

“WE PROTECT WHAT WE LOVE”

Genesis 1:1-2:3; Matthew 6:25-33

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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**Earth Sunday
(Fourth Sunday of Easter)**

In the early years of my ministry when I served a church in Baltimore, one of my favorite things to do in my off hours was to go to the Inner Harbor and, there, to the National Aquarium. Because I never had been a deep sea diver - in fact, not much of a swimmer at all - the Aquarium offered a world I could not anywhere else inhabit. Today, thirty years later, what I most remember about those visits is not any particular exhibit because they all were glorious. But a large sign in the entrance foyer displayed a quotation from Jacques Cousteau, the French conservationist and underwater explorer, I've never forgotten. I haven't been back to the Aquarium since the early '90s so I have no idea whether or not the sign remains, though I hope it does. It read, "*We protect what we love.*"

On Earth Sunday 2018, that seems to me an apt way of encouraging care and concern for the earth and environment. Cousteau was right. *We protect what we love.* Parents who love their children do anything they can to protect them. The normally affable Kelly, for instance, turns fierce and ferocious when she talks about the dangers Cora will face as she grows up. People who love historical buildings protect them. They obtain official designations so that nothing nefarious can be done to them. People who love their pets go to great lengths to protect them. On one of my three-milers on a cold early morning this week, I saw a dog being walked who had a better coat on than I did. People who love their prejudices protect them, too. *We protect what we love.*

The earth is imperiled largely because people haven't loved it enough. We love other things more. We love our profits and portfolios, our comforts and conveniences, our rationalizations and the myth of futility we tell ourselves. We convince ourselves that nothing we might do to benefit the earth really matters because the ecological problems are so immense and out of our control that it's pointless even to try, and so we don't.

That is not how we treat the things we love. Parents who love their children will give their lives for them if such is required to protect them. People who love the mighty redwood trees chain themselves to those magnificent giants to protect them from clearcutters and developers. People who love their favorite sports team will protect its honor and dignity even when the team is hopelessly bad. (Phillies fans have been doing that for years!) We protect what we love.

Our environment is endangered, the climate is changing precipitously, the floods and fires and droughts are intensifying because we have not loved the earth enough. We protect what we love.

Trying to scare or to move me with ugly numbers and frightening statistics of how badly the earth is polluted and how fractured our eco-systems have become and how close we are to the tipping point from which there is no return from the brink of unsustainability is not a good tactic to get me to change my "eco" behavior. It paralyzes me. I feel overwhelmed. Though science tells truth, fear in this instance is not an efficacious motivator for me.

But give me a good theological kick-in-the-backside and I am spurred and induced to act, as when the psalmist proclaims, "*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof*"¹ or "*You cannot love God whom you cannot see if you do not love your brothers and sisters you can see.*"² In the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi and many others through the centuries who have talked of "Brother Sun and Sister Moon" and "Brother Air and Sister Water" and "Brother Fire,"³ the earth is not an inanimate object. It's no coincidence we speak of "Mother Nature." It is lush and alive, fecund and fruitful, spiritual and generous and thus the earth needs our protection, nurture, and love no less than we do. We protect what we love.

If we could discover again our love for the earth we would protect it and help it to recover and become healthy again. We do that, I think, by rediscovering our love for God, our gratitude, our praise. Our morning psalm today is so beautiful. Let all the creatures and all living things

¹ Psalm 24:1

² 1 John 4:20

³ "Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon" by St. Francis of Assisi

on earth like a great chorus sing together, “Praise the Lord!”⁴ Maybe we find again our love for God and earth by remembering the earth is not ours to do with as we will but a sublime and ineffable *gift* for the *living* of our days and not the demise of them.

There is a huge swath of people in the world who blame the present condition of the earth on the Judeo-Christian tradition and its sometimes stupefying reading of the latter part of Genesis 1 that says: “*God blessed humankind that God had made and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’*”⁵

No one fairly can read the whole sweep of scripture and then read in that passage any possible warrant to overpopulate or decimate the earth as those with greedy and selfish intentions would like us to read it. Even within the creation story itself it doesn’t make sense to read it that way. Even in a creation myth, as the Genesis account is, God would not in the same breath pronounce the creation to be “very good” and concurrently encourage a strategy of plundering and polluting it. Genesis is not science nor is it meant to be license. It is our faith story meant to tell us three things about our origins: (1) God created the earth. (2) God created the earth for our benefit, blessing, and delight. (3) Be grateful for it, love it, and take care of it.

