

First Sunday after Christmas
January 3, 2010

TO HONOR THE GIFT AND THE GIVER

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers— all things have been created through him and for him. *Colossians 1:15-16*

In this soaring hymn to Christ, from which we just read, the apostle Paul makes a startling point, one not without precedent in Scripture—the whole of creation, here and everywhere, belongs to Christ because it was made for him. The earth is Jesus' backyard and, frankly, we've been spending a lot of time in the last century or so throwing our junk over the fence into Jesus' own back yard.

This is not to be a message about climate change and its causes. It's not a message about self preservation or, more importantly, the environmental legacy we leave our children and grandchildren—as important as these things are. It's a message about honoring the one who entrusts all things on earth to us—Jesus Christ—because God, in the moment of creation (however you wish to conceive that) looked upon the earth and blest it, and declared it to be *good*. You can imagine how you would be upset if your neighbors started heaving their trash over your fence, then expecting you to pay for its final disposal. The image, at least for me, gives me some understanding of how the poorer nations felt at the recent Copenhagen summit toward developed nations because of the ultimate cost of making our toys. I can almost hear Jesus saying, as our parents did to us as we played in the sandbox, “You clean that up before you come in for dinner.”

It isn't ours, this earth. It's first God's. And as David prayed at the consecration of his house, “But who am I, and what is my people that we should be able to make this freewill offering. For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.” Is my life my own? No! Everything we are and do is the outcome of a heritage and a gift received from others—everything. As even so eminent a mind as Isaac Newton wrote in a letter to Robert Hooke in 1676, “If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Everything we have access to is borrowed and amended and comes to us because of the ultimate genius of God the Creator. No matter how we try to justify our claims to anything in this world, a deed of title, a thing fashioned of our own hands—like the breakfront cabinet I'm building for Jane, the pine comes from New Zealand, the chisels from Holland by way of Sweden, the clamps from China. All have their origin from places and processes far beyond my reach. “The silver is mine, and the gold is mine; says the Lord of Hosts” (*Haggai 2:8*). And yet he offers it to us for a season to make of our patch of ground something good, and so leave to those who follow, something better than we found it. Wouldn't it be something if, as a constant reminder, every title and deed had in its tumbling terror of small print, the words—“In trust from the Lord” in **bold letters!** The earth is the Lord's.

The earth is given in trust to everybody. Everybody who's gone before. All the people who tended and cherished the earth. The native Americans who offered a prayer before killing the buffalo. The Australian aborigine who sang songs to the sacred flame that lifted their prayers to the God of the hunt that meant life or death to his family. The Bantu tribesman in Southern Africa who walked many days to the edge of the earth to return the thing that fell from the sky, because it belonged to God (do you recall the scene in the movie, “The God's Must be Crazy”?) All things, given in trust to everyone, of whom the Apostle Peter said “I truly understand that God shows no partiality but unto every nation anyone who [reveres] him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (*Acts 10:34-35*).

We do well to remember that the earth belongs, still, to *all the species of the earth who live or have lived*. Each one of us in each cell of our body contains two copies of the genome that made us (about 200 trillion copies per person!) But what is astounding is the huge amount of the human genome that's pure historical data, detailing every stage of biological evolution, not just our own selves, but coding for each form of life from which we emerged 3.5 billion years ago. Compact that heritage into a nine month pregnancy, and we replicate the sequence of evolution. You are your ancestors, and they are you—still! We are like a walking repository of all the billions of years of their hope and striving, just as your parents and grandparents held similar hopes in you. That's not a heritage or responsibility anyone can dismiss with an easy conscience.

Our children and all future generations have every right to expect from us a habitation and a dwelling that gives them hope, and at least as much security as a benevolent nature offers at its best.

Nature itself is a living organism with an implicit trust, as the brilliant Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin understood. As Genesis reminds us, when God created the earth, God gave us a command to till the earth and manage or cherish it as good stewards. So we must honor it. We cannot live apart from daily contact with the earth. And because it clothes and feeds us and gives us shelter. Creation involves a huge investment of energy resources on God's part. To produce 100 bushels of corn from a single acre of ground (about the size of the lower parking lot) it takes four million pounds of water (about the size of an Olympic size swimming pool), 6,800 pounds of oxygen, 5,200 pounds of carbon, 160 pounds of nitrogen, 125 pounds of potassium, 75 pounds of yellow sulfur, and other elements too numerous to mention—none of which we are able to make ourselves (we can only borrow and recycle them from the earth). Only five percent of the product can be attributable to human effort, and most of that is mechanical. Add to this, air, sunlight, wind and weather, and you have what any reflective mind can only call the work of providential genius, and say, "Thank you, God."

Nature knows how to rest well in nighttime slumber and winter sleep. It uses only what it needs. To overindulge from the earth is to deplete its ability to stay in balance. This is a diabolical act. Honor nature, and thereby God who created it, because the earth provides us with the materials, tools, machines, and medicine that we need to live fruitful lives. Honor nature because without exception we are made of the same stuff. Because earth is a thing of beauty far beyond our art or skill to replicate. Because of its rosy-fingered dawns and scarlet sunsets. And because in all these things we are led to ponder the embrace of our creator God, a presence that has seldom been better expressed than by William Wordsworth in these lines from "Tintern Abbey":

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with a joy
Of elevated thoughts; my sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still.

Because, too, this earth is our final resting place for the discarded body. And we would not wish to desecrate our own grave. "Dust to dust," indistinguishable. Rather honor it, and be grateful for its loving partnership from the hand of God.

So, let us show our gratitude by the way we live with the earth, and keep it, and pass it on. For Jesus' sake, the owner of the vineyard, so to uphold his trust.

Amen