

April 25, 2010

Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski

Earth Day: As Big As Christmas and Easter

Psalm 24.1-2; Acts 4.32-35

There is a family in this church who reads these words from Chief Seattle to their children every Earth Day:

“Teach your children what we have taught our children –

That the earth is our mother.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.

If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.

This we know.

The earth doesn't belong to us, we belong to the earth.

This we know.

All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.

All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth

Befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.

We do not weave the web of life,

We are merely a strand in it.

Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.”

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, says there are two ways of relating: I – It where the “other” is an object to be used for our benefit. It is certainly clear how we can treat other people in terms of how they can best serve our needs or make us happy.

Buber says the other way of relating is I-Thou where we treat the other as sacred and holy. What a difference it makes in relationships when we see and treat others as children of God, with respect and reverence. I often say the most important

question we can ask is, “Do others feel important, valued in our presence?”

What would change if we approached our relationship with the earth in the same way? Instead of an “it”, an “object” to be used for our purposes and pleasure, our greed, what if the earth was a sacred thou, holy, to be revered and we asked ourselves, does the earth feel valued in our presence? The earth doesn’t belong to us. The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.

A book I highly recommend is Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Leaving Church*, although don’t take the title literally. The book reflects on her decision to leave the life of a parish priest in the Episcopal Church for a new life of teaching and writing. The move involved a new place to live – a move to the country. When they found just the right spot, with oak trees and trillium and elderberry, persimmon and blackberry and milkweed and water, she says, “I found my place on earth.”

And then , as she does so exquisitely, she reflects theologically. She wrote,

“I know plenty of people who find God most reliably in books, in buildings, and even in other people. I have found God in all these places, too, but the most reliable meeting place for me has always been the creation.

I have always known where to go when my own flame was guttering. To lie with my back flat on the fragrant ground is to receive a transfusion of that same power that makes the green blade rise.

To remember that I am dirt and to dirt I shall return is to be given my life back again.

Where other people see acreage, timber and soil, and river frontage, I see God's body...

The Creator does not live apart from creation...when I take a breath, God's Holy Spirit enters me." (p.79-80)

I-Thou.

The Bible tells us that, on the sixth day of creation, God surveyed the earth. God examined the skies, the oceans, the mountains, the forests, the streams, the high desert, the rolling plains. God laughed at the centipede, the tumbleweed, the scampering puppy and at the platypus. God rejoiced in the apple blossom, the tadpole, the glacier and the glorious configuration of wrinkles and neurons that made up the human brain.

God saw all that God had made and saw that it was "Tov Ma -Ov" a Hebrew word we have feebly translated as very good. A more accurate translation is to say God looked upon creation and saw that it was 'Wow!!!' Or, better yet, no words were said because God was speechless, overcome by the sacredness of creation and saw creation as something to be loved, appreciated, cared for, and celebrated.

And, what's even more amazing is that God gave us the job of expressing that love and awe and reverence and care.

The earth is not a commodity to be consumed (an "it" an object for our greed) but a sacred community we all belong to and share and have been entrusted to care for...a sacred gift God loves and asks us to love as well...a "Thou".

Mark Brocker was here last year and offered a workshop on Earth Stewardship and suggested it is time to add a fourth quadrant to the great commandment – There is love of God, Love of Neighbor and Love of Self...and we need to add a fourth...Love of Creation. All four are interrelated and connected.

Seeing the earth as a sacred Thou and worthy of our love is foundational to our faith. The Psalmist wrote, “The heavens are telling the Glory of God...the firmament of the earth proclaims God’s handiwork.” The Psalmist wrote, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

The creation tells us something of the Creator. God is revealed in nature. We meet the Creator in creation. The “Holy Earth” is what poet Wendell Berry calls it.

Living in Central Oregon, you don’t have to look very hard to see and meet God...the grandeur of the mountains, the beauty of the high desert and the life-giving waters of our rivers and lakes. Look around...’Tov Ma – Ov” ...Wow!!!

I actually think Earth Day should become an official church celebration – Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and Earth Day because this sense of reverence and awe is so foundational to our faith.

