



CLIMATE JUSTICE & DISCIPLESHIP

REFLECTION WEEK 3 - EXAMPLE

BY THE REVD MELISSA DICKINSON

My topic this week is 'example', so in that spirit, I'm going to start with one.

I want to tell you about my garden. I'm lucky enough to have a large one, but unfortunately, when I moved in last year, it was in a sorry state—completely overgrown. All summer, all autumn, I looked at it in despair. I found it so overwhelming, I couldn't bring myself to make a start. This spring, we got some help to clear away the fallen trees and ivy. Suddenly, I was filled with hope. *This garden*, I thought, *will soon be the flower-filled bee haven that I've dreamt of.* My hope was a little premature. I soon realised there was still a lot of work to do. Despair loomed again. *There's no point*, I thought. *Might as well just let it grow over.* But then I noticed, lurking under the overgrowth, some old raised beds. I could start here. Over a few days, I cleared the beds. As I did so, I found that the soil was teeming with earthworms. I realised, all of a sudden, I was not alone in my efforts to transform this garden into a good and pleasant land. In fact, I was just joining in.

Why have I told you this story of me and my garden?

My story highlights, in microcosm, some of the difficulties we face when we approach environmental action from our Western individualist mindset. Starting from this perspective, we can easily slip into hubris—an overinflated belief in our own power to make change. And on the other hand, perhaps when we discover our own power doesn't extend as far as we thought, we can slide into despair. *I'm too small*, we think, *to make a difference.*

These are the dangers we face when we somehow think that we are responsible for 'starting' the work—whether gardening or saving the planet.

What I suggest tonight is that Creation, that God herself, invites us rather to *join in* with something that has already started. The examples all around us—of humanity's response to the climate crisis, of Creation's own ongoing activity, of God's redemptive work—all offer us the opportunity to respond creatively, collaboratively, to *join in.*

The word 'example', however, doesn't fit smoothly with this idea of 'joining in'. In fact, 'example' comes from a Latin root meaning 'to take out, extract'. An example is often something that is 'pulled out' of context to serve as a pattern for imitation.

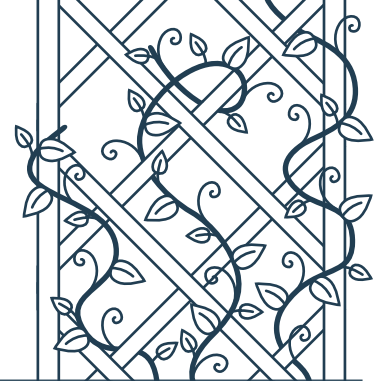
Sometimes when we hear an example, we can fall into this 'extractive' trap. We can feel the need to imitate, or even to compete with, an example. Sometimes we can strip an example down to its bare bones—*what did you do?*—rather than seeking to connect with the heart of the example: its whys, its emotions, its imaginative potential.

Tonight, I want to suggest a few principles for engaging with 'examples' of Creation Care that can help us to avoid these 'extractivist' tendencies and rather help us *join in* through the imaginative power of examples.



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The first principle of learning to ‘join in’ with examples, is that we engage not just with examples of ‘doings’ but with examples of feelings, emotions and motivations.

Dr Hoesung Lee, a leading climate scientist, says that the question which keeps him up at night is not *‘what is happening to our earth?’* or *‘what should we do about it?’* We already know the answers to these questions: the information is out there. The question that keeps Dr Lee up at night is this: *‘why do we not do what we know we should do?’*

Why have we been unable to motivate ourselves into taking the actions that we know we should do - on an individual level, as well as on collective levels?

One of the answers to this question, which some ecotheologians have begun to suggest, is that we haven’t paid attention to what really moves us: our feelings, our emotions, our deepest attachments.

In order to make space for the example of emotions, my church and several others have joined with community organisations to run climate cafés. We give everyone an uninterrupted time to speak, quite simply, about the *feelings* which the climate crisis arouses. As each speaks, the rest of us listen.

Each of us at these gatherings has a different career, lifestyle, faith community. We all have different examples of what we can and should be ‘doing’ in each of our contexts. What we share is the deep feelings which move us.

