

The Word: A Means of Grace; Story as Sacrament

From the series: The Sacramental Character of the Church

Text: Isaiah 55:11; Acts 10:44

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Pentecost IV, July 5, 1992

Transcription of the spoken sermon

...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth, it shall not return to me empty, but it will accomplish that which I purpose... Isaiah 55:11

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.
Acts 10:44

If you have any important summer events for which the weather is important, don't talk to me. This is a day of the Rhem Reunion - thundershowers predicted at noon - just when the grill is getting really hot. (Laughter) But, it's a pleasure to have so many of my family here: aunts, sisters, brothers-in law, nieces and nephews, and the lower generation. Nancy and I are especially grateful this morning that we have six kids in church. Pretty good, huh? Good introduction for a sermon on population control, of course. But we didn't know what the other was doing for a long time - I mean, before we met. (Laughter) I had better get to preaching.

As a matter of fact the sermon does have something to do with population control. Population control is really only one dimension, but the planet earth is in trouble. There is a crisis in the world, a crisis in the universe. And it is being recognized on many fronts. Last month there was a world-class summit, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro where the leaders of the nations gathered to discuss the whole situation of the environment, of the state of the planet. The United Nations sponsored the conference on the environment and development but that's where the rub is. The resources of the earth are being used up and consumed at a greater rate than the earth in its own natural cycle can replenish itself. The human race has done great damage to ecology from time immemorial, but it was rather localized and the population was not that great. But today, for the first time, population being what it is and technology being what it is, we are as a matter of fact outstripping the resources of the earth. There is a crisis on planet Earth and it is serious, and it is a matter of universal human concern, and it is a matter of concern to biblical Christians, to biblical people.

Now sometimes issues like this tend to become trendy and band wagon issues, and there are those nuts on the lunatic fringe that tend to turn us off and to offend us. Apart from them, of course, our attention would not be grasped. But sometimes they also enable us to write the issue off and to say, "Well, that's just a matter of a few nuts, and it doesn't really concern us."

Well, I want to say this morning that it does really concern us, and the situation is serious. The conference was held in Rio de Janeiro last month, but last year in Cambera, Australia at an assembly of the World Council of Churches there was a major focus on justice and peace, and the integrity of creation. The integrity of creation has become one of those catch words in our day as the Church has come to recognize the serious dimensions of the environmental crisis. Justice and peace, and the integrity of creation are major foci of the Church's thinking and reflection today, and well they should be. I suppose that there are some of you here who really get turned off with all of the claptrap about the environment as though it were a non-issue. You would probably like to spit at a spotted owl, or what was that silly fish that held up the building of the dam in Tennessee? Maybe it is still held up, I don't know. Satire can make a laughing matter of such environmental concerns. However, we cannot simply sidestep this issue.

I felt that our own president lost an opportunity for world leadership in Rio at that conference. I heard his rationale for our foot-dragging. He said, "After all, the United States has done more than any other nation on these issues." True. He said, "The United States has spent more billions of dollars than any other nation on these issues." True. And he said, "We don't have a lot of money for these issues." True, I suppose.

But, let's be honest folks. This perspective was given to me by my friend Ernie Campbell, who is a fellow pastor and writes some notes quarterly, who said, "You know it is rather difficult to make an impact on the world when you are the powerful and the affluent of the world." For example, he says, it is a shame that the rain forests in the Amazon basin are being decimated. But how impressive is it when we sent our lecture down to the Amazon basis from our four, five and six bedroom houses with three, four and six bathrooms all nicely sided with cedar shakes? And how much will we be believed as we lecture the world on the virtues of riding a bicycle as we step out of our Mercedes or Chevrolets, as the case may be? And, will we really be heard when we suggest to the peoples of the world that it is necessary to conserve energy when we sit here in air conditioned comfort in the coolest church in town? (Laughter) You see it is awfully easy to be self righteous. As Ernie Campbell said, "It reminds me of the time when I was a kid and we used to play King on a Hill," and he said, "when I got to the top after clawing my way up I wanted to say 'Stop the game. Freeze the position. Now that we are at the top, let's everybody act responsibly.'"

