

Is God's Charity Broad Enough for Bears? **Presented by Elizabeth Johnson, 3-7-17**

Good evening, everybody. Wow, that just took one, then my inner eighth grade teacher is working really well. We are delighted to welcome so many people to the University of Portland campus who this might be their first trip. We're always delighted to see our students and this is your 152nd trip to BC Auditorium and we are thrilled tonight to welcome one of the great, the really true luminaries of the world of theology and this is her first trip to the University of Portland speaking to this community.

So, we're thrilled about that. My name is Karen Eifler and together with Father Charlie Gordon, we direct the Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture. We are serving as your host tonight, but it takes a village. We're delighted to have the support of so many local parishes, of our own theology department, of our Faith and Formation Ambassadors, Campus Ministry and all other people from lots and lots of places in about a hundred-mile radius and that's just delightful to have that kind of support.

So, thank you for that. You are going to love what you hear tonight. And if you want to know more about what the Garaventa Center and the University of Portland offer to the wider community, we have lots of flyers and calendars for the rest of the year out in the foyer.

We also have an electronic mailing list that you can sign up for. We send out a newsletter about once a month and also podcasts of most of our major events, and weekly scriptural reflections, and it's just a great way to stay on top of our programs which are always free, and open to the public.

And so we hope that if this is your first trip to the University of Portland, you'll be inspired to come back again and again and again. Our speaker is such a bright light that a mere co-director of the Garaventa Center is not appropriate to introduce her. And so, you know you're at an academic gathering when there's an introduction to the introduction.

It is my pleasure now to introduce you to the 20th president of the University of Portland, our president, Father Mark L Poorman. Please welcome him.

[APPLAUSE] Good evening to all of you and welcome. It is indeed my honor to introduce to you Professor Elizabeth Johnson of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

According to one of her colleagues at Fordham University where she is a distinguished professor of theology, when Professor Johnson was a very young girl, growing up in New York, one of her favorite things to do was go to the docks and watch the huge ships coming in and going out of the enormous harbor there.

She was especially fascinated by the tiny tugboats that actually made everything possible. Seeming to ignore the laws of physics, these nautical work horses pulled ships hundreds of times bigger than themselves safely into their docking slots and out to the open sea. This same kind colleague, so much for kind colleagues, but reported that one time, Professor Johnson aspired to be a tugboat captain when she grew up.

[LAUGH] You are going to get equal time out of this. Given the breath and the depths of her accomplishments in a long and distinguished career, it's apparent, that in a way, Professor Johnson achieved that early goal over the course of a life deeply devoted to the flourishing of the church.

She has pursued big and formidable ideas and ushered them safely into the harbor. She's been a steady, loving voice calling polarized factions of the church into dialogue and finding common ground using the tools of faith and intellect, imagination and wonder and humility. Professor Johnson has written numerous influential books and articles, indeed just about everyone in this auditorium has likely read at least one of her pieces.

Her accomplishments as a theologian have garnered many, many honors. 15 honorary doctorates, the Fordham teaching award, Catholic Theological Society of America's John Courtney Murray award for distinguished achievement to name just a handful. Her service has brought Lutherans and Catholics to the same table contributed to our ongoing conversation about women in the church, and society, and reminded us that faith and reason indeed serve one another.

One of our UP theology faculty members noted that if there were a theological Mount Rushmore, Elizabeth Johnson's image would be included. [LAUGH] With our characteristic sense of appreciation for truly exceptional talent and dedication and achievement, please join me in welcoming to the podium Professor Elizabeth Johnson. [APPLAUSE] Thank you

[APPLAUSE] Thank you, Father Poorman for that charming introduction. I'll just add a PS to the tugboat story. [LAUGH] One of my colleagues once said to me, you have become a tugboat. You are trying to pull the Barque of Peter [LAUGH] into a certain direction, which it doesn't want quite go.

So good evening, everyone. It's a great pleasure for me to be here in the Pacific Northwest and the first time at the University of Portland and to be invited to give this lecture tonight which is entitled Is God's Charity Broad Enough for Bears? I'd like to talk with you this evening as that title might give way in your mind the suspicion, I'd like to talk about the Earth, about the natural world in a religious framework.

