

“Creation Care”

July 22, 2018

Hot Topics series

My grandmother was a saver. She was a child of the Depression-era, born in 1922. She saved everything – washing out plastic baggies, reusing Styrofoam meat trays, making sure that “to-go” containers were used again if they could be. My mom likes to say that my grandma was recycling before it was cool.

As you might imagine, that continued with my mom – lots of saving, lots of reusing, though we did have a burning barrel, too. These days she takes recycling to the nearby center because that service isn’t available where they live. We learn about caring for the world around us early, but the issue of creation care can become overwhelming.

Now environmental consciousness is the “in” thing – reducing our consumption, reusing, repurposing, making something new out of what we have, and recycling. Caring for the Earth is important. There’s more said about cutting down, cutting back, and even thinking about how our daily habits and practices affect the environment. Not a week goes by without a news story that connects to issues of the environment – whether it’s energy, invasive species, clean water, or air quality.

Maybe you’ve heard of the call to eat less meat and eat more veggies in an effort to save the planet. The amount of energy used to raise livestock and the amount of emissions produced are a real issue.

Plastic straws are the new hot-button issue. Starbucks has made a commitment to eliminate plastic straws by 2020 in favor of a different lid that is recyclable. Perhaps it doesn’t seem like a big deal, but stats say that 8 million metric tons of plastic enter the world’s oceans every year.

Certainly we’re aware of the ongoing need for clean water in Flint and the recent investigation into PFAS (acids from chemicals used in manufacturing and other products) in many communities’ water systems. And maybe you heard the news story about the whale found dead in Thailand with 80 plastic bags and a total of 17 pounds of plastic trash in its system.

For some, the motivation to care for the environment isn’t a faith issue; it’s a moral and ethical issue. That’s still a good thing, but the challenge for people who claim faith in God is one of stewardship first and foremost. When we talk about stewardship, many times we focus on money, time, and talents, but stewardship is a much wider. It’s about how we care for all of God’s gifts.

Frederick Buechner writes of the word “environment,” “It’s too bad that such a poor word has come to refer to something so rich. To speak of creation as the environment is to suggest that [every part of it is] somehow antiseptic, impersonal, lifeless.” St. John of Damascus who lived in the late 600s until the mid-700s wrote, “The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.” What a beautiful and powerful statement!

As we consider creation care, I offer what our United Methodist Social Principles say. Remember that Social Principles are a tool to help us bring together personal faith in Christ with the call to social action. They help us to think theologically about important issues starting with Scripture, but also taking into account tradition, reason, and experience when it comes to social issues. There’s a whole section on the natural world, and I’ll share part of it:

The Natural World

All creation is the Lord’s, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God’s creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect. Economic, political, social, and technological developments have increased our human numbers, and lengthened and enriched our lives. However, these developments have led to regional defoliation, dramatic extinction of species, massive human suffering, overpopulation, and misuse and overconsumption of natural and nonrenewable resources, particularly by industrialized societies. This continued course of action jeopardizes the natural heritage that God has entrusted to all generations. Therefore, let us recognize the responsibility of the church and its members to place a high priority on changes in economic, political, social, and technological lifestyles to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world leading to a higher quality of life for all of God’s creation.

We read those verses from Genesis 1-2 as a refresher. Remember that God creates, calls every part of creation “good,” and then gives human beings, created in God’s image, *dominion*. That’s a term that we need to unpack. In the Hebrew, *dominion* isn’t unbridled control or a license to do whatever we want. Scholars say that *dominion* also brings a sense of protection and justice. Dominion carries a sense of great responsibility for those who have it. In chapter 2 of Genesis God commands human beings to care for what’s been created.

John Wesley said, “We are now God’s stewards. We are indebted to [God] for all we have.... A steward is not at liberty to use what is lodged in his hands as *he* pleases, but as his master pleases.... He is not the owner of any of these things but barely entrusted with them by another... now this is exactly the case of everyone with relation to God. We are not at liberty to use what God has lodged in our hands as *we* please, but as God pleases...” God expects us to treat creation as God would treat it - with love and care.

We believe that God created all that is. We believe that God creates, owns, loves, values, sustains, redeems all of creation. So if we believe that, then caring for the Earth and all that is in it isn’t simply an issue about the environment or ecology. It’s a spiritual issue, too. It’s about who we say we are. One writer says, “You can’t love God and ignore the Earth.”

And we hear the truth about God and creation throughout Scripture. Psalm 24’s opening verses are powerful - everything is God’s. And that’s echoed again and again. The Gospel of John doesn’t say “For God so loved human beings that God sent his only Son.” It says “For God so loved *the world...*” The Greek word is like *cosmos* – the whole world. Love of God and love of God’s creation go together.