William Sloan Coffin said that the modern world has unfortunately divorced creation from Creator. As civilization has supposedly advanced, this sense of wonder and awe, reverence and respect, this love for all of creation has declined. And our souls are the poorer for it and the Holy Earth is clearly and painfully suffering. God created an amazing creation and left us as stewards, caretakers...asked us to treat the earth as a sacred Thou...to care for and value and love the Holy Earth.

Have you ever considered in the Divine design of things that is why we are here in the first place...to love creation as much as God loves creation?

Perhaps that's our first calling and our holiest vocation as people of faith...to be good stewards and care for God's Holy Earth. Caring for the Earth is not an option for people of faith. It's not an elective course we might consider if it interests us. Maybe God is suggesting it is one of the very reasons we are here in the first place.

Caring for the earth is not some radical "green" thing for tree huggers – it's the responsibility and privilege of every single one of us as people of faith.

God loves the world and asks us to love the world as well. I am convinced that in order to save and heal the planet, we must first love it! . . . recover a sense of reverence.

The creation that caused God to exclaim, "Tov Ma-Ov"...that God loves so much...that God is present in...is groaning and in need of love.

Eric Reece said the root of modern sin is that we simply do not love the world enough. We fall far short of the commandment to love God because we do not love the world God created enough. Love of God – love of neighbor- love of self - love of creation – all connected...all one web.

Do we love enough...the I-Thou kind of love?

I will be the first to admit that I am on a steep learning curve when it comes to cherishing God's Holy Earth. I will be the first to

admit that I have made those easy changes in my lifestyle, those easy changes that don't inconvenience me a whole lot. It's not that difficult to recycle, to change the light bulbs you use, to turn the heat down and the lights off, to bring a mug to church. If we're honest, these things make a difference but don't ask that much of us.

But, I think of the relationships in my life, it's easy to love the people in my life when it doesn't call for much sacrifice or inconvenience on my part. But, am I loving enough...am I loving as they need to be loved or loving in the way I am comfortable loving?

The love of God revealed in Jesus is a sacrificial love...a love that is willing to put the needs of the other above your own. In our reading today from the Book of Acts, it says they gave witness to power of resurrection, the Spirit of Christ was present among them, one of the ways this was evident was they didn't have any sense of "mine", any sense of "ownership", any I-It where people were objected to be used for their own purposes. In fact, they belonged to each other, they shared and no one was in need. The love reflected in Jesus is a love that risks for the other...a love that hurts when the other hurts...a love that sacrifices...a love that sacrifices and reaches where others refuse to love . . . no one was in need.

As we think about our holy vocation to love creation, is it reflective of God's love revealed in Jesus?

Do I put the needs of creation above my own wants? Am I willing to be inconvenienced and change my lifestyle, my patterns of consumption for the love of the earth? Am I willing to risk being an advocate for God's fragile Holy Earth and protect those places that are being, abused, neglected, destroyed.

Do I love enough?

You can't do everything.

But every one can do one thing to love God's Holy Earth a little more and the one thing we can do we must do.

A young boy and his grandfather spent their days together, as was their custom. The old man spent much of his time teaching the boy to hunt, fish, and make things, and to do it all in a sacred way. He taught him how to walk up this holy earth with respect and reverence.

One day the grandfather said to the boy, "We will change the course of a mighty river."

The boy was filled with wonder, for he knew his grandfather was a great man and could do great things. But the course of a great river? Who could do such a thing?

As they approached the river, the boy's heart leapt as he imagined the course of the river being changed. When they got to the bank of the river, the old man reached down into the water and picked out a rock about the size of a melon. The boy watched as the hole that the rock left began to fill with water, and in that moment he understood that, in some small way, his grandfather had indeed changed the course of a mighty river.

The old man looked at the boy with a twinkle in his eye and said, "This is the way the great river is changed. One rock at a time. It is the duty and privilege of every one to change the course of rivers.

Every action that you do, every word that you say will affect or change the course of a person's life...will affect or change the course of the world. Keep on changing the course of rivers, little one." (Thanks to Ian Lawton for this story)

Think about your love of creation. Is your love big enough? Think of the rocks you've already been picking up? Is there another rock you can pick up and if you aren't strong enough to pick up a rock the size of a melon, pick up a pebble.

May we live with a love so large and so practical rocks are moved and we do indeed change the course of history for the better that God might once again be moved to exclaim, "Tov Ma-Ov"!