And if you are someone who lives by a certain faith or Christian faith or even the Catholic faith, I invite you to test what you believe against what I say. And if you are not someone who lives by a certain faith, I hope you will find it interesting to hear what religious folk are saying about that subject today.

Let me start with an intriguing story about John Muir, the 19th century American naturalist. Once when Muir was hiking in the Yosemite wilderness, he came upon a dead bear and he stopped to reflect on this animal's dignity. Here was an animal with warm blood and a heart that beat like ours.

Here was an animal who rejoiced to feel the warm sun on his fur and for whom a good day was finding a bush full of berries. Later, he wrote a bitter entry in his journal criticizing the religious folk he knew who make no room in their faith for such noble creatures.

And I quote, they think they are the only ones with souls. The only ones for whom heaven is reserved. And to the contrary, he continued, quote, God's charity is broad enough for bears. And we get our title from that, but notice I've flipped it, I made it a question.

Is it, do you think? What do you think? Is the God you believe in or don't believe in, but hear about from others, is this God madly passionately in love with bears? With other plants and animals on our planet. Think of the Chinook and Coho salmon in the Columbia River, the song sparrows, woodpeckers, hawks and gulls native to these Pacific Northwest skies.

The squirrels, beavers, big horn sheep, the seed of fir, apple, and cherry trees, is God's charity broad enough for all of them? Now far from being a subject of merely abstract interest, this question is shot through with urgency, because in our day, as you well know, we are harming this planet.

We live in an age that's called ecological, an ecological awareness of the living world is growing around us. And you may well know that ecological, the word itself comes from the Greek work Oikos, O-I-K-O-S, which means household or home. We are realizing that our beautiful blue marble of a planet is home to a marvelous array of life, bacteria, plants, animals, including ourselves, human beings.

The number of species is, as yet, uncounted, but some say that our planet is shared by at least 8 million species named so far, 6 million on land and 2 million in the sea. It is our common home. Our only hope in this vast universe at least so far.

Now, ecological awareness is shot through with paradox. On the one hand, we stand in wonder at the natural world. Its beauty, its diversity, its evolutionary dynamism. And on the other hand we stand sickened at the deadly damage currently being inflicted on the planet, air land and sea polluted, ice caps melting, species going extinct all because of human behavior that is rendering our planet unhealthy and in fact increasingly unfit as a habitat for life.

[BLANK_AUDIO] Now, it is a matter of great puzzlement, why people who believe that the natural world is created by God have not stepped forward more vigorously to defend it. Think about this. The Bible begins with the great act of creation, Genesis chapter one. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth.

Anyone who says the Nicene Creed, we begin with belief in God, the maker of heaven and Earth and of all things visible and invisible. If you're a believer in Jesus, he taught that not a sparrow falls to the ground that our heavenly father doesn't care about. Indeed, Christian theology calls the natural world not simply nature but creation.

Creation is not a scientific word, it's a religious word that names the world with its animals and its plants in relation to God, their Creator. And yet surveys show that ecological care is not high on the list of most religious people's concerns. As a result, many Christians today are like the disciples of Jesus on the last night of his life.

While the Earth is undergoing its agony we are curled up in the garden fast asleep. [BLANK_AUDIO] Now in June 2015, less than 2 years ago, Pope Francis issued a magnificent encyclical on this subject. The title is 'Laudato Si' which means praise to you. And it's taken from the opening of the canticle of Saint Francis of Assisi which begins with these words, praise to you my Lord with all your creatures.

And you may note, it's not praise to you for your creatures, or through your creatures but with your creatures. In my view, this is the most important encyclical ever written in the history of the Catholic Church. I say this not only because it analyzes astutely the dangers that the ecological crisis poses to all life on our planet, including human life.

And not only because it connects ecological issue with issues of social justice, which are intertwined. But also because it prescribes helpful ways forward. I suggest you read it if you haven't, okay? It's easily available on the web. Just Google 'Laudato Si', and it will come up. [BLANK_AUDIO] The letter's descriptions of the problem are powerful.

