer reach for that which does not satisfy.

So turn and return, my friends, to the goodness of God's Gift Economy, as we celebrate National Coming Out Day, as we honor Indigenous People's Day. Our job really is to tend the garden and protect the garden. In community. And *with gratitude!*

Let the church say, Amen!

Genesis 2:8-9, 15-16

And God planted a garden
in Eden in the East,
and there God put the human
which God had formed from the humus.

And God caused
every beautiful and fruitful tree that exists
to sprout from the soil,
as well as a tree
of the knowledge of good and evil.

And God planted the human
in the garden of Eden
to tend the garden
and to protect the garden,
with this charge:

*You may eat freely
of every tree in the garden,
except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
Eating from that tree
will bring death and destruction
to you and to the rest of the garden.*

*"Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places" (Cosgrove and Edgerton, **In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching**, 62).