To think of “dominion” as dominance or subjugation is a gross misreading. God gave Christ dominion over us but how did he exercise his dominion? By taking the form of a servant.⁶ By giving himself for our sakes. By loving us. The qualities most often used to describe Jesus are humility, hospitality, compassion, joy. They give us our clues to how we are to exercise dominion in the earth. If we do not care for the earth in the spirit with which Christ cares for us, how can the earth ever again come to the full expression of what God created it to be?

We protect what we love. Isn’t it time to love the earth again, friends? The earth with all of its beauty and bounty. The earth with all of its largesse and loveliness. The earth with its capacity to provide the bread of wonder and the wine of celebration. The earth with its means to feed, to clothe, to house, to inspire, to heal, to warm, to sustain, to nurture, and even to entertain.

Several important theological writers have called the earth “God’s body”⁷ and by it they refer to the creation’s ability to minister the care, wisdom, and presence of God to us. How many of us have felt the presence of God in nature? The gospels often picture Jesus pointing to the earth and its creatures to teach us about the wisdom and peace of God, as in our reading today:

⁴ Psalm 148:1,2,3,4,5,7,13,14

⁵ Genesis 1:28

⁶ Philippians 2:7

⁷ Sallie McFague, for instance

“I tell you, do not worry about your life...Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet they eat...Can any of you by worrying add even a single hour to your span of life?...Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you that not even King Solomon arrayed in all his glory was clothed as one of these. But if God so clothes the flowers of the field...will he not much more clothe you?”

Someone asked me this week that if I had to sum up the message of scripture in a single sentence, what would it be? I shy away from those questions because things rarely are as simple as people want to make them. And it is no less the case with scripture. But, if I really had to do it, I would say, “It’s all about love.” If we love those who are financially poor, for example, we who are privileged will not pass legislation that is stacked against them or reduce their food and health benefits or bury them in our judgments. We will talk with them and ask them what they need and how we can help and then advocate for them and make laws that aid them. We would befriend them and help to open doors of opportunity for them.

Just so, if we love the earth, we will make the effort and take the time to uncover what we are doing individually and as nations of people that is deleterious and detrimental and amend our ways. We will coax, cajole, and call for our political leaders to make laws and rules - as Franklin Kury⁸ whom you will meet in a moment did - that benefit the earth first of all and not the corporations. We will hold the earth in our hearts and refuse to compromise its well-being for our own selfish gains and interests. We will care for it and pray for it and savor it.

I have no doubt that when Jesus told his followers to “*do unto others as you would have them do unto you,*”⁹ he was including the earth in his community of beneficiaries and mutual respect. When we think of all that God provides to us through the earth without our even asking for it - water, air, soil, elements, minerals, food, beauty, and so much more - would that we begin to treat the earth as well as it does us.

Here are two key questions the answers to which may determine the future of our global home? Can we love the earth in the measure it loves us? How will you love the earth?

The Book of Psalms concludes with a series of psalms, of which our psalm today is the flagship, profuse in their praise of our Creator God who expresses love for us through God’s

⁸ Franklin Kury is the Pennsylvania legislator who wrote and pushed for the successful adoption of the Environmental Rights Amendment to be added to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s Constitution. The amendment is appended to the end of this sermon.

⁹ Luke 6:31

creation. When we rightly love God, we cannot help but love what God has made for it all is part and parcel of God's great oneness.

We protect what we love. It is time and beyond time for us to rekindle our love for the earth and, by extension, for all who live herein.

We protect what we love.

Amen.

APPENDIX: Pennsylvania's Environmental Rights Amendment:

"The people have a right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic, and aesthetic values of the environment. Pennsylvania's public natural resources are the common property of all of the people, including generations yet to come. As trustee of these resources, the Commonwealth shall conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all the people."