

**“Gratitude! . . . Now?”
Rev Dwight Wagenius
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COVID. Russia invades Ukraine. Putin. Climate change. Gun violence. Authoritarian Chinese leader with vast surveillance system. Test scores down for math and reading. Accelerating extinction of species. Inflation. January 6. More gun violence.

So much change; So much evil; Coming together all at once.

Rana Foroohar, author of the new book [“Homecoming: The Path to Prosperity in a Post-Global World,”](#)¹ looks at all this change and evil coalescing into chaos and says “The fear is real. But the chaos is transitory, as it is largely driven by the tumult that attends any transition from an old economic order to a new one.”² She sees the world moving from economic globalization to a new normal as we seek the right balance between global and local.

She’s probably right. But that gives me little comfort today.

So what do people/we/I/you do?

Especially now. How do we reconcile this season of giving thanks with all of the change? All of the evil? All of the chaos?

Robin Wall Kimmerer is an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, a professor of biology at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and the author of “Braiding Sweetgrass.”³ Her book is filled with giving thanks, thanks for all the ways that the earth provides for us.

Giving thanks in her indigenous culture is not a one day or one week thing. It’s an everyday expression of gratitude; and it comes from their origin story. The gratitude is accompanied by a responsibility to give back to, to care for, the earth. Kimmerer calls it reciprocity. An exchange of gifts. The earth gives gifts to indigenous people; they give gifts to the earth in response.

Kimmerer recognizes that those of us in the dominant culture do not live as close to the land as indigenous peoples do. She observes that those of us in the dominant culture don’t see that our goods, our wealth, come from the land, the earth. She says that part of the problem is embedded in the words we use like “resources” or “natural resources.” Those words imply that resources are ours for the taking. No reciprocity needed.

Kimmerer challenges us, in a good way.

The word of God from Genesis is our origin story— created and carried through time orally by telling, and retelling based on retelling, and finally written down.

We know the story well. At each step in the story of creation God reviewed what God had created and assessed it as good or very good.

Some have said that the creation of humanity in God’s image with a commission to rule over animals, plants, and all living things carries a license for ecological irresponsibility. However, when scripture speaks of having dominion over the earth, don’t confuse “dominion” with “domination.” Rather think of dominion as receiving this generously gifted land, this gifted earth, with all its plants and creatures and the responsibility to tend it well.

The Bible portrays humanity not as the owner of nature but as its steward, or even as its servant, strictly accountable to God, its true owner. Leviticus 25 makes the point that creation is God’s. In God’s words, in verses 23 and 24 “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.”

I had thought redemption referred only to a response to a claim from a prior owner. But in its discussion of sabbatical years and the every-fifty-year jubilee year, Leviticus makes it clear that the jubilee is the year in which the land is redeemable by God, its true owner. The phrase, “you are but aliens and tenants” emphasizes the transitory nature of human land ownership. We humans occupy the earth only for our lifetime. God remains. God’s word in Leviticus means that what is required of stewards of creation is to care for it while in our tenancy and temporary ownership, and to conserve it for future generations—not unlike the reciprocity that Kimmerer talks about.

Genesis 9 reminds us that God’s covenant is not only with humans but “with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature.” Within this covenant understanding of the web of life, justice arises as a central guiding impulse.

In the New Testament, the gospels of Mathew, Mark, and Luke⁴ all tell us a story with almost the same words about a lawyer or scribe who questioned Jesus. The lawyer asked “which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus uncharacteristically did not answer with a parable. His answer was direct: (quote) “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (enquote)

One obvious extension of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is taking care of the animals and plants and other living things that God created and called good, and doing so with ALL of our heart, soul, mind and strength—a huge commitment, reciprocity if you will.

While the words are different, there are core values expressed in the indigenous culture and in our biblical heritage that are strikingly similar—the recognition that the earth is a gift to us and that the gift carries with it a responsibility to take care of it.

There are differences, too. The emphasis on gratitude as everyday expressions in the indigenous culture—is one of those differences.

As I look out, I see members of this congregation who spent many hours and many dollars supporting indigenous people and others who were trying to stop Line 3. Line 3 is the massive crude oil pipeline that was being built across northern Minnesota through waters, wild rice beds, and habitat. The indigenous people working to stop the pipeline regard those waters, wild rice beds and habitat as gifts from the creator, gifts accompanied by a responsibility to give back to, to care for, the earth.

