

Earthkeeping

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This we know: The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

—from a letter from Chief Seattle to President Polk in 1852

Readings: Genesis 2:4-9, 15 Hebrew Scriptures
 Romans 8:19-22 New Testament

One of my all time favorite writers, Kurt Vonnegut, wrote a piece for In These Times, a few years ago, “Cold Turkey.”

“Human beings,” he wrote, “are chimpanzees who get crazy drunk on power.” He goes on about how we are prone to addictions in general:

I am of course notoriously hooked on cigarettes. I keep hoping the things will kill me. A fire at one end and a fool at the other. But I'll tell you one thing: I once had a high that not even crack cocaine could match. That was when I got my first driver's license! “Look out, world, here comes Kurt Vonnegut.” And my car back then, a Studebaker, as I recall, was powered, as are almost all means of transportation and other machinery today, and electric power plants and furnaces, by the most abused and addictive and destructive drugs of all: fossil fuels. When you got here, even when I got here, the industrialized world was already hopelessly hooked on fossil fuels, and very soon now there won't be any more of those. Cold turkey. Can I tell you the truth? I mean this isn't like TV news, is it? Here's what I think the truth is: We are all addicts of fossil fuels in a state of denial, about to face cold turkey.

Awhile ago I saw something that created a giant lump in my throat. Scientists were testing the air quality on the California coast, and they were expecting it to be clean and pure, as it blew in from the ocean. Only they were surprised to find that it wasn't clean at all. It was full of toxins **before** it actually reached smog-producing Los Angeles. So they built these probes to measure the air quality in the atmosphere and find the source of all these toxins. They found that they originated from then huge coal-burning power plants in China in such high amounts that they could be carried along for thousands of miles over the Pacific. The chickens are coming home to roost and they've just begun. Once the Chinese have achieved the standard of living that we Americans enjoy, God have mercy upon us all.

Perhaps it has once again become unfashionable to talk about ecology and environmental wholeness without being labeled a tree hugger or a twig eater. Even so, we still need to talk about it. Johnny Carson, after the Valdez incident, said on *The Tonight Show*, “Exxon has a new slogan: Quit your griping, there are still plenty of oceans left.” As ridiculous as this might sound, this is the prevailing attitude of our present society. There are plenty of oceans, streams, lakes, forests, and blue skies left. It’s all expendable!

This morning I am going to address this concern from a Christian perspective, from our Biblical faith. In the creation stories in Genesis chapters one and two we get a picture of the kind of relationship intended for human beings to have with the Creator and the rest of the Creation. God put human beings, created in God’s own image, in the garden “to till it and keep it.” Let’s take a minute to see what this phrase means.

“Tilling” represents everything that we humans do to draw sustenance from nature. It includes not only agriculture but also mining, manufacturing, and exchanging. All of this depends upon taking and using what is of God’s creation. Now humanity hasn’t had a problem with this. In fact, one could say that we have tilled the heck out of the earth, tilled it to death!

“Keeping,” on the other hand, means tilling with care. It means to maintain the capacity of the creation to provide sustenance for which the tilling is done. This means making sure that the world of nature may flourish, with all of its intricate, interacting, life-sustaining systems. Humankind has failed to till with care! The crisis in which we now find ourselves is the consequence of **tilling without keeping**. The Creator’s gifts for sustenance have not been taken carefully nor shared equitably.

Keeping the creation means that we follow the principle of sustainability. The Creator wants the earth to continue to function properly so that the living creatures that belong to this natural system may thrive. So God wants us to relate to the natural world so that its stability, integrity and beauty may be maintained.

There are two reasons for human beings to care about the world. First, we are constantly and unavoidably dependent upon it. Quite simply, we want to keep and sustain the garden so that the tilling may continue. We care for the natural earth, number one, for our survival as a species, for the love of our brothers and sisters, present and future, for the concern of coming generations. Because we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must keep the earth.

In “An Open Letter to the Children and Young People of the Planet,” the W.A.R.C. (World Alliance for Reformed Churches) wrote:

We are accountable. We are accountable to God. We are accountable to one another. We are accountable to the myriad of creatures with whom we share this beautiful planet. And we are accountable to you, dear children and young people. It is your future for which, under God, we are temporarily responsible. Pray that we may learn better than we have done how to take care of this treasure, so that

when we shall turn our accounts over to your keeping we may not be covered with shame and so that you may learn from us a little wisdom.

The second reason to care for the natural world, other than human survival depends upon it, is nature's own intrinsic value. God's creation is good and should be cherished for its own sake. We need to say to ourselves, "Stop thinking of yourself as if you and your kind were the be-all and end-all of life...as if God's covenant were for humans only." For we have thought of ourselves as apart, above and separate. There is integrity of creation, which affirms that all, which has been created by God, is good and is to be held dear. This integrity calls for a perspective of wholeness – to find and search for meaning, globally, not just in us or in our local communities. Whenever we participate in the sacrament of communion, we acknowledge that every creature is bound to every other creature in a great community and in a communion of being. So this is what keeping the earth means – to participate in the communion of being of the entire creation order, the way God intended.

No one "owns" a species. Anyone who would destroy species in the name of development takes, in monstrous arrogance, the prerogative of God.