One example. Quote, the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth, covered with industrial waste, causing ill health to people and other living organisms. This problem is closely linked to a throwaway culture, which affects the poor more than others. The encyclical solution, are just as powerful, and at the center of the solution is a vision of what the pope calls, and I'm quoting, a new way of being human.

That enhances rather than diminishes the life of other creatures, a new way of being human. In this new way of being human we would see ourselves, the pope writes, not first of all as a separate superior species, but as part of one splendid universal community all loved by God.

I was interested in the translation this in simple code was written in Italian to begin with. And in the United States, it was translated one splendid universal community. In Australia it was translated one sublime universal community. And in England it was translated one splendiferous universal community. So, it's how you went into different kinds of English.

That word, [LAUGH] okay, but one community all loved by God. Now, in this lecture with the salmon and the hawks and the fir trees in mind. Let us explore what this means. One, the universal community, which if we get into the mindset of a new way of being human that enhances rather than destroys the life of other creatures, could have an enormous impact on our planet.

First, I will explore one major obstacle to thinking this way. Next, I will discuss two resources that may help melt away this obstacle. One being from science and one from religion. And finally, I will present three spiritual practices that can help move us forward to this new way of being human.

And let me say, that I offer this reflection not so much in the hope that you will necessarily agree with everything I've said. But that in the hope it will stimulate your own thinking about what it means to be a human being in this world today. Amid this world that God so loves now under threat.

And move you, and all of us, to take meaningful action for the world's care. So the first point, the obstacle. For centuries, Western culture has held that human beings stand at the pinnacle of creation with other beings ranked below us. Do you remember that scene from the Titanic where she says, I'm king of the world, that's the idea.

There is a hierarchy of being, so to speak, philosophy puts it this way, and we humans are on top. So this model of being human is a triangle, if you will, or a pyramid and human beings at the pinnacle of that. Right, now this way of thinking about human beings is rooted in ancient Greek philosophy which thought that everything in the world is made up of different proportions of spirit and matter.

And this philosophy privileges spirit over matter because they believe it is closer to the divine. If God is pure spirit then anything that is more spirit is closer to God. And what's more material is lower in the hierarchy of being and further away from God. I digress here, but I want to say as if God didn't make material things and dwell in them as well, but that's not what the Greeks thought, right?

And hence, there was a hierarchy of being. At the lowest level is inanimate nature. Things like rocks. The next highest level is plants. Which have a certain spirit of life. Above them are animals, because the matter of their body is empowered to move, and to communicate, and so on.

Human beings with the powers of our rational intellect and free will are higher yet, and we're the highest on Earth. But above us are angels, the purest spirits who have no bodies at all. When I teach this, using Thomas Aquinas as the guide, because this was his view of the world as well.

I always say, with a little bit of alliteration, it goes from the pebble to the peach, to the poodle, to the person, to the principalities, and powers, all under, and I can never think of a word for God that starts with p. So if anybody comes up with one, I would be happy to know, right.

Now notice not only is this ancient Greek philosophy very influential on Western philosophy, this was taken into church teaching as well. And note that the spirituality connected with this view is shaped by what's called the metaphor of ascent, ascending, all right. To be holy a person must flee the material world and rise to the spiritual sphere where the light of divinity dwells.

One must turn away from one's own body, from one's own sexuality, and from the Earth. In order to have communion in the fullest measure with God. Does that sound a little bit familiar? A lot of people here were raised with that kind of spirituality, okay? Note too, and I have to say this, that this philosophy identifies men with spirit and women with matter.

So that men rightly rule and women rightly serve them. It's a view that still afflicts the Catholic Church. Now, this view of humans at the pinnacle of creation turned really vicious in the 15th and 16th centuries

when the European age of exploration began. Then thinkers took the story that opens the Bible, Chapter 1 of Genesis, and gave it an imperialistic interpretation.

