

Thanksgiving: Stewardship of the Earth
Genesis 2: 4a-15
October 12, 2014

We have been witnessing and hearing a lot about the call for action on climate change. Greta Thunberg, the teenage Swedish girl, has led the youth call for action. All over the world, and especially in the West, thousands have marched and voiced their concern about the effects of global warming on our planet. Whether we accept their view that the planet is warming and that disaster lies ahead, you have to sit up and pay attention to their voices. Perhaps it is time for us to be reminded of our responsibility as Christians to be stewards of the earth.

What does it mean to be a steward? I had an uncle who was a steward on one of the liners that sailed out of Southampton, England. His job was to ensure that meals were served properly to the guests and crew. He probably also oversaw the cleaning of officers quarters. There were also stewards on trains and on airlines. Stewards also served on estates, in large households like Downton Abbey. By and large these stewards served the needs of those under their care. But the biblical understanding of stewardship has a much richer, diverse meaning.

What better Sunday than thanksgiving to look again at our responsibility to fulfill our calling as stewards of the earth, a calling given by the creator at the beginning of Genesis story. The creation mandate given to Adam and Eve is set out in the creation narratives of Genesis. The second creation story of Genesis 2 tells us that one of the first things God did was to create a garden where the first family were to live. We notice that the trees that grew there were pleasing to both the eye and to the stomach. Their fruit was mouth watering and pleasing to look at. God had an eye for beauty. In the middle of the Garden of Eden were gorgeous trees, plants and streams. God put our first parents into this paradise, not just to enjoy, but also to look after it. We are told that Adam was to *till and keep* it. The Hebrew word for “till” generally refers to the service a slave offers to a master. And the word “keep” means to preserve for future generations. So the ***creation***

mandate given to Adam, and to each one of us, asks the human family to **serve and preserve** what God has created.

On Wednesday four of us enjoyed the diversity and colour of the Flamboro Hills golf course. Red, green, gold colour are beginning to emerge and all under a blue sky. Such a pity we spoiled the experience by hitting a white ball into all the wrong places. But seriously how can we not celebrate the majesty and wonder of God's creation!

In the first creation story we notice that God also gives us a creation mandate. In Genesis one God gives humankind dominion over creation. We are to look after the fish, the birds, and the animals. To have **dominion** doesn't mean putting our needs first. We have been conditioned to think that we are in control. It is all about us! And in practice that is often the pattern we follow. We think we have been given permission to exploit creation, its creatures, its rivers, its seas, its forests, its hidden treasures buried deep below the surface (oil, gas, gold, etc). But this is to misuse the text.

The dominion God gives in Genesis one is similar to the story of Genesis two. The word means **to take responsibility for**. God's intention for us is to ensure the well being of all that lives and breathes in the garden called earth. Indeed, one could argue that the principle reason for our creation is to be the stewards of the garden, to care for it, to manage it and to be responsible for it. To be human is to be a steward, according to the biblical story. Caring for creation is our primary reason for being. We are caretakers of earth. We are called to serve and preserve.

But we ask, what has this emphasis got to do with the spiritual emphasis of our New Testament? That is a good question! Let me suggest why we have failed to balance the spiritual and physical in our Christian understanding. How easily we forget that God loves the physical universe.

Part of the reason for our neglect of the Old Testament is found in the **dualism** we impose on the New Testament. We learned this way of interpreting the bible and life from the powerful Platonic tradition that runs through the first four centuries of church history. And it remains a powerful means of interpretation of Scripture today. So, when "dualism" is used it

nowadays often means: “an extreme Platonist division between body and soul that is alien to Biblical thought.”

Such thinking leads us to read the Gospels and Paul through Platonist eyes forcing many of our churches to play down the Old Testament’s delight in the earth and the physical. So that **dualism**, or separating the spiritual and the physical, is the eyeglasses we tend to put on when we read the bible. It has led us neglect our Jewish cousins emphasis on the earthiness of God’s creation. The Psalmist was not so easily misled. She revels in God’s delightful creation. Listen again to her rhapsody to God’s activity and delight in the creation.

*You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.
(Psalm 104:10-15)*

As Christians we need to recover some of this reverence for creation. We need to echo more of our Jewish cousin’s theology that is rooted in the earth. It is the earthiness of the Old Testament that has all but disappeared from our Christian discourse. We have focused, perhaps too exclusively, on the spirituality that is at the centre of our New Testament. We forget too quickly that our Lord was steeped in the Jewish scriptures and had a profound love for the earthiness of its witness. It is not surprising, for example, that Jesus draws many of his spiritual teaching from the diversity and beauty of the world he observed so closely.

We are to serve and preserve the garden called earth as God’s stewards.. Ultimately it’s not ours at all. That’s a hard concept to accept in our consumer culture. We worked for it; we saved for our future; and you say it’s not really mine. Well not really! We are simply the stewards. It has been put in our care to look after.

The little gospel reading we had today is usually thought of in spiritual terms. Jesus tells us:

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

Just for today at least let us think of this in terms of our stewardship of the earth. Instead of interpreting salt of the earth and light of the world to refer to our spiritual goodness flowing out in preserving and illuminating power for all to feel and see. Let's think of this passage rather as our responsibility to serve God and neighbour, and, in so doing, preserving the creation for our children, and grandchildren. Salt preserves meat when there are no refrigerators. Light clarifies who we are and who God is. We are to be salt and light in the world. Or we are to be God's faithful stewards who look after creation, including our neighbour, and serve to preserve the goodness of the created order. When we fully grasp our responsibility as stewards of all God's garden, our possessions, our very existence, then we finally are able to express the great doxology. We can sing with the Psalmist:

May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works—who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord. (Psalm 104:31-34)

Amen