

Genesis 1:24-31
Acts 17:24-28

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Peaceful Coexistence

“...so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.
For ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’” (*Acts 17:27-28a*).

This message is aimed at the recent graduates, who we heartily congratulate, but the rest of you are welcome to listen in.

Have you noticed how, when you're not paying attention, your whole day can turn into a scramble to catch up. You miss an email or put a meeting or assignment on your calendar for the wrong day because you got distracted with a question about where you were going for lunch, and the whole day is a scramble to repair the damage.

Katherine, our youngest daughter, just got a wonderful job as director of admissions for the British School (be still my heart) in Georgetown in D.C. The phone rang on Thursday, and Katherine cheerily answered, “Good morning, the British School, you've reached admissions, Katherine Wilson speaking.” And as we commonly do when no one answers, she added, “Hello, hello?” There was the immediate sound of scurrying feet in the hallway followed by an urgent knock at the door, and an urgent voice saying, “Katherine, I think you hit the intercom button by mistake!” Thankfully they all had a wonderful sense of humor (they are British, after all!). But it does underscore how not paying attention can mean spending valuable time trying to correct or atone for an enormous gaff!

Now, imagine this scenario of not paying attention to consequences on a world scale—not for a day but for the 240 years since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in 1770. Which is precisely what all the families of the earth, and all life species, now face because, frankly, we got so self-absorbed and our planet is in an enormous pickle.

Eugene Peterson's splendid translation in “The Message” wonderfully captures the responsibility our creator has entrusted humankind with for the day to day care of the earth. We are the soul trustees, in the manner of a benevolent landlord. Yet only in recent times have we been enlivened to this responsibility toward this biosphere, this extravagantly rich web of life that is so critically interdependent. We have no rights over it, as has been our former stance, only responsibility toward it.

Two time Pulitzer prize winning biologist E.O. Wilson speaks of this web of life as both brilliantly complex and vulnerable. On the one hand, he writes in *The Diversity of Life*,

Pull out a flower from its crannied retreat, shake the soil from the roots in the cupped hand The handful may only be a tiny fragment of one ecosystem, but . . . it holds more order than can be found on the surface of all the planets combined. It is a sample of the living force that runs through the earth—and will continue to do so with or without us.

That's the complexity. Then there's the vulnerability. Wilson tells how our tiny planet relies exclusively on the living energy of the sun to sustain life. I was astounded to discover that only 10 percent of the sun's energy that strikes our outer atmosphere even makes it to the earth's surface. Then, with every phase of absorption, it gets reduced another 10 percent from each dependent organism to the next—trees and plants, to caterpillars and insects, and so up the web of the food chain. So by merely the third group that eats the caterpillars, birds etc., the energy in the food chain is down to 1/1000 of a percent. And we begin to see how fragile this whole ecosystem is on which we depend, and which we take so much for granted. Yet of which we have to be trustees.

From a Christian's (actually from any human being's perspective), it isn't that we have to actually manage each species, but like the physician's Hippocratic oath we are to "do no harm." So I challenge each of you in the decades ahead to dedicate your lives to being good stewards of this fragile home—our only home—through five principles: care for it, learn from it, become a partner with it, honor, cherish and give thanks to God for it, and teach three things to your children.

1. First, **care for** the earth. The driving force at the heart of Jesus' life ministry is love, love of God, love of neighbor, and love of our best selves. And the expression of that love is compassion, that is, to have a heart for, to value something beyond yourself, even more so than yourself. Value nature, care for it, and it will repay you with food, shelter, and the sort of companionship that Wordsworth and Morton expressed in our two poems for the day. God gives us the fruit of the earth, and with that fruit comes the promise of seed and harvest. And to that gift we are asked only to add a modicum of labor. A couple of summers ago I re-read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. It's as close to a religious experience as you can get.

