

CARING FOR CREATION

I was sitting outside the other day, staring off into space trying to think of how to begin this sermon. My eyes suddenly fell on a dog not far away. He was by himself, and he was looking at me. And he cocked his head the way dogs do when they want you to ask them to come over and play. So I said, "Sure, come on," and he grinned and wagged his tail and came running. (He did grin.) And he came to me and put his hard little head underneath my hand. He was mostly beagle, and he let me scratch behind his ears for awhile. He didn't stay long; he had more important business than me to look after. But before he left he looked me in the eye and he said, "Thank you. And I hope the sermon goes well." (I heard him say this.) And I took it as a good omen, because this sermon is about creation. It's about the good earth. And about all the creatures God made to live here. And it's about how God has called us to love and care for it all.

As you know, the church doesn't really say very much about the earth. We are strangely silent. We've been silent in a way that has made us guilty really of colluding in the misuse and abuse of creation. If you don't know what I'm about to tell you, I think you need to know. Many people in the environmental movement look at the church as an enemy. They say that we have always sided with and supported those who exploit nature. And historically they're right. They notice that we've said almost nothing about the lifestyle of this nation that wastes so much, and consumes so much, and throws so much away, and poisons so much of the world's resources. They think we in the church are so obsessed with our own institution and our private little successes that we really care not at all about the creation God has made. And that we are aiding and abetting in its destruction.

Incidentally, there are some in the environmental movement who have thrown away the Bible. They reason that since the Bible is the book Christians use while they ignore and misuse and kill creation, that the Bible must be part of the problem. But the Bible's not the problem at all. The Bible has a great deal to say about loving and caring responsibly for all creation. Scripture provides a vision grounded in God the maker of all who gave to human creatures a sacred calling to care for the earth.

To care. The word "care" has two basic meanings. First meaning of the word "care" is to love, to enjoy, belong to, desire. If I say, "I care about you," it means I like you. I like to be with you. Let's spend some time together. Young man says to a young woman, "I have grown to care very deeply for you." That's one of the meanings of care. It means to love, enjoy, belong to each other.

The other meaning of the word "care" is to help, to attend to the needs of, to give care for. We might ask, "Where's Elizabeth? Haven't see her in a long time." "Oh, didn't you hear? She's staying with her mother, giving care to her mother. Her mother's been sick; she's right by her side, to give her good care."

Or we might say to a little child, "Oh, be careful with the baby." Be care-full. Gentle. Respectful. Give the baby not what it doesn't need, only what the baby needs. That's the other meaning of the word "care." It means attending to what's needed.

In the Bible God clearly calls us to both meanings of care for creation. Enjoy it. Love it. See to its needs. Take care of it.

God enjoys this creation. Over everything God made, God said, "This is really good." God created every plant, every animal, all the dazzling variations of life, because God wanted to know all this and see all this and enjoy all this, and to gather up its life as love and praise.

Creating is a form of play, isn't it? So you can tell by creation that we have a very playful God. If you need to be reminded of this, go to a zoo sometime. Spend some time in front of the camels, for instance. Or in front of the hippopotamuses. Or in front of the giraffes. What kind of God thought this up? Watch the monkeys for awhile. Watch the penguins. Watch the seals. We have an extravagant, wildly imaginative, playful, generous God to create all this fascinating, strange, mysterious, beautiful, playful life. Did you know that one of the psalms actually says the reason God made whales is to watch them play in the sea?

And when God made the human creature, God said to the human, "I'm giving all of this to you." Not giving in the sense of "Now you own it," but giving in the sense of "I'm sharing it. All that I made to enjoy I'm giving you now to enjoy with me."

And in the next story God says these wonderful words to the first human creature, "Name all the animals. Go to each one; know them with me; name them with me; enjoy them with me."

Just for grins, I'd like to see the hand of every person who presently owns a pet, or used to have a pet of any kind: a dog, a cat, a fish, lizard, snake, bird, hamster, gerbil. Did I leave any out? Listen, every time you play with your pet, or every time you enjoy being near your pet, or watching your pet, you are doing what God does. And what God made people to do. Every time any of us goes outside to admire and appreciate the wonders of this creation; every time we look up into the sky at night to marvel at the infinite reaches of space; every time we watch a sunset; every time we sit in a garden; we are doing what God does and made us in part to do. When we are good enough creatures to know and enjoy the creation that our playful, extravagant God has made, we are pleasing to the one who made it all.

But, of course, there's more. God commanded us to care for creation in that other way, too. "Be fruitful," God said to the first humans, "and have dominion over everything that lives here." "Have dominion" doesn't mean, "Take it all and use it as you please." "Have dominion" means "be responsible. Extend the care of God." "Have dominion" means exactly what God said in the other story when God said to the human, "Till this garden and keep it. Make it fruitful and keep it fruitful."

To take care of creation is holy work. It's the first command God ever gave, and God never took it back. So I want to say again. Whenever you feed your pet, whenever you do the kind of things that give your pet a healthy, happy life, you are doing God's work. That's what God said to do. Whenever we feed the birds; whenever we dig a garden; whenever we plant a tree; whenever we water the flowers; that's God's work. This isn't, of course, the only thing God calls us to do, but it's one of the things and according to the Bible, it's the first thing God gave us humans to do: take good care of my creation.

The problem is we live in a society and we participate in a culture that doesn't take care of it at all. In fact, it does the very opposite. We are the most wasteful people who have ever lived on this earth. We Americans are a small percent of the world's population who eat up and guzzle up and waste a huge percent of the world's resources. And because most of the resources we use aren't the renewable kind, we are stealing them for ourselves and not putting anything back.

But it's even worse than that. Because our society consumes so much and wastes so much, we are putting something back. And what it is more often than not is poisonous. We do this with the cars we drive and how much we drive them. We do this with the chemicals we use. And all the stuff we dump into the earth, and the waters and the sky.

The environmentalists have told us that this is wrong. But the church really has a different word to add. And if we're faithful to the Bible at all, we will add it. It will be this: This is not just wrong. It is blasphemous. For God has said in the scriptures, "Take care of my creation. All this creation you see around you isn't just stuff for you to use and waste and throw away and poison as you like. "It is my handiwork," says God, "My creation, my house, my delight. You take care of it."

You know what we've forgotten? We've forgotten that we don't own any of this. We don't own a single plant; a single animal. We don't own the lots our houses sit on. And in spite of what the paperwork

says, the banks don't own them either. Do you remember Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and all that dwell therein." We don't have the right to abuse or waste any of it. We are invited to use what we need. We are privileged for awhile to be the guests of God in this lovely, fragile house of creation. And if we are guests, then we do only what the good host has invited; who said, "Enjoy my creation, and take very good care of it for me."

So we who believe in God have the deepest of all reasons to do the things we know to do to enjoy the earth and take care of it. So let me make it personal. Are you doing the things you know are right to do as part of your obedience to God? Are you consuming less? Burning less fuel? Recycling? Working for better environmental laws? Making humble choices in what you buy and use? Are you trying to simplify your life so that your part in God's creation is less abusive and more fruitful? Are you thankful for the wonders of creation that are yours to see and touch and enjoy? And are you giving more and more of it back to God?

In extravagant kindness God has made this beautiful, bountiful earth. And has placed us here to enjoy it and take care of it.

May God bless you in your important work, and I hope your conference here at Ferncliff goes well.