

**“An Alliance for Life”**  
**Text: Psalm 24; Luke 16:1-9**  
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*...for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. Luke 16:8b*

You may be wondering how this strange parable made it into the Bible and what on earth it has to do with Earth Day, which is our concern on this Sunday. Accuse me of reaching if you will, but for some reason, I have found myself thinking for weeks that the dishonest manager in this 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke’s gospel has something very important to teach the church about how to approach matters of urgent importance, and in this instance, how we care for God’s good earth.

The manager is not held up as a shining example of virtue or of character. He is not singled out as a man who has many admirable qualities. There are lots of things about him NOT to admire, such as his mismanagement of his master’s affairs, and then his dishonesty when he gets caught mismanaging. But there are two good things about the guy. There are two good things that Jesus considered so noteworthy he decided to tell the whole parable about the dishonest manager, in hopes that his followers – that is Jesus’ followers – would wake up and change their ways.

What happens in the story is this: a man is the steward, the manager, of another man’s property and belongings, of olive trees and wheat fields, and so on. The owner finds out that the manager has been squandering his property, and he summons the manager demanding an explanation, even as he tells the guy that he is fired on the spot. After their conversation, the manager has a little conversation with himself. “What in the world am I going to do now?” he asks himself. He conducts a quick assessment of what his options are and eliminates two possibilities right away: “I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.” But he knows if he doesn’t quickly find a way to sustain himself, he will likely be reduced to either physical labor or hassling strangers for a quarter. Sensing the urgency of the situation, he immediately cooks up a plan. He summons his master’s debtors, one by one, and reduces their debts, thus guaranteeing himself welcome in their homes in the future. Even the master, who was going to lose 50 jugs of olive oil and wheat by the bushel basket, is impressed by the manager’s shrewdness.

This parable has been described as “the story of a man running out of time, making urgent decisions under the pressure of a world falling apart.” (1) This is a story of a man who makes friends with those whom he might not, heretofore, have been in alliance with, in order to address the crisis and ensure his future.

I think Jesus might want us to take at least a couple of learnings away from this story, as we, people of faith, address the current environmental crisis. First, we need to acknowledge that there is a crisis, a crisis of major proportion, one that all members of the human family must address and address now, because before long, there will be no turning back. The planet entrusted to our care will have become uninhabitable. Secondly, I think Jesus would want us to wake up and to recognize that the protection of the environment is rapidly becoming the key moral issue of our time. I have a friend who has been involved in land conservation projects around the country for the past 15 years. He is an active Presbyterian; he has chaired the Trust for Public Lands. He is an outstanding attorney and a graduate of Yale Divinity School. He serves on the Board of the School of Forestry at Yale University. Chris Sawyer laments the fact that until recently, he has seen little if any involvement on the part of organized religion in addressing the disappearance of woodlands. He writes, “How could it be that people who worship the creator of the universe could care so little? If anyone should own the environmental issue, should it not be people of faith? We as Christians have a necessary emphasis on the revealed word of God, as found in the Bible. Most of that was revealed and recorded some 2,000 years ago, when the global population was 300 million, making the earth at that time a relative garden of Eden compared to the stresses of our six billion today.” (2)

One of the most hopeful signs in recent years, on this crowded planet, is that evangelical Christians have sensed the urgency of the moment. Richard Cizik is vice president of Governmental Affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals. He asks, “Should caring for the environment be a major priority for people of faith? Only a few years ago, I would have answered no, but I have changed; I have repented. I have come to realize that I am violating the Biblical commandments to serve and to protect creation, rather than to exploit or plunder. We must be care-takers not just takers.” (3)

The Psalmist is clear about who owns the earth: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” It is not ours to do with what we will. It is ours to be a part of, to take from and to give back to. In his book entitled *The Creation*, Pulitzer Prize winning author and Harvard professor E. O. Wilson maintains that “if the current deterioration of the environment by human activity continues unabated, half of earth’s surviving species, plants and animals, will either be extinguished or critically endangered by the end of (this) century,” only 90 years from now. (4)

The steward in the story Jesus told understood that if he did not act, if he did not take responsibility for the future, he would be forced to live a future he did not

want to live, and so he figured out what needed to be done. I sometimes think that the mainline church just might ought to spend a little less time in committee meetings and a little less energy crafting pronouncements about this and that, that few people pay attention to. I think Jesus would say what you need to do is get out more! Join hands with the environmentalists and the evangelicals. Can you imagine a stranger coalition than evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and environmentalists? This is the third thing I think Jesus would want us to do: Create new alliances, and dive in up to our ears in the great matters that are of life and death importance. Do what you can in your churches, in your neighborhoods, in your homes. Advocate for conservation, and change the way you are doing things in your own personal lives.

I learned a great acronym last week, one of the best things I've heard in a long time. When people get to talking too much and no progress is being made, and you start going around in circles, somebody needs to say, "Elmo!" We all know Elmo, the big red guy who's a friend of Big Bird's. But when you say Elmo in this context you are saying, "Enough! Let's move on." I am not one for hand-wringing or pity partying. I want to do something. I want something to happen that wouldn't have happened if we didn't join in. I am sad to say that many think that the current ecological crisis finds its roots in religion. In 1967, a historian named Lynn White wrote an article for a science magazine in which he maintained that specifically the Christian tradition has taught people to view themselves as "superior to nature, if not contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim." If White is only slightly right about this, then let's call an Elmo on that old way. Let's find a new theological approach, one that values other aspects of creation, the animals and the plants and the natural resources, because they come from the same source **we** come from. Have you ever thought about the fact that everything that is comes from the heart of God? Not just the human beings, but the cattle and the insects too. Not just us, but the redwood trees and the palmetto palms. Let's say Elmo to the old mindsets that turned a blind eye to the corruption of creation and change our habits. There is still time.

