

February 25, 2018 • Second Sunday in Lent

“Love God/Love Creation: Love Is Lord of Heaven and Earth”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris

*Mark 8:34-35*

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Early last week, I was out in Claremont to chair the meeting of the Board of Trustees of the School of Theology. I took along copies of our “How to Keep a Holy Lent: Beginners Guide” cards to give to the Board members as a way to share something we’re doing with them and hopefully contribute to their Lenten journeys as well. They were really intrigued and appreciative. First thing the next morning, one of our members sought me out. He is a retired business leader and consultant, now serving as Chair of the Board of the Goodwill Industries, International. He looked at me a bit sternly and said he had just one complaint about the cards. I braced myself not knowing what he might say. “Patricia,” he said, in a rich bass voice, “instead of saying “Give 5 things to Goodwill today,” it should say “give 50!”

Our Love God/Love Creation Lenten theme has struck a chord. It invites us all to re-examine our place in creation, to consider the consequences of our actions and our neglect, and to prayerfully consider changes we might make in our own lives to protect our beleaguered earth before it is too late. Scientists now project that we have about 50 years left to make significant changes in our policies and practices before it’s too late. What are we going to do?

As Christians, we approach this challenge as followers of Jesus Christ. Obviously, not everyone who is concerned about the environment is a Christian. We partner with Buddhists, Native Americans, people of all faiths and none. But we have a particular faith perspective that we bring, a strong and deep tradition that literally “grounds us”, frames our choices, and calls us to action. Today I hope to sketch part of the big picture and then to look again at the meaning of Jesus’ invitation to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. The big picture. In a nutshell, as we will sing in a few moments, “all the earth sings to God.” All the earth sings to God, because, as John Wesley put it: “God is the soul of the universe.” The whole earth sings to its Creator. Wesley wrote in a sermon: “The great lesson that our blessed Lord inculcates...is that God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass [the mirror] of every creature; that we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God...but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and activates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe.”

In another place he wrote: “...the wisdom, as well as the power of God, is abundantly manifest in his creation, in the formation and arrangement of all his works.”

Wesley’s words take on new meaning as we hear them now, amidst the ecological and spiritual crisis that is global climate change, that is this creation crisis. He writes from his conviction of God’s omnipresence, the presence of God in and through the whole creation. He taught that God is revealed through the natural world, that God loves all creatures, that humans are called to love and care for other creatures. And he pointed to God’s loving intention for the redemption of all creation.

And you see, once we understand that God’s redemption and salvation are for all of God’s creation, not humans only, our eyes are opened to the role we play in the life and death of the planet. Are we co-workers with our loving, saving God or are we those who thwart God’s purposes?

This is a theological question. It is a matter of faith. This is not about politics. It’s quite likely that you and I may well disagree on the best policies to pursue to provide clean and safe drinking water to the 780 million of God’s children world-wide who now don’t have access to it. Or we may think differently about how best to safeguard the 50% of the species now threatened with extinction by 2050. Or how to protect California’s salt marshes, ¾ of which have already disappeared, the rest possibly gone in the next 100 years, threatening hundreds of species and exacerbating the risk of flooding. So, let’s talk. After all, as Wesley also said: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.”

Might we unite with one another, joining our voices with the songbirds, the roaring seas, the chirping frogs? Or in the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 148, the ancient song of praise, doxology, that unites all creation in one choir and makes clear what Christ came to accomplish:

Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created. He established them forever and ever...

Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike, old and young together!
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

To get to this place in our hearts and souls, to see ourselves in our proper place amidst the whole of creation, we Christians first need what we always need, as one writer has said: conversion. Our hearts must change as our actions change. We must gain a large measure of humility, acknowledging that “the world does not revolve around us and our needs, but revolves around God and God’s desires for the wholeness and justice and community of all of God’s earth and its creatures.” (John Holbert)

Jesus put it this way to his disciples and to all the crowds gathered ‘round that day as he was teaching in the villages of Caesarea Philippi: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus knew that “the only power, strategy, and commitment” that can turn around selfish, thoughtless, destructive ways is the power of the cross, a power that inhabits the values of Jesus, a power that brings life out of death. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. In this teaching, Christ offers us a way to find our proper place in God’s creation.

Deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Christ. Let’s hear these words this morning in the context of our Lenten theme: Love God/Love Creation. You know, as I thought about my colleague’s comment about taking 50 items to Goodwill, I thought maybe what we should consider instead is not acquiring so much more than we need in the first place. Perhaps “denying” in our time has to do, in part, with consuming less and in considering the consequences of our flagrantly wasteful ways.

Here’s just one example. Do you know that worldwide 500 million umbrellas are thrown away each year? Maybe they’re owned by Californians cleaning out closets and thinking, unfortunately, they’ll never need one again. Maybe they heard the news that some climatologists are now wondering if last winter’s rains were not the end of the drought, but rather, just a brief respite in a drought that may well continue.

Actually I doubt if Californians contributed significantly to those 500 million thrown away each year worldwide. But the point is this: those 500 million discarded umbrellas contain enough metal to build 10 Eiffel Towers—each year!

Umbrellas are just one thing. Think about all those trash bins we fill up each week...

Perhaps denying ourselves and taking up our cross invites us to hear again the words of Jesus. When Jesus wanted to teach us about real peace of mind coming not from what we have but rather from who we are in relationship with God, he used examples from nature. “Do not worry,” he said, “about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them....Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God gives such everything that grows in the fields...how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ..God knows that you need them. Instead, strive for God’s kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”

In teaching us how to deny ourselves, to take up the cross and to follow him, Jesus directs our attention to nature, to creation all around us. This spiritual work requires us to say “no” to that which destroys the earth and indeed our very souls as well. And it invites us to say “yes” to his verdant Way that is the path of life for us and for all. In the words of poet Wallace Stevens: “After the final no there comes a yes

And on that yes the future world depends.”

The cross, the Tree of Life, becomes our doorway into life fulfilled beyond our imagining, for us and for all creation.

The Lenten journey with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem means travelling with him, as Marcus Borg writes, to a place of endings and beginnings, endings and new life. Taking up the cross means dying to our old way of being and being born again into a new way of being. A way of being fully alive in a creation redeemed and restored by the love of God in our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

On the path of Jesus, we walk on—with conviction, courage, and hope, our hearts singing the words of today’s closing hymn: “My life flows on in endless song above earth’s lamentations. I hear the clear though far-off hymn that hails a new creation...Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Notes:

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