

Sermon 4-27-25

It is an honor to be standing here, trusted to speak and hopefully inspire my family of faith here at FPC. Today we recognize earth care and the importance of earth justice. It is also Immigration Justice Sunday, when we turn our attention to our siblings in Christ who find themselves wondering if they will be separated from their families due to unjust immigration practices. It's a tall order for a rookie, so grace is appreciated as I attempt to do justice to these timely topics.

The Green Team has been instrumental in providing ideas for how to preserve the earth's resources. Not that environmental awareness is a new topic: when I was a little girl I was the proud owner of a t-shirt with a picture of Woodsy Owl and his catch phrase "Give a hoot, don't pollute." And if you're my age or thereabouts, you might remember the ad campaign "Keep America Beautiful," featuring an actor in Native American garb with a tear running down his cheek as he watched thoughtless people throw trash out of their cars. Both Woodsy Owl and Keep America Beautiful date back to the early 1970's...and yet here we are. Same message, different era. We are slow learners.

It's not that we didn't receive direction on this topic. The Bible is full of references to the planet and its goodness, starting with the book of Genesis which describes the process by which God created the heavens and the earth. After only a few days of work (granted they were God-sized days), He had created a perfect planet filled with every plant and animal imaginable. Not only did He create the earth with everything necessary and functional, he also provided for beauty and wonder. Trees that blaze with color in the fall, birds with bright colors and elaborate songs. All of creation comes from God's hands, and it is good.

When it comes to Jesus' teaching and earth care He didn't really get into specifics. He does frequently refer to seeds and growth in His parables because they were familiar references to listeners 2,000 years ago as well as today. Whether it's a mustard seed or seed falling on good soil, or fruit trees bearing fruit or crops being gleaned after harvest: drawing comparisons to earth and its resources means we can relate and understand.

What Jesus did talk extensively about was the importance of caring for people. When we care for the earth, we're really caring for the people who live on it. When we advocate for clean water and air, we are advocating for people. When we recycle and avoid mowing our lawns for a month, plant prairies, and drink coffee from reusable

mugs, we have the long game in mind: preservation of the planet for the people who live on it.

Jesus was particularly concerned with people living in the margins. As a Matthew 25 church, we have committed to put actions behind our words and bring justice and safety to those who need it most. Jesus spells it out very clearly: anything we do for His people, we do for Him. Specifically, providing food, water, clothing, and shelter. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink of water, I was naked and you clothed me, I was lonely in prison and you came to visit me.” Well, maybe we did, and maybe we didn’t.

Our human existence impacts the perfect creation God made. Climate change, by whatever name we call it, is real, and people living in poverty are disproportionately affected by it. According to data provided by Mercy Corps, an organization dedicated to helping those affected by climate change, “people already burdened by poverty and oppression often suffer the harshest consequences, while having the least ability to cope. The increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events like hurricanes, wildfires, and droughts threaten lives in these front-line communities, driving people from their homes and jeopardizing food sources and livelihoods. All of these effects increase the likelihood of more conflict, hunger, and poverty.”

The climate crisis discriminates. Mercy Corps states that 3 out of 4 people living in poverty rely on agricultural and natural resources to survive. When climate change places stress on the environment, it puts people’s lives at risk by creating shortages of basic necessities like food and water. And when families don’t have access to basic necessities, they are forced to go in search of them. Natural disasters, rising seas, and loss of livelihood are strong factors for many to seek refuge elsewhere. They become refuge seekers. Refugees. What starts as an earth problem becomes a people problem very quickly, and Jesus did not stutter when He told us to care for those in need.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina changed the Gulf Coast of the United States forever. Thousands of homes were destroyed, lives were lost, and landscapes were permanently altered. Congressional Research Service reports indicate that “the three states primarily impacted by the hurricane were already among the poorest in the nation with a poverty rate of 21%, and Katrina likely made these areas even poorer. Before the storm, the 700,000 people acutely affected by Katrina were more likely than Americans overall to be poor, minority, less likely to be connected to a workforce, and more likely to be educationally disadvantaged.” Long story short, few resources to draw on when the crisis came crashing down on them. Allegations of racism ran rampant at the slowness of the government’s response to the urgent needs of the communities most severely

affected by the storm: communities predominantly made up of low-income people of color.