I read this powerful statement about the connection: “In God’s design, nature nurtures Christian discipleship and in turn one of the ways Christian discipleship expresses itself is in love for the earth and stewardship of all that God has made.” We are caretakers of creation. I appreciate that video’s challenge to consider how we’re caring for ourselves and all of creation. This is an issue of discipleship.

It seems that at least one of our “God moments” each week has something to do with experiencing God in nature. And if we say that all of creation gives God glory, then how can we not be concerned about it? Creation testifies to the Creator. If God speaks to us and is real to us through the created world, we have to care about it.

And it’s not just about us here and now. It’s about how we care for each other and for those who come after us. The future matters, and our legacy matters – whether for good or bad. I sometimes think that my small part doesn’t matter. But if all of us do our part, it does matter.

I don’t know anyone who wants to pollute intentionally, though sometimes we’re fairly thoughtless about how our actions affect the environment. We have to consider our usage, over usage, and yes, even misuse of resources. It’s a telling statistic that the amount of self-storage space in the U.S. is 2.3 billion square feet! We have to look at ourselves and our stuff and our space.

We have to consider both big picture - policies and how they contribute to caring for creation (or not!). The controversy around climate change is alive and well. We may not all agree on it, but we must consider the hard facts and decide how we'll respond.

“Global warming and climate change refer to an increase in average global temperatures. Natural events and human activities are believed to be contributing to an increase in average global temperatures. This is caused primarily by increases in greenhouse gases such as Carbon Dioxide (CO₂).”

Greenhouse gases are essential to our planet. It's the levels that can be the problem. One scientist offered the analogy of salt and our bodies: A small amount of salt is essential for human life; slightly more salt in our diet often makes food tastier; too much salt can be harmful to our health. Again, hear what our Social Principles say:

Global Climate Stewardship

We acknowledge the global impact of humanity's disregard for God's creation. Rampant industrialization and the corresponding increase in the use of fossil fuels have led to a buildup of pollutants in the earth's atmosphere. These “greenhouse gas” emissions threaten to alter dramatically the earth's climate for generations to come with severe environmental, economic, and social implications. The adverse impacts of global climate change disproportionately affect individuals and nations least responsible for the emissions. We therefore support efforts of all governments to require mandatory reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and call on individuals, congregations, businesses, industries, and communities to reduce their emissions.

Professor Mike Hulme contends that “climate change is not a problem we solve, but a reality we engage.” Are there more sustainable ways that we can live? Whether it's a longer-term pattern of change or not, isn't it still our role as stewards of Creator God's resources to treat it all with great care?

I started to become more and more convicted as I thought about the issue of convenience consumerism. Many times that's where I land – it's easier and more convenient, so I do it. It takes some intention to recycle. It takes time to wash dishes instead of using things that we can throw away. Cloth diapers or not? I know what was more convenient. It's supply and demand; we use because we can. We drive anywhere we want to any time we want to. I don't think anything of it. We have to weigh it all and make the best choices thinking ahead.

Luka's Boy Scout troop has been doing the set up and clean up for Parties in the Park each week this summer. I'm grateful that we have a can deposit in Michigan because I can't imagine how many cans would be everywhere otherwise! But even considering the amount of waste from that one event, how do we advocate for better

care of our environment and better use of resources? How do we make choices that make a difference?

We may struggle to hear the Social Principles today. It's a clear call to look at ourselves and look at our policies. I hope that we'll at least be willing to consider what we can do to care for creation. Our daily decisions around these issues are a reflection of what we believe.

They are absolutely an act of Christian discipleship - just as important as staying connected through worship, fellowship, and Bible study. How can be we people who reflect the words of the psalmist - that the Earth is the Lord's? Even this week, there's a group of United Methodists meeting in Minneapolis for a Creation Care Summit – advocating for eco-justice.

It was this past year when Luka had to do a solar system project, including all of the planets. When I looked at the expanse of the universe – even just our solar system – I was deeply aware and in awe of God's creation. And I also realized that we are not the center of the universe. It's not just about me or us or our planet; it's about all of God's creation.

We started this series talking about health care and Jesus' call to abundant life. We end it with thinking about the larger issue of the health of our planet and our universe. It's a personal issue and a global issue, and it's not simple. There are pieces of this that affect people and economics, land and water, and every other area of life. But maybe that's the call – to recognize that we are connected to each other and to God's creation.

What do we do? Do something! I offer you a start with this resource list. If each of us added at least one action, think what we could do! And I invite you to respond with your own ideas about how to care for creation more effectively. This is our calling. May it be so. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

St. Augustine (354-430)

"Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?"

Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881)

"Love all of God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light! Love the animals. Love the plants; love everything. If you love everything, you will soon perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it,

you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.”

George Washington Carver (1864-1943)

“Reading about nature is fine, but if a person walks in the woods and listens carefully, he can learn more than what is in books, for they speak with the voice of God.”