

The Whole World is In Our Hands

Sermon 140 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 8, 2022

Genesis 1:26-31, 2:4-8

On the 18th of May, 2015, I walked into the Fellowship Hall of a large Presbyterian church. I was there early because I'd been asked to sit on a panel with other clergy from different faith traditions (Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim) talking about one of the things we share in common: a spiritual and theological commitment to care for the earth. I was by far the least credentialed person asked to serve, but I had recently worked with a handful of congregants from my own church to do an exhibit called *Creation Care*. It was a beautiful gallery of original photography and poetry that showed both the beauty of creation and the tragedy of its destruction. To be completely honest with you, this exhibit – brilliant as it was – was not my idea, nor was it my favorite thing happening in my ministry area at the time. It was, however, an olive branch. It was a way for me to connect with and support the church's commitment to creation care that long preceded my time on staff. And, because word about the exhibit was out around town, it earned me a spot on this panel.

I guess you could say my story of ecological conversion started somewhere around here. Sure, I'd read some books on eco-theology, I'd reaped the benefits of my mother's garden my whole life long. I even understood that human life on this planet was causing irreparable harm to the natural balance that God ordained. But what I did not understand was the spiritual nature of the broken relationship I had with the earth. I was in need of an ecological conversion.

I'd never really considered that idea before – an ecological conversion – but on that day in 2015 when I started introducing myself to the other panelists, the Franciscan Friar stole my attention. He'd stayed awake the whole night reading early excerpts of Pope Francis' forthcoming encyclical, *Laudato Si*.¹ And he was captivated by the Pope's conviction, calling us all (Christians around the world) to undergo an ecological conversion.

This wasn't the first time a pope had used that term. In 2001 John Paul II used it in a similar (although much shorter message) entitled: *God made man the steward of creation*. John Paul says:

...If we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations. Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialization, degrading that "flowerbed" – to use an image from Dante... (Paradisio, XXII, 151)...

¹ Pope Francis. *Laudato Si*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

*We must therefore encourage and support the “ecological conversion” which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading. [Humanity] is no longer the Creator’s “steward”, but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that [we] must stop at the edge of the abyss.*²

Don't you just love a good papal encyclical?

It wasn't the first time the language of ecological conversion came from the Pope's pen, but it certainly was an historic moment because whereas John Paul calls Christians around the world to encourage and support the ecological conversion that is happening, Francis says we all need one.

Now, as a lifelong Baptist, I am quite familiar with the language of conversion. The story of Saul's life-altering, name-changing, Damascus road experience was covered at least once a quarter in my Sunday school curriculum as a child. In fact, it seemed the whole church – the one I grew up in – was watching and waiting with eager anticipation for me (and every other child) to have our own conversion experiences. But these were not ecological conversions. These were theological conversions characterized by saying the sinner's prayer, repenting of all the evil that characterized our short lives up to that point of redemption and then giving it all over to God with the ancient profession of faith: *Jesus Christ is Lord*.

Yes, I knew a thing about conversion.

But with all the education and mentoring that took place leading up to that conversion from sin to salvation, no one ever spoke to me about the earth. For all the repetition of the Damascus road theophany, no one ever went over the Genesis stories, the words of the prophets, the numerous laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy and what they meant for me as a lover of God and a follower of Christ.

Looking back, I know they meant well, and I do not mean to criticize any of these teachers who instilled within me a strong faith and a deep love of God; but now I know that I needed another kind of conversion as well. One also rooted in scripture, one that would provide another layer of depth and responsibility to my evolving relationship with God. Now I know that in addition to that personal theological conversion, I was in need of an ecological conversion as well. And in the fellowship hall of that neighboring church, it was beginning to unfold.

It happens when we are met on the road of life (much like Paul, actually) and one encounter everything changes. Duke Professor, Ellen Davis recalls one such moment in her own life. Her normal routine of reading the New York Times was interrupted by a front page photo taken from the deck of an icebreaker ship back in August of 2000. The ship

² St. John Paul II. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html

had gone up to the North Pole expecting to find work breaking through the ice and clearing a pathway. But the picture showed clear and flowing waters where there should have been solid ice. An oceanographer aboard the ship said to the Times, "It was totally unexpected." The pain and shock of seeing the melting of the ice at the North Pole caused a revelation that all of his intellectual knowledge couldn't imagine... (no doubt he had read of this reality, he was a professor and this was his field of study). But seeing it first hand, and capturing it with a camera evoked a different kind of response. A moment of ecological conversion for him and for others, like Dr. Davis who would see the image on the front page. (15)

For me, it was slow and perhaps it is still happening.