In a former church, Philadelphia Presbyterian in Charlotte, there was a large family, the Bain's that had seventeen children. Most of them had been raised through the Great Depression, and I asked one of the surviving members how they had fared. "We did fine," he said. "Hardly knew what hardship was. We had a few acres of land and it provided everything basic that we needed, with some surplus to help others out." It was the folk in the cities who were often hit the hardest.

Let me contrast that, and our culture's insatiable desire for things. Two years ago when Katherine and three friends cycled across the U.S., at the end of a week of cycling and driving the support vehicle Jane dropped me off at the train station in Minot, North Dakota. There isn't much to do in Minot, so I sat on the platform counting freight cars. One hundred seventy containers on average per train, often double stacked. Forty trains per day, all going East. In just one year, on just that northernmost line in the U.S., that would cover an area almost six miles square. After two years those freight cars would cover all of metropolitan Philadelphia. All coming East. The cost of maintaining these economies of scale, and our consumption, is eating us alive. We would need five planets our size to keep this up for only a few generations. Live simpler lives. Buy local. Supplement your needs by growing some of your own own.

Caring for the earth pays us all back, and it makes us feel connected.

2. Nature is a **wonderful teacher**. I was sitting in my office yesterday, watching the breeze playing with the big trees over on Waterloo, and like most of nature's frolicking play I saw how it also fulfilled a need. For whenever the breeze turned the leaves around, or momentarily separated the branches, sunlight reached into every nook and cranny with its life giving energy. Earth's multitude of systems display indomitable faithfulness looking after each other—sun, wind, soil, tide, air are not separate but part of one wholly integrated Gaia (earth) system. And the earth shows an indomitable faithfulness toward looking after itself. Even when something dies. Last summer we began a compost heap of kitchen waste that now feeds our vegetable garden with wonderfully rich, dark humus that cost us not a penny. Nature is incredibly efficient. It cleans up its own mess, regulates its own populations, and self regulates its food chain, makes and plants its own seed, wastes nothing, looks magnificent in the process, and has an innate sense of architectural and engineering genius that we, at best, can only marvel at and learn from.

When Jane and I bought a couple of hundred lady-bugs for a pittance from the West Coast, that were shipped in a couple of days, we couldn't wait to dot them around the vegetable beds like sprinkles on a birthday cake. By the morning, they were all gone. Of course they were. They had nothing to tend and feed on, so they went elsewhere. We are so new at this. I could almost hear nature whispering. "You'll learn. We can teach you!"

3. Become **nature's partner**. God intended us to be in partnership with nature, not a slave owner or dictator. It's good to remember that virtually every species on the face of the earth has a few million, in some cases a few billion years head start on homo-sapiens. That gives them a certain credential, wouldn't you say? We are still the new kid on the block. There's a lot to be said for living as a partner on nature's terms. Susan Bordo, in *The Flight to Objectivity*, writes:

Odd, the modern world thinks of itself as a world unattached, free, but it did not thereby expand, it shrunk. We retreated deeper and deeper into ourselves. The sovereign ego, *I am the center of the universe*. The universe with the ego at the center is a very small world.

4. **Honor, cherish, and show gratitude** for all nature's gifts to us. We still aren't smart enough to make any part of nature's vast panoply ourselves, from scratch. Whenever you eat from nature's table (where else does anything material come from?), say thank you to the creator. Even a new cotton blouse, a pair of jeans, a worsted suit, or material which we misname "man-made fiber" comes from the good earth, into which God breathed abundant life. I've long been deeply touched by the awareness that so many indigenous people, whenever they killed an animal for its food or pelt, give thanks for the gift to whomever they worship. Which, if truth is known, means to our shared God of many names. Isn't it just plain good manners to say "Thank you!" God, as Paul reminded the Athenians, runs in and through all things as the giver of life. In honoring these things we show gratitude and teachability.

5. Finally, as Deuteronomy instructs us, **teach these things to your children**.

4 Hear, O people: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.* ⁵You shall love the Lord your Creator with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. 10 When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors . . . to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, ¹¹houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, ¹²take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you . . . out of the house of slavery.

Amen.