“I was thirsty and you gave me a drink of water.” Of course the water Jesus wants us to share with our neighbors is clean and safe, but is that always the case? The Natural Resources Defense Council states that in 2014 the city of Flint, Michigan changed its drinking water supply from Detroit’s system to the Flint River to save money. Unfortunately measures were not taken to adequately treat the newly sourced water and a series of major water quality and health issues ensued. The water was foul-smelling, discolored, and off-tasting, causing some residents to experience skin rashes, hair loss, and itchy skin as well as elevated levels of lead in children.

According to the US Census Bureau, the poverty rate in Flint, Michigan is 34.4%, with black or African American individuals representing 57% of the population. It’s no wonder that the Michigan Civil Rights Commission concluded that the Flint crisis was a result of systemic racism. After 11 years the situation is better than it was but still not completely resolved.

Parents in Flint turned on their faucets to make formula for their babies and smelly, discolored water poured out. They made Kool-aid for their kids with that water. They cooked with that water, they washed their clothes in that water, and they bathed in that water. If we ask ourselves if this crisis would have occurred in some other geographical area with a different demographic, I think we know the answer. Can you even imagine this scenario happening in Palm Beach?

“I was lonely and in prison, and you visited me.” We must remember that what we do to our brothers and sisters, we do to Jesus. He doesn’t call for His people to be imprisoned over immigration status or separated from loved ones or sent to countries they’ve never even called home. He calls for mercy, which is currently in short supply as all over the country individuals are arrested and deported unjustly. We can do better.

Some of you may know that I’m a participant in a cohort program called Spiritual Deepening for Global Transformation, or SDGT, through the Christine Center near Greenwood. I’m 1/3 of the way through the 3-year program, and to say that it has been life-changing is an understatement. I am learning a new vocabulary for my faith, learning to see God in every aspect of the universe and understanding my role in both the big picture and the small picture. My eyes have been opened to how other cultures and faith traditions experience the divine, and I can’t help but be in awe of the wealth of expressions and interpretations of God that exist in this world. While my Christian

tradition will always be my mainstay, I acknowledge that the wisdom found in non-Christian sources speak to me and deepen my own understanding.

One such example is from the book “The Tao of Healing: Meditations for Body and Spirit” by Haven Trevino. I have often had the experience of words or thoughts coming to me at exactly the moment I need them, and this is the perfect example. It happens to be number one in the book of meditations, and it reads in part: “...It has been said ‘God is Love’. Thus, the Heavens seek Love. Earth seeks Love. People seek Love. This is what makes us great. People abide on the Earth; Earth abides in the Heavens; the Heavens abide in Love; Love abides in all. This is what makes us One.”

This is what makes us one. It’s powerful to think how interconnected we all are, as God’s people and as inhabitants of this planet. We are connected by the love that comes from God, regardless of where we were born, where we live, or who we love. *All of creation is one.*

Mother’s Day is fast approaching, and it wouldn’t be a bad idea to take the opportunity to reconnect with Mother Earth. “For thousands of years, indigenous communities have referred to Earth as our mother because Earth nurtures life. They base their stewardship of and heartfelt connection to the natural world on the idea that if you take care of the earth, the earth will take care of you.” (thehill.com)

According to Diversity Plus, an organization dedicated to diversity across all aspects of life in this world, “Native American communities across the United States are taking the lead in environmental conservation and sustainability for two reasons: one is the cultural belief that nature and humans are one, and thus they have a responsibility. The other reason is that climate change threatens their reliance on land and water and their ability to practice cultural traditions. From this perspective, environmental conservation and sustainability efforts also involve cultural preservation and expression.”

Black Elk, a holy man of the Oglala Lakota people, lived from 1863-1950. He fought in the Battle of Little Bighorn with his second cousin Crazy Horse, and survived the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. Later in life, he converted to the Roman Catholic faith and took the name Nicholas at his baptism.

