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THE GULF, THE SELF, AND GOD

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Recently I was asked for an appropriate prayer for the environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, one that could be shared with others. In that asking, I learned about a proposal for prayer which bears all the hallmarks of New Age eco-mysticism. Mr or Ms. K. R. Garland, of an organization bearing the very New Age name of "InnerConnections" ("A BodyMind [sic] Approach to Balance * Harmony * Direction"), reports that a certain "Dr. Masaru Emoto" - whose "research revealed that water physically responds to emotions" - has proposed that those angry about the harm done the Gulf recite this "prayer": "I send the energy of love and gratitude to the water and all the living creatures in the Gulf of Mexico and its surroundings. To the whales, dolphins, pelicans, fish, shellfish, planktons, corals, algae, and all living creatures I am sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you. "

One can hardly object to an expression of love, gratitude, and (where warranted) repentance to other creatures - but the claim to "send the energy of love and gratitude to the water and all the living creatures..." is grandiose. Mr. (or Ms?) Garland tells us that this "prayer" is designed "to set an intention of love and healing that is so large, so overwhelming[,] that we can perform a miracle in the Gulf of Mexico. We are not powerless. We are powerful. Our united energy ... can literally shift the balance of destruction that is happening. We don't have to know how we just have to recognize that the power of love is greater than any power active in the Universe today. ... Let's take charge, and do our own clean up!"

Logic requires that a prayer be addressed to a deity who has power to save. If the creatures of the Gulf of Mexico are in trouble, as they are, clearly they are not (individually or collectively) a deity who can be of help - otherwise they would be helping themselves. But it is perfectly clear that the deity whose power is invoked is none other than the people reciting the prayer: "we can perform a miracle", "we are powerful", "let's take charge". This is not so much prayer, as an incantation of the all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful Self - the god to whom we turn in place of God. Yet is the Self really capable of taking the place of God? Can it sustain and regenerate the order of creation, either natural or spiritual? And does not this turn to the Self not open us to self-deluding narcissism - or worse still, a pride that acknowledges nothing greater than itself? We do owe a debt of love, gratitude, and yes, repentance, to our fellow creatures - but does our

hope for creation's renewal lie in this exaltation of the Self? "Humble yourselves beneath the mighty hand of God" – the hand that delivers the whole creation "from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" – "and he shall lift you up". Humility would seem a most appropriate stance for the human race, and Faith, not in itself, but in the Creator of heaven and earth: and our prayer might be of humble repentance for our sins, of humble hope in the power of his redeeming love, and yes, of humble petition that he would pour this same redeeming love into our hearts, that we might do his gracious will. Only thus can we begin to pay the debt of love to our fellow creatures.

So how shall we pray the disaster of the Gulf of Mexico? As with some many particulars, it is the repentance, hope, and charity which the liturgy as a whole expresses, that is our best prayer. But for something a bit more specific, you could do much worse than the Prayer "For Fruitful Seasons" (unique, I think, to the 1928 Prayer Book). It was probably not written with environmental disaster in mind, and yet, because it is based on biblical doctrine, it addresses all the different aspects of our relation to the natural creation – our dependence upon it, the harm we may do it, the renewal and healing we hope for it. (It is printed in the next column, with a few phrases in italics added to particularize the sea, and scriptural references in square brackets.)
GGD

The Rev'd Gaving G. Dunbar



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