Recall, after creating the whole beautiful world in six days, at the end God creates the human couple, male and female, in the divine image and likeness. And gives them a mandate, and the word as we have it in English is to have dominion over the rest of the world.

Be fruitful, multiply. And have dominion over the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, and so on. Now, this is an important point. In its original biblical context, dominion was a practice connected with the royal court. If a king had a large territory, he would send representatives to oversee distant regions of the kingdom.

And to see that his will was executed there and his ways were followed. These representatives were said to have dominion over that region. They were to make sure the king's will was followed. The author used that meaning of dominion in Genesis because God has just created all kinds of creatures, blessed them, given them the mandate to increase and multiply and has pronounced them good.

And then says to the human couple, have dominion over them. You follow what that means, right? Be representatives of the creator. You are charged to see that God's ways are carried out. That they can be fruitful, and multiply, and flourish the way God, their creator, wanted, right? And Christian theology pretty much interpreted Genesis that way for a number of centuries.

But in the 15th and 16th century when European nations began to colonize other continents, philosophy in Europe done amidst this aggressive entrepreneurial culture changed the meaning of dominion to mean domination. Resources in other lands were there to be extracted. Plants and animals were mere creatures for human use. And not to be missed, is the way elite European peoples apply this also to other human beings.

White Europeans had the right to dominate and enslave darker, indigenous peoples. Whites were higher on the hierarchy of being. And unfortunately, most of Christian European theology at that time supported this view. [BLANK_AUDIO] I find it daunting to realize how deeply this view of human beings as masters and rulers of nature has shaped Christian belief and practice as well as our country's lifestyle and business practices.

With deep roots in the Western Classical tradition, this view has largely erased creation from religious experience. [BLANK_AUDIO] Open the door to unbridled exploitation of nature without ecclesial protest. You could go back to the 15th and 16th, 17th and 18th centuries and say, where are the theologians saying, don't do this?

Nowhere to speak of. Here and there a single voice, but not the whole view. [BLANK_AUDIO] Now in strong language Laudato Si', the pope's encyclical, criticizes this pinnacle view, as I'm calling it, as quote, inadequate, end quote, and also, I quote, frankly wrong. [BLANK_AUDIO] And I'm quoting from the encyclical now.

Even if we Christians have, at times, incorrectly interpreted the scriptures, that's an admission from a pope, isn't it? But even if we had, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the Earth justifies domination over creatures and quote. Instead, the pope says, we are meant to live and here is his phrase, in mutual relation with other creatures, sharing together in that one splendid universal communion, embraced by the love of God.

So as I was reading this I said, okay, he wants to get rid of the triangle view of human beings in relation to the world with us at the pinnacle. And instead, invite us into imaging ourselves as part of a circle. Mutual relation, a circle of life. [BLANK_AUDIO] So, how can we climb down from the tip of our triangle and re-envision ourselves as part of a community of life?

This is terribly hard. [BLANK_AUDIO] We have to deconstruct the imagination that we've lived with for so long. We have to re-change the feelings of our heart. [BLANK_AUDIO] And so, I move us to the second point, two helps, two sturdy steps on this ladder that could begin to get us thinking differently of a new way of being human.

[BLANK_AUDIO] And those two ways, as I said earlier, are scientific discoveries and religious insight. First the science. [BLANK_AUDIO] All living plants and animals on our planet, including ourselves, as you know, didn't suddenly just pop up but emerged over unthinkable stretches of time in a developing universe. I think most of you know what's called The Universe Story.

Yes, that's starting with the Big Bang, 13.7 billion years ago. There was an explosion that spewed matter and energy and gas out into the universe. And soon, gravity pulls some of this matter together. The friction of the simple hydrogen atoms ignited and we had stars. And gravity pulled the stars together and we had galaxies.

[BLANK_AUDIO] And after billions of years, some of those original stars grew old and they died in vast explosions whose intense heat cooked as scientists say those original hydrogen atoms into more complex atoms such as carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, gold. [BLANK_AUDIO] Now we, live in the Milky Way galaxy and now our own solar system formed about five billion years ago out of the debris of exploding stars.

