

So a couple of stories about dirt or the real word—**soil**. And my apologies to all the farmers out there, but quite a long time ago—Sunday morning, a much younger and not so seasoned me—telling the children’s story in church. I don’t remember what the story was or the point I was trying to make, but here’s what I do remember. I had wrapped a box like a present; and inside—dirt. “Who wants this present?” I asked. Of course, everyone did. Who doesn’t want a present right? And they all complained and whined a little when I gave it away to only one. “Aww, how come she gets to open it?” They all crowd in as she opens it, pushing in closer, each one trying to see what’s inside. Then the disappointment. “What? Dirt?” “I know,” I said. “Who wants dirt?” And of course, nobody did. And that’s all I remember. Except for what happened after church was over. An old man, a farmer to the core—dark green work pants, plaid shirt, one leg severely misshapen from years of arthritis and back breaking work—an old man came limping up the center. “It’s not dirt,” he said. “It’s soil.” It was all he said.

But now another story. A class in seminary on food and faith and a day at a community garden in a rough part of the city. A garden built out of necessity because grocery stores don’t build in these neighbourhoods. We sat in a circle and before us—the teacher—a boy, an overgrown body round and bulging from his jeans and way too tall for his age of fourteen. We didn’t know it then, but this was no grade 3 science lesson, no textbook theology, but a creation story. Quietly, head down, hands twisting, he spoke of his life. A society that called him lost. An abusive home and his journey with crime and alcohol and hunger and drugs. In his own words he told us of his life, a rootlessness, “I didn’t feel like I was connected to anything or anyone,” he

said. “But then I put my hands into the soil for the first time to plant a seed. I can’t explain it,” he said. “But suddenly I had found my ground, a connection to the land, a connection to the me I am only beginning to know.”

A boy and some dirt. Connections, soil, belonging, identity. And maybe that was what an old farmer was trying to tell me. That dirt is something we wash and sanitize and sweep up and throw away. But soil is something much more intimate, innately personal and foundational. Not only for the food and life it supports and nourishes and nurtures. But because it defines our humanity. Or, as author and theologian Norman Wirzba describes it; connection to the land and soil:

...creates in us an indispensable “imaginary” that enables us to think, feel, and act in the world with greater awareness for life’s complexity and depth. With eyes, tongues, noses, ears, fingers, and toes, it is the place where people discover what it means to be marked by hunger, blessing, mortality, ignorance, and interdependence. It is where people first taste and fully sense the grace of God.¹

And so it is to stories of land and soil we turn today, to the deep intimacy of our lives—of our humanity—that rises; that is shaped and formed and named by God out of the dust and dirt of the ground. Let us pray.

This is a story about soil; about the life that rises and grows from deep within the ground of our earth. But it may not be what you expect. For this is not a story about grass and grain or flowers and trees. But a story of humanity. Of a man shaped and formed and named out of the dust of the ground. You know him as Adam. And maybe you think the name a bit arbitrary, albeit synonymous with the first human being

¹ Norman Wirzba, *Food & Faith A Theology of Eating*, (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pg. 37 & 35

created by God. And yes, the name Adam does mean mankind or better put *humankind*, and in the more gender specific “man.” But there is something deeper yet in the name; for Adam means the one who rises, who is shaped and formed from the *adamah—adamah*, the name given to the soil, the earth, the ground. A deeply personal, intimate name that at once identifies the man Adam and the identity of us all in the innately foundational relationship of humanity and the ground from which we came. Connections, soil, belonging, identity. *Adam* the one from and of *adamah*.

And so it was with the creation of humanity the boundaries had been set—boundaries of interdependence—that this *Adam* was a being in relationship with the land, with all creation, and with the God who created life; who shaped and formed and breathed life into and within the dust of the ground. The God who walked daily with *Adam* of humankind in the splendour and abundance of a garden rooted deep in the soil, rooted deeper in love and big enough to house God’s dream of life for all.