After listening to my new friend, the Franciscan, as we shared on the panel that day, I went back to Genesis and re-read the stories of creation, this time making a point to pay attention to the rest of creation as God is making and shaping it all. I was awe struck at the goodness, the dignity, the purpose, and the deep worth of it all... long before humanity ever enters the picture. After each piece of nature is made, God says those three profound words of blessing: *It is good.*

Reading the text with this lens opened up a whole new world for me as I began to see for myself what Ellen Davis means when she writes:

Beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, there is no extensive exploration of the relationship between God and humanity that does not factor in the land and its fertility into that relationship. Overall, from a biblical perspective, the sustained fertility and habitability of the earth, or more particularly of the land of Israel, is the best index of the health of the covenant relationship. (8) When humanity, or the people Israel, is disobedient, thorns and briars abound; rain is withheld; the land languishes and mourns. Conversely, the most extravagant... (8)

Recognizing that the covenant between God and God's people was first expressed in such a grounded way, I knew I had to get my hands in the dirt. It had been years since I last dug around, planting, picking, pruning, watering.... you know, just spending time tending the earth. As I began to get my hands dirty – literally – I noticed a sense of ease, awe, and wonder came over me. So I began to return to the soil in the early mornings as I sipped on coffee or in the evenings after work. Over time I learned that a few minutes in the dirt could wipe away a whole day's worth of worry.

Perhaps that is why when the pandemic shut everything down in the earliest days of spring in 2020, I had Justin build two gardens for me on the sunny side of our back yard. There was so much to worry about. Would any of us make it through? Would the church survive? Would we be able to pay our bills long enough to stay and reap the food that would grow in that garden? I've spoken to many of you on the phone as I've pulled weeds from that soil, planted seeds in that dirt, cut spinach from the plant that grows within it. I've prayed for you as I've watered, as I've mourned the sprouts that didn't make it, as I've rejoiced as voluntary pumpkin vines emerge out of nowhere... ever present reminders that God is always up to something good, even when we cannot see what, when, or how.

Those two gardens are named “hope” and “persistence” because that is what they have taught me time and time again.

These are the moments making up my ecological conversion, and they grow and intensify as I spend more and more time with my hands in the dirt. Not because I have a green thumb (I don’t), but because there is something profoundly sacred about being in relationship with God’s good creation.

You see, if we read the Genesis text closely, with our minds attune to more than just the emergence of humankind, we begin to see that a whole world exists before us and around us. God entrusted it to us, we are here to tend it, to work it, to care for it, to be in relationship with it just as God is in relationship with us.

Though some Christians discredit environmental concerns saying that the whole world was created for the benefit of humankind; what does it matter how we treat the earth, God will renew it all in the sweet by and by? They often look to the same scripture we read today pointing out phrases like “let them have dominion...” to support their disregard for the health of the earth. It would do us well to remember that neither the sentence nor the sentiment begins there. First God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... and [then] let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air...”

You see, first we must ask ourselves: What would it be like to be made in God’s image? What would it be like to live according to God’s likeness? What kind of relationship does God have with us? Does God Lord over us and treat us with ambivalence or dis-concern? Or does God bend down low to shower us with love, to touch our lives with compassion, and to give us everything that we need in order to become the best version of ourselves?

God has shown us, and continues to show us, what it means to be a steward of this beautiful creation. We experience it in the love of God that we receive each and every day. And God has entrusted us with a great responsibility not to abuse and ignore this beautiful gift, but to care for it, to nurture it, and at very least to step outside and get our hands dirty in it so that we might know the persistence of a tiny seed burrowing down into the soil, the hope that there is always something good taking root, and the beautiful, glowing delight of new life bursting forth... even when we least expect it.

I’ve got to tell you, even in the midst of my own ecological conversion, there are days when the problems seem too big, too complex, too daunting... when the world seems too broken to ever be repaired, certainly by any small act I can contribute. When those doubts and fears start to seep in, I think about the love that I have experienced in God. Love that is patient, love that is persistent. Love that is unwavering and committed, even when I look like a lost cause. Love that believes the impossible is possible; and love that will do anything to make the dream a reality.

This is how God loves me. This is how God loves you. This is how God loves us.

and this is how God loves all the rest of God's creation.

So, when I remember this loving, committed relationship that *is God's very nature*. And when I read the words from Genesis that identify me and you and us as being made in the likeness of God. I begin to wonder what might happen if we all started to love the earth like God loves us? Wouldn't we find a way to reduce our carbon footprints, to find renewable sources of energy, to use less and to care more. You see, God really did create the whole world with God's own hands (so to speak) but then God put it in ours, to tend, to work, and to love.

I guess what I'm trying to say is this. Yes, *He's got the whole world in his hands* (as the old song goes) but also, we've got the whole world in our hands...

So what are we going to do with it?