We were not successful in stopping Line 3. It was built and is carrying oil. But the alliances we formed, and the respect for each other and the land, endure. That's a good thing because oil and ethanol interests have proposed another pipeline. A new 2,000-mile pipeline would carry CO₂ across Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota, to eventually inject and store the CO₂ underground in North Dakota.

The oil and ethanol interests claim that the pipeline project will be a climate benefit—that's just . . . greenwashing. The project is designed to delay the transition away from carbon intensive energy. And to make money from subsidies in the process.

A recent peer-reviewed study in a prestigious national journal⁵ said that ethanol could be 24 percent more carbon intensive than gasoline. There are huge subsidies available for using CO₂ to push oil out of the ground so it would be wise to assume that that is exactly what the CO₂ in the proposed pipeline would be used for.

Local Indigenous groups, farmers and environmentalists are firmly against the pipeline.

So the pipeline story is not over yet. Citizens will persist. And I know that I can speak for you as well as for me when I say we are deeply grateful for the citizen effort.

There is a small clearing in the woods at our farm where a local beekeeper keeps some of his bees for the summer. The beekeeper takes all his hives to California when it's time to pollinate almond trees. When you were hearing about bee colony collapse in the media, our local beekeeper was telling us about neonicotinoids, a new class of pesticides used on corn and soybean seeds, that were killing his bees. The makers of these systemic pesticides, Bayer and Syngenta, the first and second largest pesticide companies in the world, declined to take any responsibility. And our Minnesota Department of Agriculture chose not to challenge Bayer and Syngenta.

The bee killing problem was not confined to corn and soy territory. Minneapolis beekeepers were also losing honeybees to these new pesticides and went to the Minnesota legislature with the support of the city government. They asked the legislature to ban the use of these

pesticides in the city. The legislature tried. Year after year after year. But each time the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, with the backing of two different Governors, said “no.”

Citizens caring for the earth and God’s creatures took the matter into their own hands. I know you have seen the yards with signs saying pollinator friendly or Bee safe yard—in other words no pesticides and most likely native plants that appeal to a wide range of pollinators, not just honeybees. But that’s not all. Citizens formed all sorts of groups—even fairs and groundwise groups at churches [thank you Linda, Beth and others]—to make pollinator-friendly gardens and educate friends and neighbors about what was happening to pollinators. With that support the legislature was able to appropriate funding to the Minnesota Zoo to try to save a butterfly that was going extinct. And to enact multiple funding bills to help citizens create safe places for pollinators.

This pollinator story isn’t over yet. Citizens are persisting. And I know that I can speak for you as well as for me when I say we are deeply grateful for the citizen effort.

Xcel’s proposal to store nuclear waste in casks next to the Mississippi in the mid 1990’s was about as controversial as anything can get. One piece of the compromise that allowed the casks on the Mississippi was a requirement that Xcel generate some of its electricity from wind. That proposal by then-Senator Janet Johnson was a first. Citizens then took up the effort to push for more wind-generated clean electricity. Now Xcel celebrates its wind-generated electricity because it is renewable, and because it is the cheapest way to generate electricity. Xcel will retire the last of its coal plants in 2030.

Now, to address climate change, we need to **use** that clean electricity by planning to convert fossil fuel or older electric appliances to new efficient electric ones when the old appliances fail or become outdated, as they inevitably will.

This story is just beginning. Citizens are persisting. And I know that I can speak for you as well as for me when I say we are deeply grateful for the citizen effort.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the earth and for the plants and animals and all things the earth provides for us.

We respond with gratitude and know that the gift of the earth carries with it a responsibility to care for it.

Thanks be to God for the gift of clean water, wild rice, and habitat.

We respond with gratitude to the indigenous people and others who are working to protect these gifts by opposing the environmental degradation caused by pipelines.

Thanks be to God for the gift of pollinators that ensure that our trees and plants will reproduce.

We respond with gratitude to the citizens who are working to provide safe places where pollinators can thrive.

Thanks be to God for the gift of a climate that supports all creatures.

We respond with gratitude to the citizens who are working to rapidly reduce the use of fossil fuels.

And *thanks be to God* for this Mayflower community.

We respond with gratitude for each other as we work together in community to care for God's creation.

May it be so.

¹ Rana Foroohar, *Homecoming: The Path to Prosperity in a Post-Global World*, Crown Publishing Group, 2022.

² Rana Foroohar, *Globalism Failed to Deliver the Economy We Need*, NY Times, 10/17/22.

³ Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Edition. 2013.

⁴ Matthew 22.34-40; Mark 12.28-31; Luke 10.25-28.

⁵ Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, *Environmental Outcomes of the US Renewable Fuel Standard*, 2/14/22.