I don’t know about you, but sometimes in this work, I find myself assuming that no one else cares as much about the environment as I do: this feeling kills my motivation. As I listen to how other people feel about the environment, I’m drawn into the great emotional richness of humanity, and I’m inspired to ‘join in’. Others at the climate cafés have also reported feeling empowered, encouraged, moved and determined.

When we look at Jesus’ ministry, too, I think we often skate over the emotional pull that his example had on people: Jesus himself was moved with compassion, with anger, with sorrow; and those who followed him were moved with amazement, with fear, with joy. Our examples must draw people into the feelings and motivations that can move us to ‘join in’, rather than simply become another thing to do.

Secondly, I want to encourage us to look to Creation itself as our example. We are not to ‘extract’ human action from the great ongoing work of God in Creation when looking for our examples.

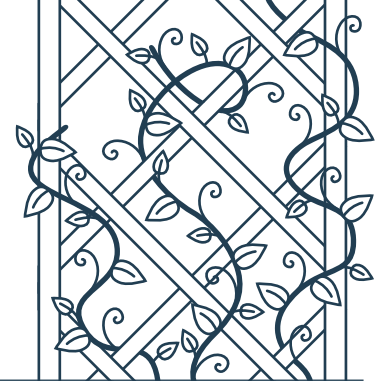
Western hierarchies of Being have long placed humans at the top, closest to God. Western Christianity has been complicit in this construction and its violent ramifications, giving humanity free rein to exercise ‘dominion’ over a Creation of which we do not consider ourselves fully part.

As Revd Dr Rajkumar highlighted for us in Week 1, many indigenous ways of knowing offer far more integrated, kinship-based understandings of humanity’s relationship with Creation. And these encourage us to draw our ethics and example from our fellow creatures. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation in America, writes about humans as ‘the younger siblings of Creation’. *‘Humans,’* she writes, *‘have the least experience of how to live and thus the most to learn - we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way they live. They teach us by example.’*



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Do you hear the echo here of Jesus' own instruction: *Consider the lilies?*

Consider, pay attention, learn from them. We need to listen deeply to Creation's example. Consider the lilies: learn spiritually and ethically from them.

This is part of what the Forest Church movement is trying to achieve: to help us reintegrate our spiritual lives with the example of all Creation. During the Forest Church we run at Emmanuel, we pay attention to our fellow creatures simply to 'join in' with their life of worship. In the UK, where our church season matches so closely our seasons, we can enter Advent watching and hoping with the bulbs we plant, or experience Easter along with all the signs of Spring life.

If we want to follow Jesus, we should look to all the examples he gives us: not just in humanity, but in the very lilies of the field.

Finally, we should look to examples that broaden our collective, while keeping us rooted.

It's all too easy to hear the examples of others held up over us in judgement. Anyone who grew up with siblings must surely have heard the phrase 'can't you be more like your sibling?' Why couldn't our parents just appreciate that we were, are and always will be, different people!

In the same way, a non-extractive way of relating to examples shouldn't try to force one person's story as judgement on another. Rather, each example becomes an opportunity for imaginative and creative engagement as we each seek to respond to the call of God on our own lives, contexts and communities. We are each 'living stones' built together, by God, into a 'spiritual house'. You don't have to be the same as the next stone, but we are called to be responsive - to be 'living', alive - to each other and to Christ, as we are formed together into a coherent whole.

God, who builds this house, will always include stones we don't like very much. We need the humility to understand that our collective, our 'church', is always broader than we might like. We must learn from examples that go beyond the boundaries we like to draw: even as we know that we don't have to imitate those examples exactly.

In a similar way, Interfaith work aims to broaden relationships whilst rooting each person more deeply in their own tradition. I think this is the model we need for Creation Care: we need to broaden our sense of kinship, opening ourselves imaginatively and responsively to the examples of others, becoming aware of all the work that we are joining in with. And yet, our own response should grow from our rootedness in the place where God has planted us.

Examples from others are powerful: they can transform our imagination, and our imagination, as Sam Wells puts it, is where transformation really happens.

But don't forget to pay attention to the voice of God, the voice of Creation, in *your* context, and let your imagination root into that time and place.

Let's not become those who 'extract' examples from the texture of their particular place and time. Rather, let's listen for the ways that we are each being called to 'join in' as the 'living, responsive' stones that God has made us to be.

The Revd Melissa Dickinson, 25th March 2025