Gravity, once again, drew some of this gas together to form a new star we call our Sun. And some of the material clumped together in chunks too small to ignite and these are the planets, including our home, third rock from the Sun. [BLANK_AUDIO] Scientists say that Earth is a Goldilocks planet, not too close to the Sun that would evaporate all the water, not too faraway that it would freeze but just right for life.

Because about 3.5 billion years ago another marvelous event happened which no one yet knows how to explain. Certain molecules joined together in such a way that they could reproduce-- the origin of life. When Charles Darwin published his book, *On the Origin of Species*, he called it, in 1859, he shared the discovery that ever since, over these last three and a half billion years, species have originated slowly from other species through small changes made over deep eons of time.

One example he uses is this, a mutation, may increase the toughness of a bird's bill ever so slightly. If the area's major food source is a hard seed, the tougher bill will result in more nourishment for that bird and more successful egg laying. And more birds will be born with tougher bills and eventually birds with weak bills will disappear.

[BLANK_AUDIO] Nature selects a beneficial characteristic when it shows up and places it forward. And over eons of time, new species of birds from ancestral parents as a result of this ongoing process of small successful changes that adapt to changing environment. Not until the sixth edition of his book did Darwin call this evolution.

His favorite term was descent with modification. D-E-S-C-E-N-T, descending, generational, okay?

[BLANK_AUDIO] Now, this cosmic story of our origins as sun and planet in the universe coupled with the story of evolution of life on this planet, makes abundantly clear that all living creatures on this planet are related, doesn't it?

I mean, they're kin, I mean that's scientific knowledge. As Darwin tried to describe this, he drew this little tree so that we all are a tree of life with different branches. But we come from one another and we are all connected on this Earth. [BLANK_AUDIO] Speaking of the redness of blood, for example, the British scientist and priest, Arthur Peacocke asked this question, why is our blood red, and the blood of other animals also all red?

Answer, iron. Where does this iron come from? And I quote him, every atom of iron in our blood would not be there, had it not been produced in some galactic explosion billions of years ago. And eventually condensed to form the iron in the crust of the Earth from which we have emerged.

So quite literally, as Carl Sagan used to love to say, we are all made of star-dust, all creatures on this planet coming from the minerals that were produced that way. That's the cosmic story. The biological story of evolution moreover makes it evident that we share as human beings with all other living creatures a common genetic ancestry.

A universal common ancestor that first sprung in to life in the ancient seas. So bacteria, pine trees, blueberries, horses, the great gray whales, we are all kin in this community of life. Let me invite to ponder this quote from Charles Darwin. What can be more curious than that the hand of a man, formed for grasping, the paw of a mole for digging, the leg of a horse, the paddle of the porpoise, and the wing of the bat, should all be constructed on the same pattern.

And should include the same bones, in the same relative position. He goes on to say, in the view of direct creation, this is the idea that God made each creature separately, okay. We can only say, it has so pleased the creator to construct each animal that way, but, if we suppose an ancient progenitor had its limbs arranged that way, then all descendants inherited the pattern.

The bones might be enveloped in the thick membrane to form a paddle to swim or a thin membrane to form a wing to fly. Well they may be lengthened or shortened, or separated for some profitable purpose like fingers, but there will be no tendency to alter the framework. Indeed, we give the same names to these bones in widely different animals, in the end saying what a grand natural system formed by descent with slight modifications.

Let me end this all through brief look at scientific discovery. With a timeline suggested by Carl Sagan. If the Big Bang the origin of our universe started on January 1st, then our solar system formed on September 1st. Life on Earth began on September 25th. And human beings emerged on December 31st at ten minutes to midnight.

We are only recently arrived and we put ourselves at the apex of the triangle, or are we are part of the circle of life? Let science teach us. [BLANK_AUDIO] I can't encourage people to study science enough, because it's gonna keep bringing in a connection this way to all the rest of life.

