

The Care of Creation as a Form of the Love of God and Neighbor

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Today is Earth Day Sunday at Grace. The title of the sermon is “The Care of Creation as a Form of the Love of God and Neighbor”. I am arranging it in the form of 15 sentences with a little elaboration of each. In them I will move from a theology of creation care to a spirituality of creation care to an ethic of creation care.

I

The world is the creation of a good God who blessed it and called it good.

Some forms of thought, ancient and modern, see the created world as evil or corrupt. Others think it as of little consequences. Others think of it as a blind accident of molecules. Some forms of Christianity divorce spirit from matter so completely that what happens to the world has no moral meaning. But matter *matters!*

Biblical faith maintains the goodness and blessedness of Creation. God is great and God is *green!*

II

God created humankind in the divine image, and called us to take care of Creation, that is, to love it as God loves it. Thus the care of Creation is a form of the love of God. The biblical word for this is *stewardship*. In the New Testament Greek the word is *oikomenos*, economics, house-hold economics which includes the whole world as the household of God. The Psalmist says, “The earth is the *Lord’s*”; it is not *ours*. We are its trustees, In other words, God wants *us* to be green!

III

We have the terrible and real freedom to care for or destroy the earth.

Pride, sloth and greed cause us to destroy it. Wendell Berry has written that the modern industrial economy is “founded on the seven deadly sins and the breaking of all ten of the Ten Commandments”. Such an industrial economy draws us in as accomplices in the murder of creation.

The created world and human life are so inter-connected. The destruction of the world is self-destruction. The prophet Isaiah saw it clearly:

The earth dries up and withers,

The earth languishes and withers;

The heavens languish together with the earth,

The earth lies polluted

Under its inhabitants;

For they have transgressed laws,

Violated the statutes,

Broken the everlasting covenant.

Therefore a curse devours the earth

And its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;

Therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,

And few people are left. (Isaiah 24:4-6)

As Wendell Berry put it: “Beware the justice of nature.” (From “The Futility of Global Thinking”.)

IV

Scripture has been used to justify the exploitation of nature, but in fact it has been misread and misused. The problem is our poor following of it.

Professor Lynn White has made the famous charge that the Bible and Christianity have caused the ecological crisis. He cites the words from Genesis where God calls us to “subdue” and “have dominion” over the earth and its creatures. But the Bible is clear: *We exercise our dominion under the dominion of God*, and God has in scripture given us clear instruction about our care of the earth. I like better the verbs of Genesis 2, the second creation story, where God sets us in a garden and calls us “to dress and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

(The most outrageous use of scripture I’ve seen is the citation of Isaiah 40:4 in a Kentucky Coal Mining Association Bulletin as a way to justifying strip-mining:

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain shall be made low.)

Professor Ellen Davis of Duke Divinity School is teaching us that the Bible is “greener” than we know. She calls Leviticus, “that green book.”

V

A Creation Spirituality begins in awe and wonder, then love and praise of creation. As the Psalmist cries out: “The heavens are telling the glory of God, and firmament declares God’s handiwork” (Psalm 19:1).

Poets lead the way, and I could quote all day. Like Hopkins' poem "Glory be to God for dappled things" and "The world is charged with the grandeur of God", which is a poem of praise *and* protest about how we've treated the world.

When Jesus said, "Consider the lilies", he was not just teaching us to trust in the goodness of God, but to glory in them and be considerate of their care.

VI

A Creation spirituality moves from the love and praise of creation to the care of creation, thus an ethic of creation care. As Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commands." So we love God by loving and caring for what God loves and cares for. Again, the care of creation is a form of the love of God.

VII

An ethic of creation care begins with love for the world. As Berry has written, "It all turns of affection." E.B. White, the famous writer, once said in a N.Y. Times interview:

...I arise every morning torn between the desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

A world not worth savoring is not worth saving. So let us do both, however hard it is to plan the day.

VIII

Care of creation is a form of self-care. The prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Hebrews exiled in Babylon, these words from God:

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

So seek the welfare of the air, the streams, the soil, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

IX

Care of creation is also a form of the love of neighbor. Ecological peril endangers the lives of every neighbor, especially, and first, the poor of the earth.

Wendell Berry wrote:

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament.

When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want. ¹

X

Global warming is a wakeup call to a world in ecological peril. We are like Noah and Mrs. Noah being warned about the coming flood. The difference is that God is not calling us to build an ark to save a few but to make the *world* an ark to save the many.

XI

The green revolution is calling us to a new way of thinking where ecological concerns are paramount. As atomic weapons caused us to think new political thoughts, the environmental crisis does as well. To quote the sage Samuel Johnson:

When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.

XII

We need a moral revolution as well, similar to the moral revolution in our thinking about slavery and women's emancipation.

This requires a stretching of the moral imagination to include those not-yet born, even generations away. Johns Hopkins foreign policy expert Michael Mandlebaum says:

This issue does not pit haves versus have-nots, but the present versus the future—today’s generation versus its kids and unborn grandchildren.

As Jesus stretched our moral imagination and expanded our view of neighbor to include all people, so we need to stretch our moral imagination to include the unborn.

XIII

An ethic of creation care thus blends urgency and spiritual patience.

The urgency is clear, if we can break through our psychological denial. But there’s the spiritual virtue of patience required. There is Something and Someone greater at work with us. We can be urgent without being frantic. God is with us for the long-haul.

I took a group to visit Wendell Berry and his wife Tanya a few years back. One of us asked if he ever gets overwhelmed by the magnitude of the issues, and what he does when this happens. He said, “I go to the fields.” That is where he renews his heart, mind, spirit. Then he added with a bit of whimsy quoting his environmentalist friend, Edward Abby; “Saving the world is a good part-time job!” As a full-time job it can do you in!” The important thing, says Berry, is “to last.” We are in it for the long haul, and God is with us in a this-wordly redemption.

XIV

Start small and start local. Don't wait for global solutions. Start with you, your home, your community, your church. Solar power, anyone? In his speech "The Futility of Global Thinking", Wendell Berry said to graduates:

Learn, therefore, to prefer small-scale elegance and generosity to large-scale greed, crudity and glamour.

Make a home. Help make a community. Be loyal to what you have made.

Put the interest of the community first.

Love your neighbors—not the neighbors you pick out, but the ones you have.

Love this miraculous world that we did not make, that is a gift to us.

As far as you are able make your lives dependent on your local place, neighborhood, and household...

Find work, if you can, that does no damage. Enjoy your work. Work well.

XV

Don't despair. Live by an ethic of witness rather than an ethic of consequence.

An ethic of consequence decides what to do based on likely success. *An Ethic of witness* acts upon what it believes is the right thing to do, without calculation of final success.

We act, then trust God with the future, for as Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock, it is Abba's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

1. Wendell Berry, "The Gift of Good Land", *the Art of The Commonplace* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 2000), p. 304