Black Elk is particularly remembered for his interviews with the poet John Neihardt, where he discussed his religious views, his visions, and events of his life. He was comfortable practicing Catholicism alongside his native Lakota ceremonies, and while the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rapid City opened an official cause for his beatification in 2016, he was equally comfortable praying with his pipe and his rosary.

One of my favorite quotations from Black Elk is this: "Perhaps you have noticed that even in the slightest breeze you can hear the voice of the cottonwood tree; this we understand is its prayer to the Great Spirit, for not only men, but all things and all beings pray to him continually in different ways." We are one.

So, now what? Today we're recognizing earth care. We acknowledge the good work done by our Green Team and others who encourage us to make sustainable and responsible choices for our planet, but is that enough?

Recycling and hybrid cars are good places to start, but if we really want to follow Jesus' directive to care for people who depend on the resources of the earth for their health and livelihood, large-scale systemic change is needed.

Today's scripture reading tells us that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. When I think of corporate interests that profit from practices that endanger the resources of the earth and thus the health and safety of people living in poverty, I wonder if those corporate representatives even know what a needle looks like. The former CEO of Nestle was pressured to walk back his statement that claimed access to clean water was NOT a human right, and that it should have a monetary value. Maybe he's hoping that there are some really big needles near the entrance to Heaven.

But the scripture reading also tells us that all things are possible with God. We have been making steady progress toward better stewardship of the earth's resources, but that progress has been slow and marked with setbacks. This is not a quick fix situation but one that requires a vision for the long game: small but significant changes in our mindset can affect our consumer behavior, and that's where our power lies: systemic change at a societal level. All things are indeed possible with God.

I ran across a quote a while ago that really spoke to me: you can't lean on a shovel and pray for a hole. It doesn't work that way. While praying for God's help and support is always a good idea, we can't stop there; we have to actually use the shovel if we want a hole to appear. I'm also reminded of an old story of a man who was trapped on the roof of his house during a flood. His neighbors floated by in a rowboat and begged him to get on board, but he refused. "God will save me!" he insisted. In a few hours a Coast Guard rescue boat came by, and the sailors tossed him a line. Again he refused, saying "God will save me." Still later a helicopter dropped a rope ladder near him and signaled him to climb up to safety. He refused, insisting "God will save me, I have faith!" The water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. When he reached

Heaven he had a bone to pick with God. “Why didn’t you save me? I had great faith, but you let me drown.” God replied, “I sent you a rowboat, I sent you a Coast Guard rescue boat, and I sent you a helicopter. What more did you expect?”

Those of you from my generation or thereabouts will recognize a song that I’d like to share. You didn’t think an old music teacher would miss the chance to work in a song, did you?

Written in 1971 by a team of songwriters working with ad executives as a jingle for Coca Cola, the song expressed a positive message of hope and love. The commercial featured multicultural teenagers singing the song in peace and harmony while enjoying Coca Cola. The commercial was so popular that the jingle was re-written, dropping the references to Coke and adding a few extra verses. It was then released as a single by two different groups, The Hillside Singers and The New Seekers.

The simple sentiments of the song struck a chord in 1971, and we would do well to return to that sentiment today. The song celebrates our relationships to one another and to the earth, as well as our commonalities instead of our differences. We are all inhabitants of God’s perfectly created earth. We are one.

I won’t sing the song, but if you know it you’ll be singing along in your head. It goes like this:

I’d like to build the world a home, and furnish it with love
Grow apple trees and honey bees and snow white turtle doves.

I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony
I’d like to hold it in my arms and keep it company.

I’d like to see the world for once, all standing hand in hand
And hear them echo through the hills for peace throughout the land.

Put your hand in my hand, let’s begin today
With your hand in my hand, help me find a way.

I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony
A song of peace that echoes on, and never goes away.

From the very first words of Genesis the Bible spells out the importance of God's perfect creation. We are called by prophets and by Jesus Himself to pay attention to the earth and its resources. We are called to care for the earth as we advocate for the people who are most impacted by unclean air, unsafe water, and the effects of climate change. We are called to be one, in harmony with the planet, with one another, and with the divine.

I'll finish today with words spoken by Lakota holy man Black Elk: "As you walk upon the sacred earth, treat each step as a prayer." Amen.