I hope there will be some technological breakthrough, some way in which we will expand the resources of the earth beyond our fondest dream. And that's really

what has been the story of human development. They were up there in space long enough recently to maybe have brought back a crop of tomatoes. Who knows what potential there is in the cosmos for the meeting of human needs to make life sustainable on the planet? But in the meantime, the crisis is there. It is our responsibility and it is up to us either to pay the tab or to wind down our consumption and simplify our lives. It simply won't wash to lecture the Third World on environmental preservation and conservation while we go blithely on our way, the greatest consumers that the world has ever known.

But you know, the issue is greater than a matter of human survival. The real issue is that we have not valued and cared for God's good creation. God created the heavens and the earth, and God looked it all over and God said, "It's very good." And God rested on the seventh day and luxuriated in the wonder of the worlds to which he had given birth. Creation is God's and we are called to value it, and to bless it, and to bless the Creator in the blessing of creation. It is not ours.

It is really a relatively recent thing that the human race has raped the earth and treated it as an object at our disposal. You can trace it back to the 18th century, to the Enlightenment. The same kind of philosophical thinking and experimentation that has led to such fruitfulness in the natural sciences has also led us to view the whole planet and the cosmic reality as that over against which we can have dominion, and we can manipulate, and we can use and abuse, that we can exploit for our own purposes. It is almost as though we have in mind that the earth and the plants, and the animals, and the sky and the sea exist for us, for the satisfaction of our wants and our desires, for our pleasure. We have failed to see our connectedness with all that is alive. We have failed to see ourselves in the continuum of creative reality and through the Industrial Revolution, in our consumer society, we have raped the earth; we have abused creation; we are outstripping the resources presently available to us. And it is high time that we question the whole modern approach to the world that has made it a "thing" to be used. It is high time that we get off our highhorse, anthropocentrically looking at reality as though it is there for us and failing to see ourselves as a part of the linkage of life.

We have to get back to a biblical understanding of things. God created the heavens and the earth, and God blessed creation. Maybe you say to me, "But doesn't it say in Genesis 1, at the end of the chapter, that God said, 'Be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over creation?'" It does. And there may have been a day when that was God's word, but that word dominion dare not be used today because that word dominion, which could mean to rule as a servant, has come to mean to dominate and to have dominion over, and to exploit. The dominion model won't work today. Most who look at these things and who study these things biblically have moved to a stewardship model. God has made us stewards of the earth. We are the trustees of creation. We are called to preserve, to conserve, to care for the created order.

But there are some who are saying we need to go even farther than that, that stewardship, although it calls to mind human dignity and the agency of the human person in the whole creation of things and their operation and accords a certain dignity to the human person created in the image of the person of God; nonetheless, stewardship in our day, in the light of the crisis, even gives us still too much of that over-againstness. It is being suggested by some today – and it comes out of a rich, ancient Christian church heritage in the Eastern tradition – it is being suggested today that we think in terms, not of dominion, not even of stewardship, but of a sacramental model. That we begin to see creation as that stuff of reality that becomes for us alive with God, that creation becomes the material tangibly that conveys to us the knowledge of God and the grace of God, that we see the whole of creation as alive with the life of God.

So that, just as bread and cup and water have become vehicles of grace, tangible material things, outward signs of inward and spiritual reality, so we begin to look at our world that way. A sacramental model of reality would see the world as a pointer to the Creator and all of creation, drawing forth from us praise and doxology. That we develop “Epiphany Eyes” in order to see through created reality and to recognize as the Psalmist said, “That all life is alive with the breath of God.” Apart from the breath of God there is no life. “You breathe and give them life,” he says. And so the whole created order needs to be recognized more and more as alive with divinity.

