

People of Faith Caring for Creation

We begin on a lighter note:

An environmentalist dies and reports to the pearly gates. St. Peter checks his list and says, "Ah, you're an environmentalist—you're in the wrong place." So the environmentalist reports to the gates of hell and is let in... because well... they'll take anybody. Pretty soon though, the environmentalist gets dissatisfied with hell's environment and starts implementing eco-friendly improvements. After a while, the fires are put out, air and water pollution are under control, the landscape is covered with grass and plants, the food is organic, and the people are happy.

One day, God calls Satan and asks, "So, how's it going down there," (*cause you know God likes to keep up on things.*) Satan replies, "Hey, things are going great. We've got clean air and water, the temperature is much cooler and the healthy food has really helped my waistline. Ever since you sent us that environmentalist things have really turned around."

"What?" God replies, "You've got an environmentalist? That's a mistake—you need to send him up here right away."

"No way. I'm keeping him." says Satan.

"Send him back up here" God said, "or I'll be forced to sue."

Satan just smiled, "Yeah, right. And just where are you going to get a lawyer?"

I was reminded this week that we need to laugh, although my intention here is certainly not to laugh AT any one person or occupation- but sometimes when dealing with weighty issues like heaven and hell,

money and how we love it,

or the challenge of caring for this planet

we need something to help tear down our walls of indifference and pop the bubbles we live in.

Perhaps then we can more fully live as sacred caretakers - first of ourselves, then for our neighbors and finally even for the earth we all live on.

For the past two weeks we have been exploring what it means to be made- not only in the image of God- but made to have *dominion* in God's creation. In the time of kings and kingdoms, people understood "having dominion" as having authority and responsibility to protect and keep safe that which is placed under your charge. In the prophetic tradition of Israel, good rulers were those who helped balance the scales of justice so that the rich did not lead lives of luxury while the poor struggled with basic necessity.

The words of the prophet Amos provide not only **outrage** at gross inequality but also the **consequences** that inevitably result. The rich are going *down*. Down into exile and eventually down into death like everyone else and if Amos would have had rock and roll to listen to, he might have used the words of a Don Henley song to warn those lazy rich people that it's all going away cause "you don't see no hearses with luggage racks".

Pastor Tim Koester, St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomfield NE, September 29, 2013
Pentecost 19C- [Amos 6:1a, 4-7](#), [1 Tim 6:6-19](#), [Luke 16:19-31](#)

But since the days of the industrial revolution, a different view of *dominion* came to *dominate* our relationship with the created world - it was there for us to **use**, to **exploit**, to **exhaust** (all common adjectives in resource management). Having *dominion*, combined with the power of industry, meant we were free (and for the first time *able*) to take what we wanted from the world. The long-term consequences (if there were any) would surely not equal the reward offered by a "better life" that could be easily...*purchased*.

And that worked for a while. Few of us want to go back to living in the pre-industrial world but the fact is we live in a finite world. Growth cannot continue unabated. The medical term for that is **cancer** and it causes the death of the body. So too we cannot continue believing that a "better" life can be purchased by consuming more and more and more things. It is an admirable goal to believe all the world should be brought up to the "standard" of living we enjoy but the problem is we are going to need several more planets to do that.

And there is the connection. At first I thought I was going to have to select some different scripture texts in order to focus a message on "Caring for the Earth" but I came to the uncomfortable conclusion that "love of money" and "disregard for the poor" lay at the center of short-sighted decisions that damage the environment and even play a role in our denial of planet wide changes and our role in creating them. We like to believe our actions are driven by principles and ethics but if the hard truth be told, most of what we do -day in and day out- is determined by two questions, "**How much does it cost?**" **How much will it pay?**"

There is little to no doubt that the planet is in trouble. Only a few days ago, the United Nations Climate panel, issued their strongest consensus to date about global climate change and humanity's role in it. Our attempts to purchase a "better life" have the side effects of spewing carbon dioxide, methane, and a few other types of green house gases into the atmosphere. The result is an increase of global temperatures, rising sea levels, and growing change in long term climate patterns and weather events.

People might conclude, "So you believe in global warming?" and my response would be 'No. I believe God loves me. I believe Jesus rose from the dead. I believe there is coming a great reversal where the values of God completely upend the values of humanity. Those are faith statements but I don't need faith to **accept** global warming. It is happening. The evidence for it makes the case and there are few things in science that are more agreed upon than the rise in the earth's temperature and the reason's behind it. You would think that with so much evidence and so much at stake, and attainable solutions, everyone would be on board.

But we have those two pesky questions, "How much does it cost, How much will it pay" and our judgment, even our judgment regarding the care of the only planet we have to live on, is impaired because we are under the influence of a drug called "money"...and when I say "we" I include myself among the addicts.

Pastor Tim Koester, St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomfield NE, September 29, 2013
Pentecost 19C- [Amos 6:1a, 4-7](#), [1 Tim 6:6-19](#), [Luke 16:19-31](#)

So where does that leave us? Somehow, I've got to preach a sermon that Jesus Christ actually had to die for or it's just a lot more carbon dioxide spewing out of my mouth and contributing to the problem. It seems the evidence is not enough. **Scientific truth, as helpful as it is, has little power to change the nature of human behavior** so perhaps we must find a place for faith in the discussion after all.

The story of the rich man and the poor beggar named Lazarus (whose name means *God has helped*) is a parable that certainly serves as an indictment of the confidence we place in financial security. But even more so, it is a parable about the danger of becoming entrenched in a worldview that blinds us. The rich man and Lazarus both die and the rich man sees the reversal of fortune that comes with it but instead of asking for forgiveness, instead of seeing the error of his ways, he continues to see Lazarus only as a servant, one who can serve him in Hades and make his lot somehow "better". He still fails to truly "see" that the problem is with him.

The parable ends with a plea for someone from the dead to go and warn his brothers and perhaps that is where we need to see ourselves in this story. We are the people who still have the chance for change, not because someone simply warned us or scared us but because **the very Spirit of creating God lives inside us!**

We are people of faith who **have** heard from someone- not who has come back from the dead **but who has defeated death itself**. We are people graced to believe in something more powerful than "how much does it cost and how much will it pay". Our ancestors in **life**, were the original environmentalists, recycling, reusing and reducing before it was ever cool. We have much to learn from their ability to find happiness with less, not more.

And our ancestors in **faith**, left us a legacy of power that changed the world because they were not afraid to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the gospel
even if it cost them their very lives.

People of God are not motivated to environmentalism by political ideology. We do not have a left or right, conservative or liberal agenda. Rather we are moved to action by the belief that God is at work in this world and we have been called to join the labor force. I don't have a list of things you should do. There are many ways each of us can care for God's creation, including a voice and a vote in our political system. Pray about it. Talk about it.

The "bottom line" is this: Faith in the creating God calls us to be caretakers for our selves, our neighbors, and the good earth that sustains us. We may still ask "How much does it cost and how much does it pay" but there is another question that keeps popping up and interrupting everything: **How much does God loves us and how do we respond?**