

The Great Connection

A sermon by Bass Mitchell

Delivered on July 16, 2006 at Ivy Creek UMC, Charlottesville, Va.

Scriptural references: Psalm 24

Several years ago we went to Cherokee, North Carolina. While in the museum there, it was our good fortune or divine guidance to meet Jeremiah Wolfe, an elder on the Cherokee Council, who talked with us about an hour. I was astounded and touched by his words, the wisdom, the deep spirituality that was evident in him. He told me that he had been a United Methodist for over forty years! Then he told us about the Cherokee and their love of the land, of how they only took what they absolutely needed, and how they gave thanks to God when having to take any part of it for themselves. Then he looked at me and said, "All things are connected, you know..."

He expressed so eloquently what I have felt for sometime now... that the older I get the less I feel separated from the world, from creation, from all things. I have grown to feel more and more intimately at one with it.

I find it interesting when I read the creation story in Genesis that human beings are said to be created out of the earth itself. The word there for earth or soil in Hebrew is "adamah." And the name of the first man - "Adam," literally means the "earthman," the man made of earth. "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return," Genesis 3:19 tells us, a phrase often used in burial liturgy. You see, we are intimately connected to creation.

Not long ago I woke well before the sun had risen. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked out the window at an ancient oak tree with its deep green summer leaves. Suddenly, the first rays of sunlight crept over the horizon and it seemed as if to me that that tree - every branch, every leaf, every twig glimmered, glowed from within, pulsating with radiant life. And not only that tree but every tree, everything from the mountains to the bushes and plants. I saw life - brilliant, dazzling life everywhere. Everything was alive. Then suddenly a ray of sunlight burst through the window, igniting the curtains with light, and bathing my face in its warmth. And the life that I had seen and sensed everywhere outside I now felt within me. I felt at one with all things, with that ancient tree, with the rocks, the animals, the air, the mountain - we were one.

J. Baird Callicott wrote of a similar sense of connectedness but that was not as pleasant. He said that he stood on the banks of a river one day that had become choked with industrial waste and sewage, choking the waters with a black and brown silt. While looking upon it he felt a pain deep inside himself. He had not planned, he said, to drink from the water or buy land near it, but yet he felt wounded with it. In that instance, he said, "it occurred to me that the river was a part of me" (*Spiritual Literacy*, page 143).

I was at the West Virginia State Fair not long ago. One of my favorite things to do is visit the animal exhibits. Animals of all kinds are there - from pigs to sheep to horses and rabbits. But I had a very strange experience this last visit. I found myself looking into the eyes of many of those animals, especially a variety of sheep that had the most beautiful sky blue eyes you have ever seen. And those animals were looking back at me! I sensed in them a kinship, a connection, an intelligence that was a bit unsettling. Surely something like this has happened to you maybe through a pet like a cat or dog - that awareness that these are not just dumb creatures we can do with as we will. They are fellow creatures. Though we may be different in many ways, we are also alike in many ways. There is a common bond between us that I sensed as my own eyes met theirs. I knew then that I would never look at them in the same way again.

Disconnected from Creation

But we modern people, for many reasons, have often come to see ourselves as over and against creation, as somehow above it, better than it. Perhaps it's because, unlike past generations who lived more in contact with nature, we have tried largely through our technology to disconnected

ourselves from it.

Did you know that there are fewer and fewer places these days you can actually see the starry heavens because of all the artificial light we have created? I saw a picture taken from a satellite of the United States at night and it seemed the whole country was ablaze. When we stop looking at the stars, we can soon get an unduly exalted opinion of ourselves!

More and more people live in concrete worlds, going days, weeks, and months without even really seeing a tree or real grass.

A news segment recently followed a group of children who visited a dairy for the first time, their eyes wide with wonder at discovering that milk did not come from grocery stores!

Our food so often comes to us pre-packaged and pre-processed and pre-practically cooked for us so we do not see the connection with the soil, the water, sunshine, and creation from which they come to us.

