

“What on God’s Green Earth?”

Genesis 1-2:4a, 2:15; Job 12:7-10; Luke 12:6-7

Last week I got into some silly discussions about why certain things and animals were created, and what use they are anyhow. The idea was that there were some things we would like to ask God, if we ever get the chance, why God made these things, and do they have any purpose. One lady had the idea of germs. My question is about fire ants—do they serve any purpose? Still another “questioned species” was snakes, and another tobacco—maybe it should be used for stuffing pillows, maybe we have gotten it wrong.

But you know, all of those questions are just a bit arrogant. All of them are from the point of view, “What’s in it for me?” “How can these things be used to help us?” It is the attitude that we are the most important of all of Creation, and all the questions were based on ourselves.

So, maybe, we, the human beings, have turned out to be God’s most troublesome creations. (You know, it would be pretty scary if it thundered just now.)

Human beings are pretty self-centered. That has always been one of our tendencies. Even the Bible stories, from time to time, have been interpreted in such a fashion, with human beings as the star, rather than God.

The story of Creation is one such example. By the way, I was reading that from a version of the Bible you may not be as familiar with, The Message. And if you read on, there is yet a second Creation story, right after that one. We will never lack for them!

The story of Creation has sometimes been taken as meaning that all of the world, with all of its beauties and wonders, has been given to Adam and Eve and all people since, to do with as they will—including trashing it!

Well, that’s not the case. Adam and Eve were supposed to be in charge of taking care of Creation, enjoying it, using it properly.

I don’t know who came up with that selfish understanding, but shame on them! It almost sounds like the birthday party of an incredibly spoiled rotten child, who opens each present and immediately destroys each one.

Gifts are given to be enjoyed and cherished, not destroyed. We all know that.

Yet, we haven’t done a very good job with this wonderful gift from God, the gift of Creation.

Part of the problem may be that we don’t think things through. This has been quite a problem in our country because it is so big, we get the idea that we can’t hurt it. Or to quote Manuel G. Velasquez (author of Business Ethics: Concepts and Cases):

“ . . . businesses have seen the environment as an *unlimited* good. That is, the ‘carrying capacity’ of air and water is relatively large, and each firm’s contribution of pollution to these resources is relatively small and insignificant. The amount of chemicals (the company) was dumping into the Gulf (of Mexico), for example, might be relatively small compared to the size of the Gulf and the effects viewed as being negligible. When the effects of its activities are seen as so slight, a firm will tend to ignore these effects. However, when *every* firm reasons in this way, the combined ‘negligible’ effects of each firm’s activities may become enormous, and potentially disastrous. The carrying capacity of the air and water is soon exceeded and these ‘free’ and ‘unlimited’ goods rapidly deteriorate.”

The Methodist church has a principle that would work very well, to correct such thinking. In fact, we just were studying it in a class lately.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, came up with 3 General Rules, and yes, they are in effect, even now, for the church.

Rule #1—Do no harm.

Rule #2—Do good.

Rule #3—Attend upon the ordinances of God, or put in more modern terms, do all you can to stay in a loving relationship with God.

It's Rule #1 we need to look at right now: Do no harm. It's only three words, but it is the hardest one. It requires us to think, and think hard. It requires us to take responsibility for our actions, and be willing to make changes and sacrifices. It requires us to deal with the consequences of what we do.

How this fits into the problem of pollution and ecological concerns—or as the video put it, the Care of Creation, is that we think and learn about what we do, and the effects of what we do, and try to be of help.

I can't say that John Wesley, back in the 1700's was worried about the environment, in the 21st century. He wasn't. When he talked about doing no harm, he gave out some different prohibitions.

“When Wesley composed the General Rules for the societies, bands, and classes of the early Methodist movement, he listed some examples of harm to avoid. (Bishop Reuben) Job describes them as sounding ‘quaint and dated’ to our ears . . . Twenty-first-century Christians may be surprised at how many of these ways of doing harm have an economic dimension—working on Sunday, buying and selling on Sunday, slaveholding, not paying sales taxes, participating in usury (lending money at unlawful or exorbitant rates), wearing expensive clothing or jewelry, buying or selling distilled alcohol.