Yet all is not well in the land. Paul writes that creation is in "bondage to decay," and that it groans inwardly and waits with eager longing for redemption, for liberation, for restoration. "Creation," wrote Paul, "was subjected to futility." In other words, creation is a victim. It suffers the consequences of humanity's "progress." William Sloane Coffin said,

It may be that as a civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. But it is ironic that just as technology frees us to be full human beings, not mere survivors of the earth's rigors, at this very moment we may be about to lose the whole planet because we have lost our sense of wonder. For finally only reverence can restrain violence, violence against nature, violence against one another.

So, you see, ecology is basically a *spiritual problem*. It is the problem of humanity living out of relationship with God and outside the limits of the created order. There is a litany of things we could spend hours on:

- About 96% of the contiguous United States is developed, farmed, and grazed, timbered or designated for multiple uses. Only about 2% has been designated for wilderness.
- Renewable resources such as forests, croplands and fisheries are being destroyed. Soil erosion has become epidemic.
- Non-renewable resources such as oil and minerals like iron, aluminum and copper are being exhausted.
- Water is being polluted by pesticides, landfills, oil spills, and toxic waste.
- Americans produce about 5.1 pounds of garbage per person per day. It is more than four times that of those living in China and twice that of those living in France and West Germany.

- In the 20th century the world population has gone from two billion to six billion.
- Recent studies suggest that global warming is the gravest threat of all, threatening to upset the fragile ecological balance of the planet.

Bill McKibben, a noted author and environmentalist, has a website called 350.org, and he says that when it comes to the issue of global warming, there are really three numbers that you need to understand it: 275, 390 and 350. And in the end, the most important number on the planet is 350.

For all of human history until about 200 years ago, our atmosphere has contained 275 parts per million of carbon dioxide. Now, it turns out that we need at least some CO₂ to trap some heat in the atmosphere or the planet would be too cold for human life.

Beginning in the 18th century, human began to burn coal, gas and oil, and at first, the amount of carbon dioxide began to rise only slowly. Recently, however, it has been rising much more quickly—exponentially—at a current rate of about 2 parts per million every year. And right now we are at about 390 (that second number) ppm of CO₂. Scientists say that this is too much, and we're beginning to see a disastrous, catastrophic impact:

- Glaciers are melting.
- Mosquitoes are spreading along with the diseases they carry.
- Drought is becoming more common.
- Sea levels are rising.
- The oceans are becoming more acidic.

In the arctic by 2007 the sea ice was 39% below the summer average. (see slide #1) Some now say that it will be completely ice-free in the summer between 2011 and 2015, some 80 years ahead of what was predicted only a few years ago.

So the world's leading climate scientists say that to turn this ship around, we need to bring the CO₂ level down at least to 350 parts per million. (see slide #2)

James Hanson, the first scientist to warn about global warming over 20 years ago, recently said,

If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted... CO₂ will need to be reduced from its current 385 ppm to at most 350 ppm.

Human beings, it seems, are behaving as a cancer, growing at a destructive rate with *no awareness* that they depend upon its host. Cancer cells are stupid cells, that is, each is acting and growing simply in its own self interest and does not participate in the life and well being of the whole body.

A heart cell, for example, "knows" that it is part of an organ and it *serves a higher purpose than simply living for itself*.

This is why we need *more than voluntary actions of individuals* to solve this problem. human beings need to act as a whole—collectively, politically, socially—like the cells of an organ serves a function of a body. It needs to be a concerted, organized effort. Clearly, for example, we need to act as nation and as a civilization to develop alternative sources of energy and reduce fossil fuel consumption.

And so, yes, we need a sense of awe, of wonder, of deep love and respect for all of creation, and we need an *awareness* and “*knowledge*” that we are part of this whole, and that our well-being and survival depends upon the well-being and survival of the whole.

Our tradition says that God, the Creator, loves the *whole* creation, and that God, the Redeemer, acts to save the *whole* creation as it cries out. And as human beings, we can be part of God’s redemption of creation.

When human beings are finally restored to their true destiny, nature will also share in this release from bondage to decay and share in the freedom of glory. According to Paul, hope reaches beyond believers to creation as a whole. The destiny of creation is redemption; this is part of the good news of the Gospel. Creation will regain its original goodness. It will happen. This is the vision of “the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.”

In the words of William Sloane Coffin,

If you believe, as many believers do, in a politically engaged spirituality, and you’re trying to save the environment...and if you’re an American trying to temper patriotic fervor with a healthy dose of national humility, you’re bound at times to feel like quitting. But Jesus never allowed his soul to be conquered by despair, and if it was to those furthest from the seats of power that he said “You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world.” Who then are we to quit “fighting the good fight of faith?”

Creation groans to be released from a bondage we created. To be part of the body of Christ is to be part of God’s redemptive work and to share the groaning of every creature; it means to unite us in communion with **all** creation. It means that we *wake up* and fully realize, in the words of Chief Seattle, that the earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Wendell Berry wrote a poem called “Work Song,” that talks about this vision of returning to a way of living that was not easy, that was strenuous and difficult. He wrote,

*If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,
if we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,*

*then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
here, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides, fields and gardens
rich in the windows. The river will run
clear, as we will never know it,
and over it, birdsong like a canopy.
On the levels of the hills will be
green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.
On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down
the old forest, an old forest will stand,
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
Families will be singing in the fields.
In their voices they will hear a music
risen out of the ground. They will take
nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light. This is no paradisaal dream.
Its hardship is its possibility.*

This vision, this harmony, this wholeness, this peace—it's hardship is its possibility.