

“Keeping the Garden”
Genesis 2:15
Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 20, 2008

“God took the Man and set him in the Garden of Eden to work the ground and keep it in order.” (Genesis 2:15, The Message)

God planted a garden and immediately made Adam chairman of the Building and Grounds Committee. It’s true. According to the most reliable translations, Adam’s job was to “till and keep it,” to not only to care for and maintain the garden God created, but to protect it as well. As one commentator has put it, Adam’s role was “not simply to guard the garden but to work it, to make it better than when it was received from the hand of God.”¹ And that is our role as well. No matter which of the two creation stories you read in the Book of Genesis, whether you prefer the poetry of the 1st chapter or the humor of the 2nd, humans are told that they are to have dominion over the created order. But don’t misunderstand. If you really take a look at the way the Bible uses that word, dominion does not have that sense of consumptive exploitation as has been so often interpreted. Dominion is to be understood in terms of care giving and nurturing, just as that good gardener does every single day out in the tomato patch.

On the Church calendar, this day is known as The Festival of God’s Creation, a day that asks us to take a look at how and if we are fulfilling the specific roles that God has given to every one of us. They are roles that have become relatively unknown to us, as the whole story of creation has been reduced to merely a debate on how it happened. Those on the right as well as those on the left bear responsibility for forcing us to fixate on something that has very little impact upon the main focus of this story. Whether it took six days or millions of years for the world to come into being is not important. What is important is that God is the creator and that God has given humanity the task of being an agent in and for creation. Even though we no longer live in *that* Garden, we still have been given the responsibility of caring for God’s good creation. And that good creation includes all the gifts that God has given us. This is not a going to be a sermon on ecology,

¹ John C. Holbert, The Story Teller’s Companion to the Bible, Michael E. Williams, ed., Abingdon, Nashville, 1991, p. 33

although that is certainly part of what God has called us to do. This is going to be a sermon on stewardship. Now don't get all excited. We've already received the offering. I'm not going to talk about money—although caring for the gift of our money is certainly a part of what it means to be a good steward. True stewardship is simply caring for everything that God has given to us. That includes, of course, the rainforests and the spotted owls, those properties we call our houses and our churches, and those relationships that involve our families, our friends, our nation, and our world. Have you been keeping the garden?

Several weeks ago, Tim and I came up with the idea for this service. He had become aware, just as I have become aware, with how all too often we tend to limit the idea of Christian stewardship to financial matters. Mention stewardship, and most of you start grabbing for your wallet or pocketbook in order to keep it away from this or that money-grubbing preacher. But as you have heard, it is so much more than that. Once again, true stewardship includes the care of everything that God has so graciously given to us. In the biblical way of thinking, being a steward is literally “Job One” for the human race. “From the very beginning,” one has written, “the human creature is called, given a vocation, and expected to share in God’s work.”² Knowing that, Tim scoured the library and the Internet, and found an example of what he felt was a good understanding of this very important task. He told me that it wasn't necessarily a Christian document, but it had plenty of ideas in it to which Christians should be able to understand and relate. After reading it, I agreed. We both thought it would be perfect for this morning. But before we did anything with it, we needed to do a little research. Let me show you what we have found.

Chief Seattle was a leader of the Suquamish tribe in what is now the state of Washington. When incoming white settlers drove his people from their traditional hunting and clamming grounds, Seattle formed a friendship with a settler named David “Doc” Maynard. That friendship helped both peoples avoid the kind of deadly conflict that was the rule in so many areas across the United States. These two friends went on to

² Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982, p. 46

be very instrumental figures in the settlement of the Northwest. When the U.S. government began demanding that the Suquamish cede their ancestral lands, the chief made a rather famous plea. While translation from one language to another is always difficult, and while his letter has more than likely been embellished down through the years, it gives one of the clearest accounts of what true stewardship is all about. And once again, Tim and I both thought that it would be profitable for you to hear it. So let me share some of it with you. I hope that you will give it a fair hearing. It begins like this:

The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the dew in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man all belong to the same family.

Now let's stop for a moment. Some of you may be getting nervous. You may be thinking that this sounds a bit too close to some kind of touchy-feely, tree hugging, New Age Spirituality. But I assure you its not. If Tim and I are reading this letter correctly, Chief Seattle, like St. Francis before him, saw the flowers as his sisters and the bears as his brothers. He did not see them as his god—which is one of the chief tenets of pantheism. In the Biblical understanding of things, there is a clear distinction between the Creator and the creation. God is the Potter and we, as well as everything else, are the clay. Not so in pantheism. While the Bible calls us to care for creation because God made it, those who practice pantheism are called to care for creation because it is god. The lines

between creator and creature are blurred. There is no real distinction. And as the Apostle Paul told the Romans, when that happens all kinds of hell breaks loose. When Chief Seattle called the shores, woods, and meadows “holy,” he did not say that they were divine. Rather, he seemed to have the same kind of understanding of holiness that Moses and Aaron once had: that something is holy because God had taken that which was very common and ordinary and set it apart from everything else. And whatever is set apart in that way is like a mirror. It reflects the glory of the one who set it apart. So with all that now in your mind, lets get back to the letter. Seattle wrote:

If we sell our land, remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life that it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also received his last sigh... So if we sell our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.

This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

One thing we know: our God is also your God. The earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator.

Let’s stop again. I think it is important to remind you that, even though we are just two days from Earth Day, this is not a sermon on ecology. It is a sermon on stewardship. Even so, all things are of the earth. The 2nd chapter of Genesis tells us that man was created out of the dust or dirt of the earth. As a matter of fact, the name “Adam” comes from the Hebrew word “*adama*,” which means “dirt.” When it was discovered that it was not good for the man to be alone, the writer of Genesis tells us that God also formed all creatures out of the good earth. And when neither the giraffe, the buffalo, nor the even duckbilled platypus was a good fit for the man, God knew something very different had to be done. So, according to that same story, God took one of the man’s ribs and used it to fashion a woman. We are all “*adama*,” you see. Every part of God’s good creation is

related to the other. So good stewardship, as well as good ecology, does not only mean saving the whale or the redwood, but also saving one another: our relationships, our families, our homes, and our church. For once again, good stewards understand that life is never lived in isolation, that everything is connected, and that we are all a part of one another. Chief Seattle seemed to recognize that. That's why he said:

Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many men and the view of the ripe hills is blotted with talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Where will the eagle be? And what is it to say goodbye to the swift pony and then hunt? The end of living and the beginning of survival.

When the last red man has vanished with the wilderness, and his memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, will these shores and forests still be here? Will there be any spirit of my people left?

We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. So, if we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it, as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you receive it. Preserve the land for all children, and love it, as God loves us. As we are part of the land, you are part of the land. The earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you.

One thing we know—there is only one God. No man, be he Red man or White man, can be apart. We are brothers after all.

The writer of Genesis knew it. The carpenter of Nazareth knew it. The beggar of Assisi knew it. Even the chief of the Suquamish knew it. Do the members of this congregation know it? Humans, people, men and women, you and me—we are all called to be stewards of God's good creation. We are all called to deal responsibly with everything that God has so graciously given to us. Whether it be the money in our pocket or the squirrel in our backyard, whether it be our relationship to the outdoors or our

relationship to our family, whether it be that bald eagle perched up in the tree or that bald neighbor stretched out in the hammock, God has given you and me the responsibility of caring for the whole of the created order. We are asked to be stewards. True living begins when you understand and accept that role.