Often, the church has been the caboose instead of the engine when it comes to important issues of culture and society and now, the survival of "the planet entrusted to our care". (5) Lest we beat up on ourselves too much, let us also remember that the church has been one of the most important change agents in the history of civilization. Just think of the abolition of slavery, women's right to vote, the civil rights movement. (6) As Bill McKibben writes, "Communities of faith are the last institutions in our society that offer some reason other than accumulation for existence." Therefore, we have enormous power because we have an alternative world view. We can change course, with God's help, if we are willing to admit we have a crisis and that we need to figure out what to do sooner rather than later. It will call for us to think some new thoughts.

Christian educator Roger Nishioka often tells the story of his younger brother and his brother's goldfish named Snerdless the Gert. Snerdless was won at a

carnival. He outgrew his jar and Roger's brother decided to free the goldfish to swim in the bathtub. But even in the new wider space, the fish still swam in the same tight pattern. Nishioka says, "I think God drops us into bathtubs, and it is our chance to do figure eights, but all we do is keep on going around in the same circles."

Now, it's time to change our path and pattern and our way of doing things, making friends with all sorts of people, claiming our role as disciples of Jesus Christ, to be leaders in changing public attitudes. How did Jesus speak of the role of the faith community and society? You remember what he said? "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savor, how can its saltiness be restored? It's no longer good for anything." He said, "You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel, but on a lamp stand so it gives light to all who are in the house." That is our calling and our responsibility.

Last year, on Earth Day, I was struggling, and I confess my struggle to you. I knew I was supposed to use those new low wattage light bulbs, but I'd put one in the lamp on the dresser in our bedroom, and I didn't think I looked very good in that kind of glary light. I felt like I was in a police lineup. Guess what! They now are making soft light energy saving light bulbs, and I look great in my bedroom mirror now. One small step for woman, one giant step for humankind! If we make changes, if we turn the lights off, if we drive less, if we carpool, if we just do a hundred little things, they will add up to a big change. I am not trying to induce guilt this morning, but I do want to observe that there are too few of us in this congregation who have joined the Environmental Action Committee. Too few of us have made it a priority to change our lifestyles. I am not asking you to do it because you feel guilty. Do it because you feel hopeful. Do it because this world that is our home is precious to you, because you want it to be a wonderful place both now and for generations to come.

As Pope Benedict XVI, on his first visit to the United States, has been in the news this week, I have been wistfully thinking about Pope John Paul II, a man for whom I had great admiration. In 2003, he, along with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, head of the worldwide Orthodox Christian Movement, made a common proclamation. "Within a single generation," these two great religious leaders said, "we could steer the earth toward our children's future again. Let that generation start now, with God's blessing," and may we be among the shrewd ones of this day and time. May the Church of Jesus Christ do what needs to be done to fix the problem.

I have had a hard time staying inside this past week, it's such a beautiful time in our city. Once again last week on Thursday afternoon, I was going to a meeting in a downtown office building. I was waiting for the elevator with a fellow who was talking on his cell phone. Here's what he said to whoever was on the other end, "...and you know, I was just outside, and I stopped, and I looked up and I let the sun hit me, and it made me feel so good. Just a little bit of sunshine will get you

going right again.” Ah yes. Just a little light, just a little warmth in this beautiful world God has been gracious enough to lend to us, where the sun can fall on your face, and everything in life can fall back into place again.

Could I end with a poem by Mary Oliver?

***This World***

I would like to write a poem about the world that has in it nothing fancy.  
But it seems impossible.

Whatever the subject, the morning sun  
glimmers it.

The tulip feels the heat and flaps its petals open  
and becomes a star.

The ants bore into the peony bud and there is the dark pinprick well of  
sweetness.

As for the stones on the beach, forget it.

Each one could be set in gold.

So I tried with my eyes shut, but of course the birds were singing.

And the aspen trees were shaking the sweetest music out of their leaves.

And that was followed by, guess what, a momentous and beautiful silence  
as comes to all of us, in little earfuls, if we're not too hurried to hear it.

As for the spiders, how the dew hangs in their webs  
even if they say nothing, or seem to say nothing.

So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe they sing.

So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe the stars sing too,

and the ants, and the peonies, and the warm stones,

so happy to be where they are, on the beach, instead of being locked up in gold.

The earth is the Lord's, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

(1) Thomas G. Long, "Making Friends," Columbia Theological Seminary, Graduation, 2006.

(2) Christopher Glenn Sawyer, "Uncommon Alliance: Connecting Faith and Environmentalism," *Reflections*, Yale Divinity School, Spring, 2007, p.45-57.

(3) Richard Cizik, "New Moral Awakening, or How I Changed My Mind," *Reflections*, Yale Divinity School, Spring, 2007, p. 58.

(4) E. O. Wilson, *The Creation*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.

(5) Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

(6) Sally Bingham, "Power, Light, and Hope: Fighting a Crisis, One State at a Time," *Reflections*, Yale Divinity School, Spring, 2007, p.34.

(7) Mary Oliver, *Why I Wake Early*, Beacon Press, 2004, p.27.