It is a hopeful and beautiful beginning. But we all know the story. That it doesn’t stay that way. We all know about a snake and an apple; how quickly hunger growls, how quickly insecurity gnaws at the foundations of relationship, how subtly uncertainty slithers and winds and constricts and challenges the limits of love and our humanity. This part of the story we know so very well, so very intimately in our own identities as love blurs, as blame is laid, “God, **you** created her, **she** took the fruit, but the **snake** tempted me. Relationships are broken—human relationships with one another in our marriages and families and in all those we consider so other than us whom we exclude

and push to the margins. Broken relationships with creation pushed to the brink of extinction; ground becomes commodity. Land and soil, drilled, razed, poisoned, mined, harvested to the brink of resource extraction and consumption; to ever-increasing yields for an ever-increasing hunger. Broken relationships with God as we hope and think to be our own gods; to live without the boundaries that define our humanity. Truly we are the *Adam* who thinks he can walk alone. That he has outgrown the soil from which he came; outgrown the God who shaped and formed him for relationship and love.

It is a rootless foundation. And God speaks the truth of the consequences of where our rootlessness leads. Away from gardens of abundance, to places of even deeper hunger, and struggle and uncertainty. A hunger that not only affects us but all creation. Even to the soil, where the brokenness of our lives becomes the rootlessness of all creation in thorny and unfruitful ground; in barren soil and desert wasteland. And still we look to ourselves—to our ingenuity and wisdom for the solutions; even while God is yet walking, yet seeking restored relationship; even while God is yet calling out, “*Adam of adamah* where are you?” But we do not answer. Because we no longer recognize our name. No longer recognize our identity as the ones who rise from *adamah*, as ones shaped and formed by the very hands of God from the dust of the ground.

But just as we think that restoring creation is up to us; once more a story about soil; about the life that rises and grows from deep within the ground of our earth. It is a

familiar story that begins right where we are—in thorny and unfruitful ground; with our world where the struggle is real, where our lives seem barren in a fruitless time. And so the story unfolds of a barren and fruitless fig tree, and the voice of judgment that judges the tree, that places all responsibility for growth and life and fruit on the tree. A sanitizing voice that would sweep up the dirt of this life and all who are less than they could be. A voice of last chances all consumed that says, “It has no fruit! Cut it down! Cut it down and throw it away.” We don’t know who the voice belongs to—whether the world or our own—or the real fear that the voice is God’s who would have us return to the dust from which we came—dust to be swept up and discarded in a heap. Such is the story we are quick to hear, a story synonymous with the harshness of our world and the interpretation of these fruitless times, these present times of ever-present struggle. And we think the tree is defined—that our world and our lives are defined once and for all in a story that begins and ends with a fruitless tree.

And yet, into the story—wounded, limping from the wounds and the back-breaking work of love; from the hope for the life that will rise once more from the ground—into the story comes a farmer. A farmer who sees soil not dirt. A farmer not interested in sanitizing or sweeping away. A creator not interested in cutting down, but in planting, in growing, in building up. A farmer who sees life and fruit even before it has come to be. And the farmer speaks, “Don’t. Don’t cut it down.” The scene turns suddenly, deeply intimate, innately personal; foundational. As the farmer God kneels, as the Son of God bends down to the ground, and with nail-scarred hands, takes up the soil, works it and kneads it, waters it and fertilizes it with manure. With every sense

of God's being—eyes that sting with the dust and grit but yet see the beauty and vision of what can be. With a nose ripe with the stench of rotting life; a tongue that tastes the bitterness. With toes and feet rawed and calloused by sharp stones and the roughness of the soil. With fingers that knead and press and soften until every muscle aches. With eyes, nose, ears, fingers, toes, the ground of our being—the soil—is the place where the God of all creation is marked by our humanity—our hunger, blessing, mortality, ignorance, the need and the ache and interdependence of life in this world. With eyes nose, ears, fingers, toes, the soil is the place where our humanity is marked with every breath, muscle, flesh, blood, wound and scar of the Son of God; the place where we taste God's grace; where the dream and imagination of the Creator begins to shape and form and breathe anew, so that life may rise once more; so we rise once more to the fullness of our identity—shaped and formed and named from the very depths of a heart of love. And we are God's new creation rising anew. Rising to live in relationship with the land, with all creation, with one another, and with the God who walks daily with and in our humanity in the splendour and abundance of love, connection, belonging, identity. In the splendour and abundance of life rooted deep in the soil, rooted deep in love and big enough to house God's dream of life for all.

It is a beautiful, hopeful beginning and beginning again; and once more our humanity is defined. Defined in the life and love and breath and imagination of our Creator God, who calls us once more. Calls us, names us *Adam of adamah*, the ones who rise, who are shaped and formed from the dust of the ground. Thanks be to God! Amen!