Some of these are about harm done to our relationship with God and with other people, and some are about both. Wesley's list represents what he saw, and much of it was about harm to the poor. Using sources of knowledge available to him in the 18th century, Wesley looked for the root causes of poverty and saw that the shift from an agrarian economy to an industrial one was part of the problem. Britain has fenced off common land. Small farmers were getting poorer while the wealthy were getting richer from agriculture. Unskilled workers left the countryside in search of jobs in the city, sometimes to no avail. Households in the country suffered from lack of income while the increased number of unskilled workers in cities drove down wages. Some of these ways of doing harm were related to the indulgences and luxuries of the rich. Spending money on unnecessary items was a stewardship issue. Resources that could have helped the poor were often wasted by those who had money. The use of distilled alcohol and the number of horses owned by the wealthy were driving up the price of grain. Wesley saw these factors as robbing the poor.” (Three Simple Rule for Christian Living by Jeanne Torrence Finley)

In the recent past, we have followed the do no harm rule by not buying things made and produced in certain countries, like South Africa, before apartheid was dismantled there.

Now, carry that Rule on, into the ecological problems of pollution of water, air, and land, and the destruction of animal and plant species. We'll have to ask ourselves, ‘What things are we doing, as a church and as individuals which are causing harm to God's creation? And ‘What can we do differently?’

Well, we know the answer. It's been drilled into us, the three R's: Reduce, Re-use, Recycle. And let's add a fourth—Remember. Remember that you have a cloth bag in the car for your purchases.

--Don't use as much stuff, especially disposable stuff.

--Re-use what we can.

--And recycle whatever we can recycle.

It takes some and time and effort. We may even need to wash out some real coffee cups. But that's okay, coffee tastes better without that Styrofoam touch anyway. And if you like the taste of Styrofoam, you are in luck, it never degrades.

Some people may be wondering why "on God's green earth" this is a topic for a sermon. And yes, I have been called a tree-hugger before. That is okay, I can take it.

Well, the church has taken a stance on this, as an issue that affects God's Creation, and how we live.

Strangely enough, there is actually opposition, not just neutrality, but opposition to the care of the earth, by Christians no less! Here is how the book The Phoenix Affirmations, by Eric Elnes put it, in a conversation between Jake and a pastor

" 'I just don't get how you can be so concerned about the environment when you're a Christian minister,' asked Jake. . . . 'Isn't that, like, a major break with Christianity? Aren't you leading people away from their faith?'

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, the Bible commands humans to subdue the earth and have dominion over it, and Christians have been doing so for thousands of years. That's why we have so much environmental devastation today. I had some Christian friends in college who went to some sort of Christian conference or rally once and came back all concerned. . . . They said the environmental movement is part of a satanic plot to divert people's attention from the spiritual world to the material world. They said environmentalists are just secular humanists trying to case doubt on God's power to provide for our needs by suggesting that the earth's resources are limited. When I tried showing them the hard facts about the state of the environment, they changed their tune and said that they world isn't going to last much longer anyhow. They said Jesus is going to come back and take believers out of this world. "Christians are here to play, not to say," they said.' The pastor disagreed. 'Jesus told his disciples that no one knew the day or the hour he'd return—not even Jesus himself.' . . .

Jake saw the point immediately. 'Those college friends of mine . . . didn't care about conservation because they were so sure Jesus would arrive any day!'

What if Jesus doesn't return for another thousand years or so? I wonder how they'd feel about "Here to play, not to stay" then!'

'Jesus has stern words for those who assume they know more about God's timing than even he does,' (answered the pastor.) . . . just as it's foolish to assume that Jesus is coming back the day after tomorrow and thus give up on the environment, it's also unwise in my view to assume that the environment will be destroyed the day after tomorrow and thus give up on Jesus. Both the earth and the Christian faith may very well be around a lot longer than any of us think. It's best to invest our energy in bringing them into harmony with one another while we still can.'

Now, I don't know who these folks were that had the young man, Jake, so misled. I do know how easy it is to get led astray, by our own selves and our own laziness.

I know because on Monday afternoon, after I wrote most of this sermon, something happened to me. I bought a cup of coffee, in a paper cup, with a plastic lid and a cardboard sleeve to protect against the heat. After I finished drinking it, I really wanted to throw that cup and lid and sleeve away, in a trash can, and never have to bother with it again. I didn't want to keep on carrying it.

But, I figured I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did that. I certainly wouldn't be able to preach this sermon with any integrity. I would have to write a whole new sermon, and we can't have that!

So, I held on to all that stuff, took it home, got it all ready for recycling, which I did on Friday morning. It was not that big a deal. It did not kill me. It just felt like it, for some reason.

What I would invite us all to do is to take a bit more time to thank God for our beautiful Creation, and take the time and effort to take good care of it.

Amen.

By Rev. Sally J. DeMasters