

John 21: 1 – 19 Greening Our Theology
April 18, 2010, Newtonbrook United Church, Rev. Allan Baker

When people are asked about what they want from sermons, their responses are usually that they want them to be relevant to their lives in the 21st century, and based on the Bible. That's why the title of today's reflection is called, "Greening Our Theology".

As for relevance, a secular festival that is growing annually will be happening this week. It is called, Earth Day. One question is how do we as Christians relate to all those who are celebrating Earth Day, and what can our faith – based on the Bible – add to this secular festival?

First of all, I am making the assumption that we all know that there is no need to document the environmental crisis that the earth is facing. Many of us already know the truth of what theologian Sallie McFague wrote;

*"More people, including children,
die in a world being destroyed by climate change than from terrorist acts."¹*

In saying that, you should be aware that last Monday I had lunch with a friend who does not believe the data about climate change. If you hold similar views, I'd be happy to discuss my assumptions with you.

Last year I heard Chris Turner from Calgary, author of the Geography of Hope, speak at Eastminster United Church. The current edition of Walrus magazine has a feature article that he has written about how European nations are making changes to reduce their carbon footprint. In that article Turner writes that he believes that beating climate change and ending our dependency on fossil fuels represents the defining challenge of the twenty-first century. He also writes that he has reached this conclusion;

"despite the diversionary tactics of an intransigent chattering class here in North America that would have us believe a poorly worded email or two negates a hundred years of scientific inquiry since the greenhouse effect was first detected."²

What does the Bible have to say about care of the earth that we can talk to our neighbours about on Earth Day, or any day? Let's look at ownership first.

***"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it."³***

That statement is not only a part of the Psalms, but it is also found in the books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Paul's letter to the Corinthians. God's ownership of the earth is in both testaments! We are God's people and we do not own the earth – we are here in this vineyard, or this garden, as stewards of it; as care-takers; as tenants of God's house.

¹ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, p. 145

² Chris Turner in, *The Walrus*, May 2010, page 26

³ Psalm 24:1, Exodus 9:29, Deuteronomy 10: 14, 1 Corinthians 10:26

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Former Moderator of our United Church of Canada, Rev. Stan McKay quotes Chief Dan George with a contribution from our aboriginal sisters and brothers:

***“Of all of the teachings that we receive, this one is the most important:
Nothing belongs to you of what there is, what you take, you must share.”***⁴

Our reason for being interested in Earth Day goes beyond just taking care of the environment for our own sake, or to make a better world for the best interests of our children and grandchildren. The dream of a new world is a part of the Biblical tradition from the prophet Isaiah⁵ all the way through to the 21st chapter of the Book of Revelation in the second testament. Indeed, even the Book of Exodus is a statement of a search for a new way of living – one that is in accord with God’s teachings.

We embrace an alternative way of living because we know that the earth is God’s earth, and we are here as stewards of life on earth. We are accountable to God for our actions, and Jesus used some of his parables to illustrate that the tenants in God’s vineyard are accountable to God.⁶

We Christians undertake to live our faith as stewards of God’s creation because we know in our hearts that God calls us to live, as we say in the New Creed, with respect IN God’s creation.

The Bible helps us to answer the question of who we think we are in this creation. By looking at 1 Corinthians 12, we know that we are a part of one earthly body, that has many parts. We exist in relationship with all parts of creation. Human beings are not aliens visiting the earth – we are people of the earth! What happens to the earth has an effect on us. That may be a selfish response, HOWEVER it is also taking responsibility for our actions.

There is another way of looking at this. When Jesus calls us to love others, do we interpret that commandment as to love only humans? Theologian Sallie McFague writes about our inter-relationship with all of creation and she says that we need to develop an appreciation for something other than ourselves and our own interests:

*“Like God, we need to be able to look at the world and say, “It is good.” Period”*⁷

If God owns the earth, and we are God’s stewards who are a part of this part of creation, how are we to act? How are we to live our Christian faith on Earth Day, and all other days?

*“I believe that faith is not a system of belief exclusive to one’s own tradition,
but a way of living.*

*As a Christian, I believed that I am not so much called to believe **in** Jesus,
but to follow him.”*⁸

⁴ Stan McKay in Ecotheology: Voices from south and north, David Hallman ed., page 215

⁵ Isaiah 65: 17 - 25

⁶ For example, Mark 12: 1 – 12, which is also in the gospel accounts of Luke and Matthew

⁷ Sallie McFague, A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming, p. 148

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*“Many religious traditions stress action over belief:
what you do matters more than what you think.”* according to Sallie McFague⁹.

Theologians have words for this – it is called orthopraxis – DOING the right thing - as compared to BELIEVING the “right” thing – orthodoxy.

So, let’s think for a moment about how we do live our faith as a Christian community. What makes Christians from Newtonbrook United Church any different on Earth Day?

Our biggest statement of faith is how we live our lives as individuals.

Our second biggest statement of faith is how we live our lives as a community.

What people see of our life as a community is often the building where we gather to praise God, and be empowered for ministry. What does this building say about how we are living with respect in creation? What can we do to reduce its carbon footprint; the negative, life-robbing impact that the building may have on the surrounding community.

Because there are thousands of people who drive past the building weekly, and a few hundred of our neighbours who actually come inside these walls each week, the building makes a statement to others about our faith. By looking at the building; by experiencing it, they form an opinion of who Newtonbrook United Church is. The building communicates.

How do others know that we are trying to live with respect in creation?

- Can they see that we use only recycled paper – or that we are trying to use less paper?
- Can they see our new, more efficient boilers?
- Can they see our composting and recycling programs?

This year we have an opportunity to make a major statement to the community – a statement that we are attempting to be good stewards of God’s creation and we are attempting to live what we say we believe in. We will be making a decision on a new roof for the building. It will be visible to the surrounding community. What will it communicate?

As we think about the relationship of Earth Day, the Bible, and our lives as a Christian community, we might seriously think about the question of, “how “green” can we go?” when we are making a decision on the new roof for this building. Will it be an example of our increased awareness of eco-theology, and the environmental crisis of the world?

Will it say that we have changed and that we are attempting to “green our theology?”

⁸ Bill Phipps, Cause for Hope: Humanity at the Crossroads, page 149

⁹ Sallie McFague, A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming, p. 153

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“ In a time of ecological emergency, the church can offer to the world a hope that is rooted in the power of God to bring new life into all that has been created.”

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

We are living, I believe, in a time of ecological crisis. How we respond to this crisis; how we live, is a statement of our Christian faith. How green is our theology – how GREEN can we go?

HYMN – We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky – More Voices # 143

For your reflection:

“The initial step for a soul to come to knowledge of God is contemplation of nature.”

Irenaeus (120 – 202)

“ In a time of ecological emergency, the church can offer to the world a hope that is rooted in the power of God to bring new life into all that has been created.”

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“Actions speak louder than words.” Have you experienced this to be true? What are the implications of this for our Christian journey?