But there are also religious insights that will help move us down from the pinnacle of our arrogance, and put us in touch with the rest of creation. And here we have, I'd like to concentrate briefly on the bible. It's interesting to find out that apart from that mention in the first book of Genesis and one Psalm, Psalm 8, dominion even in the good sense is not the major way that the Bible sees the human world relationship.

Rather, it sees us all being created by God and held in existence by the loving power of God, and therefore, if I could put it very bluntly, we all have more in common with each other as creatures than we have that separates us. A stunning example is found in the book of Job.

As the ancient folk tale begins, Job is suffering loss on every front, his health, his house, his children, his possession, right. And in a debate with his friends that grows every more acrimonious, he maintains that he has done nothing sinful to deserve this punishment. They think he has. They keep saying, what sin did you commit Job, that's causing all this trouble, right?

So in the end in anguish, he mounts a lawsuit challenging God to appear in court to defend the way the world runs. And then, in Job, we have this famous line then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind. [BLANK_AUDIO] The answer is unexpected. In gorgeous, poetic language that just pours out over the course of four chapters 38 to 41.

The divine voice describes God's activity in creation where the human role is just about next to nothing. Because the voice from the world once starts with this question. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? Where were you when I put the sea within its boundaries and told its waves not to come any further?

Where were you when the stars began to sing? Do you command the sun to rise at dawn? Do you make the snow and rain to fall? Do you tell Orion, and the other constellations, how to run their course across the night sky? And on it goes. Where were you?

I guess the answer is, I wasn't anywhere yet. [LAUGH] And once the whole physical world is laid out, the questions from the whirlwind turn to the behavior of animals. Who, for the most part, are wild and free, living their lives without serving human purpose. The voice says to Job, do you give food to the lions when they hunt?

Do you know when the mountain goats crouch to give birth? Do you let your children play with the wild ox? Do the ***, the hawks and eagles, the mighty horses, bow to your will? And the voice says in all of them I take delight. God is loving these wild animals, and none of them obey Job.

Now the startling thing to notice, and I encourage you all read Job chapter 38 to 41. If you don't know this wonderful poetry you'll see it there. The startling thing to notice about Job as compared to Genesis is the absence of even the mandate to have dominion in the good sense.

There's no take charge of it here, right? Instead of being in charge, Job is in the natural world, living in a way that he does not have mastery. And the whirlwind's vision of creation's grandeur makes a religious point. Mainly, that the human place in the scheme of things It's not, first of all, one of supremacy.

We are not the center of everything. Creation is not all about us. Granted, as Sallie McFague, a theologian in Vancouver, compassionately writes. She writes, we have lived so long with this picture of ourselves that it is difficult to imagine that it might not be true. However, the repeated questions from the whirlwind urge a different view.

[BLANK_AUDIO] The breath of every living bird and fish and plant and animal has the same source, as the breath of every human being, the creating spirit of God. And if we grasp the simple but radical truth, we will realize that we humans as creatures have more in common with other creatures than what separates us.

We are all kin. [BLANK_AUDIO] And with a humility that is essential to being properly human, we will take our place among other beloved creatures, in whom the living God is independently interested. [BLANK_AUDIO] Back to the encyclical on this point. In view of Christianity's long acceptance of the matter-spirit dualism and the paradigm of domination by humans, Pope Francis recognizes that he is contributing something new to Catholic teaching by emphasizing the community of creation.

Now, listen to these sentences. He did not write them in a sequence. I went and I cherry picked, all right. But, I was looking for what is his vision here of this new way of being human. And I've compiled these couple of sentences. All right, so he says quote, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes.

Next quote, indeed in our time, the church does not simply state that other creatures are subordinate to the good of human beings. As if they had no worth in themselves and could be treated as we wish, end quote. Again. Rather, they have an intrinsic value in God's eyes, independent of their usefulness to us, and why?

The pope says, quote, because God loves them, even the fleeting life of the least of beings, is the object of God's love and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection. And commentators on this

encyclical say he's talking there about mayflies, that hatch from their eggs, and find each other and mate, and die again, all within a 24-hour period.

