Gathered through Christ in Cosmic Communion

“Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all thing in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the good of his cross,” (Colossians 1:15-20, NRSV).
We might say Sittler inaugurated an eco-reformation movement in 1961 when he chose to vastly expand the subject on which he was invited to address the World Council of Churches: church unity. Speaking to the assembly gathered in New Delhi, Sittler expanded ecumenism to cosmic proportions, suggesting this unity is only rightly understood in the scope of God’s cosmic redemptive work of ecological unity in Christ.

He also had a specific message for the other Protestants at the gathering. Recognizing the important emphasis the tradition has placed on redemption and salvation he argued that, “A doctrine of redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation.” In short: any theology of salvation worth its weight in salt must be creation loving rather than creation evading.

Pope Francis’ letter urges a perspective he calls “integral ecology”—the integration or interconnection of all things. More than just environmental interconnections though, Francis is urging an expansion of the scope of even ecological interconnections. The concern for social justice can commonly be left out of environmental concerns. However, climate change tragically demonstrates the interconnection of social and ecological justice. “We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social,” Francis writes, “but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.” Since ecology and economy are interconnected, “strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature,” (139).

The letter highlights the ways in which our most pressing issues of human injustice (racism, colonialism, income disparity, etc.) are also issues of ecological injustice. Lutheran ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda has similarly highlighted the interconnectedness of social and eco-justice. In Resisting Structural Evil the scholar demonstrates the injustice of the fact that those who contributed the least to
global warming are likely to suffer the first and most profoundly from it. This injustice is compounded by the fact that the populations most likely to feel the effects of climate change first and with most disruption or devastation to their livelihoods are most likely to be not white, impoverished, and politically underrepresented.

Where eco-justice and social justice are intimately linked human salvation and redemption cannot be purchased at the expense of either. Early on in the encyclical Pope Francis quotes Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of the Eastern Orthodox church, who links the Christian ritualization of communion with the ecological communion of the world. Patriarch Bartholomew urges us to

“accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbors on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet,” (8).

If Colossians 1 is to be trusted, this must surely be the case since all things have been created through Christ and for Christ; in Christ all things hold together and through Christ all things have been reconciled to God.

**Conclusion**

*Invite any concluding reflections and then ask a volunteer to close in prayer.*

**Preparation for Week 4**

- Return next session with Bible, Study Guide, and Encyclical
- Optional: Read chapters 5 and 6 of *Laudato Si’*