We turn on our tap and out flows fresh water (we hope) that we did not have to go outside to a well or spring or river to fetch.

We have become detached from our world and in so doing have lost something vital, something essential to our own well-being.

Part of it is just how dependant we are upon the creation. What do we have - from houses to cars to clothes to even the electronic gadgets in our houses - that does not in some way depend upon the abundance of the good earth?

I think maybe this forgetfulness of our connection to and dependence upon creation comes back to us in the midst of some drought or natural disaster. We take creation for granted and it has a way of humbling us, of reminding us that we are not so independent and in control as we might like to think.

It's this detachment from creation that has also led to its abuse. We tend to see it only as "stuff" to take and melt and mold and use however we wish, often without a whisper of thanks or appreciation or any thought as to what it may do to the rest of creation.

I think we are beginning to realize that nature will do quite well and even better without us, but that we cannot live without it. What we do to the creation - to the water, the air, and the soil has profound implications for the whole world.

Loving Our Neighbor the Earth

“Who is my neighbor?” Jesus was once asked. He told a story to answer it – “The Good Samaritan.” The answer was simply that anyone we can help is our neighbor, and that this help means going out of our way, of sacrificing even for the good of our neighbor. Being a good neighbor is one of those life lessons we all learn or should. Mister Rogers spent his life trying to teach that, didn't he? It was kind of important to a man named Jesus also.

But it recently dawned on me that my neighbor is not just people but the birds, the fields, the trees, the water, the earth! How very narrow-minded of me, you see, to think that only my fellow human beings should be the recipients of daily kindness. The earth, too, is my neighbor and yours. We must do a better job of loving this neighbor.

We Are the Gardeners, Not the Owners

Part of what this means is to recognize that the earth really does not belong to us. We are trustees, stewards, not the owners. That's what we hear in the words of the Psalmist:

24:1 The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;

24:2 for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

It is not ours to do with as we please.

The ancient story in Genesis about the creation of the world and human beings says that we were given dominion over the earth. We do have such power. But we have too often taken this to mean that we can use it anyway we like. That ancient story tells us that this power was meant to be used to take care of the earth. The earth is a gift, a wondrous garden, and we are the gardeners.

That means we are to love creation and do all in our power to take care of it, to be kind to it, too.

It means recycling paper, glass, metal and everything we can...

Riding a bike or walking when we do not have to drive...

Purchasing hybrid cars and trucks that burn cleaner fuels...

Car pooling...

Turning off all items that we can like computers and lights...

Turning off the tap when we are brushing our teeth...

Taking shorter showers...

Supporting policies and laws that seek to protect and preserve our environment...

Did you know that there are 16,000 plants and animals now on the Red List – more than ever before – that's the list of endangered species largely due to habitat destruction, introductions of invasive species, overhunting and overfishing, pollution and climate change? For the first time polar bears and hippos are on the list.

Loving our neighbor – the earth – means...

Volunteering in the SPCA...

Demanding that our government spend more time and effort on research for renewable and cleaner sources of energy...

And many other ways each day we can show love and kindness to this wonderful neighbor, whose well being largely determines our own.

Conclusion

I want to do something a little different this morning. I am handing out to you four rolls of yarn of different colors. I want you to take one end and then pass it around to each other and also across the aisles. Please do that now...

Now, I want each of you to take turns wiggling the piece of yarn you are holding...

What's happening? What do you notice?

That we are all connected. That moving the yarn here sends vibrations throughout this whole web, the entire connection.

We are yarn, woven by the Creator into the very fiber of creation. For we are not only

connected to one another so that what we do affects just each other, we strands of yarn are wrapped about every tree, every plant, every living creature and to the whole of creation. What we do impacts it and what happens in it impacts us.

We must learn this – that our neighbors are not just those who look like us, but also the flowers, the streams, the turtles, the dolphins, the marshlands, the forests, the hills, the air - the whole universe. For, as my friend Jeremiah Wolfe would remind us, “All things are connected, you know...”