Even the fleeting life of the least of these beings is the object of God's love. And in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection. The pope goes on. Other species, are a source of revelation. Each one, and I'm quoting here, reflects in its own way a ray, a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness.

Just by being what they are, they give us a hint of what their creator is like. Some people have said, now that species are going extinct very rapidly, we are wiping out knowledge of God from the earth. Finally the pope says, other creatures are sacramental, the word he uses.

Since the spirit, I'm quoting here, since the spirit of life dwells in them, they are not simply natural, but a place where God dwells, and therefore, they are sacred, we can encounter God in them. Looking forward, Pope Francis writes, the final purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us, rather all creatures are moving forward with us toward a common point of arrival which is God.

This at theocentric view again. And speaking of heaven, the encyclical finishes with this hope. And I quote. [BLANK_AUDIO] At the end we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God. Isn't that a beautiful description of heaven? We'll find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God, and I continue to quote here, and each creature resplendently transfigured will share with us in unending plenitude.

[BLANK_AUDIO] Is God's charity broad enough for bears? Pope Francis certainly thinks so, [LAUGH] certainly if you look at it this way, and if you take the Bible in its fullness this way, right? So all we have the apex of a triangle, or can we get ourselves to understand deep mutual connections with all other creatures on this world.

Let science teach us. Let the bible teach us. Along with scientific discoveries, the bible prompts us to reimagine who we are as a species, and start to reform our ways. [BLANK_AUDIO] Which brings me, to my third and final point. Making this shift is not easy. It is terribly hard.

And we need a conversion. Now, the pope writes the current destruction of life on this earth has the character of deep failure. It is profoundly sinful, contradicting the will of the creator, that the world should flourish. End quote. Now, in our Christian tradition we have a word, that describes, what, what we do when we move from a life of sin to, a life of grace and that word is conversion.

We turn, right? In the new testament the Greek word is Metanoia turning, a change of direction. Pivoting away, from one path and swiveling toward another. So facing ecological ruination, we need a deep conversion and let me put it this way, we need a deep conversion to the Earth. And this is not the usual religious way of talking about conversion, is it?

Because usually we're talking about, turning away from the Earth toward God. But here we're making this connection, turning to the Earth that God so loves. We need to live as human beings with an ecological vocation. As part of our religious faith and that phrase again is from Laudato Si'.

So in the last part of this lecture, I would like to highlight three among many spiritual practices, that can move us toward ecological conversion. These are contemplation, asceticism and political advocacy. First contemplation. Here, we gaze upon the Earth with eyes of love and wonder rather than with an arrogant, utilitarian stare.

I always loved the phrase that, the scientist of the 19th century, Louis Agassiz wrote when he said, I spent the summer traveling. I got halfway across my back yard. [LAUGH] Quieting our mind, if we really look and learn to appreciate nature's astonishment and be alert to its harm, we are contemplating, we're bringing our spirit, our own soul in tune with creation.

And anyone who has ever had an experience of God through contact with nature knows this practice. Okay, now, in engaging this practice, you might think of it this way. We are following the example of Jesus who looked on the natural world with a loving eye. Laudato Si' speaks about, has a whole section, it calls the gaze of Jesus.

And it talks about how Jesus saw seeds, and vineyards, and trees, foxes, sheep, nesting birds, and mother hens, all as creatures of God with something to tell us. He did not hesitate to speak movingly of God's care for the wild flowers, and even to declare divine concern for one dead little bird.

And I quote from Matthew's gospel, are not two sparrows sold for one penny, yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your heavenly father knowing it. I was find it interesting that Luke's version of that same saying is, are not five sparrows sold for two pennies, it's like if you place a double order, you get freebies.

[LAUGH] But Luke goes on to say, and yet not one of them is forgotten by God. So we had Muir's dead bear, but Jesus is talking about a dead bird. One dead little bird has God's care, okay? So the silent prayerful practice of contemplation. It, too, has a strong emotional dimension.

It helps us in the beautiful words of Albert Einstein, to free ourselves from our egotistical prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty, end quote. In the depths of our being, contemplation helps us recover a capacity for communion with the natural world, to the point where brother sun and sister moon, brother wolf and little sister bird, are more than poetic ways of speaking, but truths that we feel as was the case with Francis of Assisi.

