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Text: Genesis: 24b – 31; Luke 12: 22-28

Opening Our Eyes to the Sacred

April 13, 2008
(Slides in bold)

I'm challenged by a question posed by the theologian and environmentalist Bill McKibben:

“I have been puzzled most of my life by this contradiction: How can one believe deeply in God and yet be so cavalier about God’s creation?”

McKibben is suggesting that there is a dis-connect, between Christianity and being responsible care givers for what God has created.

With national survey’s indicating that most American’s consider themselves to be ‘Christian’, there seems to be a dis-connect between one’s faith and one’s responsibility for the natural world. This dis-connect, has big implications for everything from public policy to personal practice.

Why the dis-connect?

An answer may be found, in how we understand a few key Biblical passages.

In Genesis 1, we hear these words:

God blessed humankind and said to them “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” V 26

For much of Christian history, this focus on ‘Dominion’ and ‘subduing’ the earth, has been taken as a blank check to do anything we want to the earth...believing it is for our use, to be controlled and utilized for our own purpose. Words like ‘dominion’ and ‘subduing’ suggest a master/slave relationship...little room for partnership or mutual respect.

Anyone who has seen the movie *An Inconvenient Truth* or followed innumerable news articles, understands that we are in the midst of climate change.

The vast majority of scientists agree that global warming is real, it’s already happening and that it is significantly affected by human activity.

We are already seeing changes. Glaciers are melting, plants and animals are being forced from their habitat, and the number of severe storms and droughts is increasing.

Slides of Glacier

This slide of Argentina's 'Upsala Glacier' was once the biggest in South America, but it is now disappearing at a rate of 200 meters per year.

Slide of Global Sea Levels

Global sea levels could rise by more than 20 feet with the loss of shelf ice in Greenland and Antarctica, devastating coastal areas world wide. It is estimated that by the year 2050, 25 percent of Bangladesh's landmass, will be affected by rising ocean levels. This is a huge problem in a country the size of Wisconsin, with 130 million people...compared to the 3 million who live in Wisconsin. ... In such a highly populated country, the loss of 25% of land will have devastating results.

...To think that our faith teaches that nature is subservient to human beings...is to miss an overriding emphasis in the Bible. Listen to more of the creation story:

"God saw everything God had made and behold it was very good." V 31

The word very good in Hebrew is tov = intense delight = a cosmic WOW, from the Creator....

...Hence this emphasis on God's intense delight in all of creation....birds, mammals, insects, fish, soil, water, air...suggests that God has placed great value on all that God has brought into being....

The challenge for those of us in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is to encourage our sisters and brothers, to see that everything in nature, has worth, meaning and purpose.

In 2001, the Catholic bishops of British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana wrote a pastoral letter on responsible use of the Columbia River watershed. They entitled it: "Caring for Creation and the Common Good."

They wrote:

"We are created as social beings who must exercise a certain responsibility toward our neighbors. Each is responsible, in part, for promoting the good of the entire human community and the good of our common home."

They go on to define this "common home" as being inclusive of people and all that inhabit the natural world: wildlife, fish, insects, plants, trees, soil, water, air.

The theology of the Bishops is summed up in the Greek word, pan-en-theism.

Pan-en-theism teaches that God is in all that has been brought into being, including the awesome web of nature.

Listen to this Pan-en-theistic quote by Martin Luther who lived from 1483 – 1546:

"God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars. ... If you truly understood a grain of wheat, you would die of wonder."

Luther understood that to believe deeply in God, is to approach nature with deep respect and reverence.

... Back to that problematic passage in Genesis:

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” V 26

In recent years, Biblical scholars have re-translated the Hebrew word for dominion, to stewardship. To be a steward is to practice restraint, to use the land with an eye to one's own needs and those to come.

A Native American approach to decision making, is for tribal elders to be concerned not only with how the decision will affect those now living, but also for the next seven generations....Such is the practice of stewardship.

Farmer's understand this, they tend their soil and crops carefully, with an eye to providing fertile soil, not only for this year's harvest, but with an eye towards many harvests to come.

This theology of respect and restraint is summed up in a bumper sticker: “If you love the Creator, take care of Creation.

Back to the question that we started with:

“How can one believe deeply in God and yet be so cavalier about God's creation?”

If we love the Creator, then we also love what the Creator has brought into being. It means that the Fender's Blue Butterfly (show slide of Fenders Blue Butterfly, please leave slide up for duration of sermon), an endangered butterfly that only exists in isolated pockets of our Willamette Valley, has inherent worth and rights, just like you and me.

To Love God deeply is to look around, with a sense of reverence and awe...and to re-commit ourselves ... individually and as a faith community, to be good stewards of the earth....both for today, and for generations to come.

This is the good news, thanks be to God. Amen.