I love to sit on the bluff and listen to the surf. When it is a gentle surf, the constant lapping of the waves in rhythmic regularity reminds me of a cosmic breathing. Breathing in and breathing out. Breath, spirit, the cosmos pulsating with the life that is the life of God and, therefore, the whole of created reality, a pointer to the creator, drawing forth worship and praise. How will we ever be able to develop such a sense? Is it not by observing Sabbath? Is it not by heeding the biblical word, the call to observe Sabbath in the Old Testament where the law, (and incidentally we speak of the Ten Commandments or the Law, but the better word is the Torah, which meant to the Hebrew a way of life), the way of life in Exodus 20, and the way of life in Deuteronomy 5 both called Israel, both call us, to observe Sabbath. But in the case of Deuteronomy it was to observe Sabbath to remember the redemption from Egypt. In Exodus 20 the call to remember Sabbath is to remember creation, for the writer says, “Six days God created and rested on the seventh day.” Israel was called in that rhythm of worship and work: life and liturgy - to remember in ever reoccurring cycles that all of reality was a gift of God through the observance of Sabbath. Sabbath means rest, and that to which God called God’s people was to cease, to stop, to look, to listen. That to which God called God’s people was simply to let go, to take one’s hands off the controls. Simply to be.

Now when I get home, I am glad that I will be surrounded by about fifty strong family, otherwise Nancy would take me aside and lecture me severely and say, “Preacher, heal yourself.” Being a Dutch Calvinist who grew up believing that

salvation was through suffering and one's labor, it is very hard for me to cease from my labor. Sabbath calls us to stop. There is that in us which struggles and strives and seeks to achieve. There is that indispensability complex that forgets that the world will get on jolly well with us or without us. There is that in us that gives ourselves far too much credit and too much responsibility for the ongoing movement of things. God said to Israel, "Stop. Look. Listen. And in your pause let me whisper to you that it is I that keeps the planets in orbit, and the fields green, and the rivers flowing, and the rain falling. It is I, in that greater grace of life that embraces you, that sustains you and keeps you in existence." Sabbath. Stop. Look. Listen. Luxuriate - after the example of God.

Why did God rest after the sixth day? Was God exhausted? I don't really think so. Was God bored? Probably not. Did God need refueling in order to go back to work the next day? Hardly so. Why did God stop? Did not God stop simply to delight in that which God made? And is not to observe Sabbath an invitation to delight in the wonder of the world? To take a moment to revel in joy at birds and bees, and creepy crawly things, turtles and rosebuds, and starry nights and a fresh breeze that wafts across one on a summer's eve. Sunrise and sunset, the succession of the seasons: Springtime and harvest, Summer and winter. Sun, moon and stars in their courses above. All of it if we just stop - and look - and listen. Inviting us to move beyond it all to the one who upholds it all by the word of power, whose grace embraces all, who calls us to delight.

Matthew Fox, the Catholic theologian in trouble with the Vatican, suggests that the Church has been so hung up with original sin that it has forgotten original blessing. Before Genesis 3 is Genesis 2, the creation of a garden named Eden, which means delight. And the whole covenant of grace and the whole salvation thing is simply an emergency means to the restoration and realization of God's grander scheme of the creation of the heavens and the earth. The breath that you breathe, that pulsates within you, is the same life that is in the rose and its source is the same good and gracious God.

Oh, I remember Sundays as a kid - they were to be endured. As someone has said, "Ugly Sundays." Another part of my Dutch Reformed pietism, Sundays were marked by all the things I couldn't do. That oppressive legalism has created a lot of dysfunction in our lives. It has taken me a long time to get over my rebellion against that suppression of delight to the point at which I realize that the invitation to observe Sabbath is an invitation of the good and gracious God who formed my well being and says "Delight. Just sit there and delight. Don't do anything. Simply be and let grace wash over you."

The writer to the Hebrews says, "Today if you hear my voice, harden not your heart. Enter into the joy of the delight of God's wonderful world." Thank God.