Second practice, ascetic practice, or penance with sacrifice. We're now in the season of Lent where this comes to the fore, right? Here, we can change our selfish practices of consumerism, and waste, and greed in order to protect life on Earth. We can green up our lives knowing that how we eat, and shop, and travel affects other creatures.

[BLANK_AUDIO] I suggest we fast not from candy, but from shopping. [LAUGH] We can conduct business with an eye to the green bottom line as well as the red or the black. Many, today, are suggesting we observe Sabbath as a genuine day of rest, which would give the entire Earth a rest.

Not just individual acts, but institutions too can engage in ascetic life affirming practices. Colleges, universities, churches, offices, and so on can adopt the best practices to conserve energy when heating and cooling their buildings, watering and fertilizing their land, or cleaning their facilities using non-toxic products, and trying to live more simply, in other words.

Today, we can make sacrifices not because we're anti-body. That gave asceticism a bad name in recent years, okay? But we practice asceticism to free ourselves from enslavement to unthinking but selfish practices that harm other creatures. And so we can become instead life-givers in our daily way of living.

[BLANK_AUDIO]

And third practice, I'd like to suggest we could follow, is political advocacy. Contemplation deepens human connection with the world. And asceticism awakens us to how our actions harm the natural world and leads us to change. And both of those spiritual practices have long term practical effects. And so we join with others to speak boldly and act critically on behalf of the survival of the planet.

There are tough political and economic issues at stake. Decisions about budget expenditures, energy production, pollution controls, trade patterns, climate treaties, and the like, where the well-being of Earth is at stake, and in the tradition of Biblical prophecy, and the spirit of Jesus. People with the love of the Earth can band together and take critical public stands to the care and protection of the Earth and its species.

Fully aware that they may receive the classical reaction of the powerful to the prophet and be despised. Along these lines, Laudato Si' carefully lays out the deep-seated connection between ecological devastation and social injustice. As it says, poor people suffer disproportionately from environmental damage. Let me give you one telling example from my own life.

Fordham University is in the Bronx, in the 15th congressional district of the South Bronx, and this district is the poorest congressional district in the United States. And here are cited, numerous city sewage treatment plants, waste transfer stations, and distribution hubs serviced by hundreds of polluting trucks a day. Public health statistics show that this area has the highest concentration of severe cases of child asthma in New York City.

Now, overlay these facts, they are not incidental. Poverty, ecological damage, poor health for children connects. So political advocacy works for a healthy planet for all living beings, seeing the social justice implications of all our ecological work. So to conclude, [BLANK_AUDIO] We started with the story of John Muir and his bear, which raised the question of why, unlike the God they believe in, religious people, in general, did not love and protect other creatures.

Drawing on Laudato Si', we tackled a central stumbling block to this love, namely, the idea that human beings have the right to dominate other creatures. Taking ourselves off the apex of this pyramid, and placing ourselves into the circle of life as kin to all other species is the huge emotional, intellectual, and spiritual step that we need to take toward our own conversion.

The scientist, Stephen Jay Gould, once said, we will not fight to save what we do not love. Is God's charity broad enough for bears? If we say, yes, then our own charity will be broad enough for bears. It, too, will grow to be like God, whose love embraces the whole groaning, evolving Earth, now under terrible distress.

Our hearts will be configured to God's heart, which loves the Earth. And we will begin to act in an ecological way. The task is daunting. I just leave you with this word, we haven't a moment to lose. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE] We thank Professor Johnson for using her customary grace and unequivocalness to call us into relationship with one another, and our home planet, relationships that are sublime, splendiferous, and splendid.

And we thank you for that evening. If you're a student here, who is here for part of a class, sign-ups are in the foyer of BC auditorium. If you have a book that you would like Professor Johnson to sign, I know that she is going to be gracious with her time on that as well too.

Thank you very much for coming out tonight, and have a safe drive home. [APPLAUSE]