



“The Greening of Christianity”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Second Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2009
Acts 4:32–35 (NRSV)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The primary text for today’s sermon is drawn from the earliest history book known to the Christian community, “The Acts of the Apostles.” Acts opens with the Ascension of Christ, continues with the Day of Pentecost, and progresses with the description of several defining moments in the life of the early apostles.

The word “apostles” means “those who are sent out.” So the Acts of the Apostles is the history of those who are sent out by God to proclaim the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today’s reading falls on the heels of the Pentecost story and the call of Mathias, who replaced Judas in the Apostles’ lineup, and it explains how these early church leaders organized themselves and lived out their mission and ministry.

Like most modern churches, other nonprofits, public organizations, and private corporations, the apostles had an ideal sense of how they should organize themselves and carry out their mission, and this ideal grounded their identity and purpose, particularly in turbulent times and in uncharted territory. Christians in every age and location since the first century of the Common Era have returned repeatedly to these early chapters in Acts to remember and regroup themselves in their God-given identity and mission.

Today’s reading from Acts 4:32–35 is one of those founding statements for the Christian church. Here we are reminded of the first apostles’ hope to be a community of mutual support and accountability in which individual resources were held and shared in common for the good of all and passed on for the benefit of future generations.

In celebration of this rich heritage that we have received from God and from our forebears in the faith, we sing together our Musical Meditation, “God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending.”

MUSICAL MEDITATION“God, Whose Giving”¹ (v. 1)

№ 565

*God, whose giv-ing knows no end-ing, from your rich and end-less store,
Na-ture's won-der, Je-sus' wis-dom, costly cross, grave's shat-tered door:
Gift-ed by you, we turn to you of-fering up our-selves in praise;
Thank-ful song shall rise for-ev-er, gra-cious do-nor of our days.*

SCRIPTURE READING

Acts 4:32–35

Stephanie S. Spencer

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

SERMON

“The Greening of Christianity”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

On Wednesday of this week, April 22, people around the world will participate in the 39th successive celebration of Earth Day and the anniversary of the modern environmental movement. The principal champion of Earth Day was Gaylord Nelson, U.S. Senator from Wisconsin from 1963–1981. Nelson, in addition to being a distinguished senator, was also a lawyer, an environmental educator, and a champion of the Zero Population Growth (ZPG) movement.²

The first Earth Day drew 20 million participants (mostly students from public schools and universities in the United States) and featured teach-ins on environmental conditions and the need for social policy reform and conservation of natural resources. This week's celebration, by comparison, will draw more than 500 million participants around the world from all walks of life. Efforts are already underway to radically expand participation in the 40th Earth Day celebration next year, which will include coordinated events in 40 of the world's largest cities.³

Over the years, I have become intrigued and inspired by the environmental movement and its growth in popularity within and beyond our society. I have also become increasingly interested in how this movement seems to have grabbed the attention of secular humanists, middle and upper middle class youth and young adults, and children and youth from within the Christian community.

The environmental movement seems to have become a kind of religion and religious community for persons not formally associated with a faith tradition, and also a natural seedbed for intergenerational ministry within Christianity, especially among our youngest and oldest members.

¹ Text: Robert L. Edwards. © The Hymn Society, 1961, renewal 1989. Tune: Franz Joseph Haydn. Reprinted under Eden UCC's OneLicense.net #A-708960.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaylord_Nelson

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth_Day

III

I base my latter hypothesis on observations made during my sabbatical travels last spring. After visiting several congregations in distinctive venues, I noticed that virtually all of the churches that I visited were vigorously engaged in some sort of environmental project that involved the whole congregation, and that these projects seemed to emerge organically and independently of each other. Some notable examples of the eco-justice projects that I encountered included the following: waste management projects designed to reduce, reuse, and recycle; walking and biking to church campaigns; the study of individual households' environmental footprints and coaching on how to reduce household footprints; strengthening of individual church's environmental practices; public policy advocacy to promote environmental health; building "green houses" with Habitat for Humanity; and launching mutually sustainable agricultural projects with mission partners in Haiti and Mexico.

One of the sweetest parts of these projects that I encountered was how they seemed to lend themselves to intergenerational collaboration, learning, and service. When I shared this observation with one of the pastors with whom I visited, she said, "Oh yes, our green ministry is an especially big hit with the seniors and the children. They have bonded over these efforts, because eco-justice is a topic that is near and dear to the hearts of seniors, and the children have a heightened sense of purpose about how our efforts are bound up with their future. They are also often the very best teachers of their parents."

In a time when most religious leaders are knocking ourselves out creating worship, spirituality, and service-learning ministries that nurture and naturally draw together disparate ages, the green ministries that I encountered were naturally nurturing intergenerational relationships without much effort on the part of anyone.

IV

When I thought about this phenomenon it made total sense to me. Who, after all, in my life, had raised my consciousness about care for the environment? It was my grandparents and their peers. Perhaps my observation strikes a chord of recognition in you too.

My grandparents and many of their peers were "green" before green was "kewl." They reduced, reused, and recycled as a way of life. They didn't have to be educated about the merits of stewardship, conservation, or eco-justice. Every day was Earth Day for them.

As farmers, my grandparents and their friends practiced conservation tillage, raised diverse crops and livestock for the sake of the land, and employed family labor in order to minimize the need to buy commercial pesticides and herbicides and to reduce risk in the marketplace.

The stewardship that they practiced in the fields and farmyard was also practiced around the house. My grandparents (and many like them) raised their own beef, pork, and chicken, and cultivated their own fruits and vegetables. They had “his and hers” gardens to keep peace in the marriage, and they raised enough livestock and produce to support our entire extended family.

Grandma canned and froze most of their produce. She did all of the family mending, and some of the family sewing. She tore up and reused fabric from worn out clothes for patches, quilts, and rugs, and tossed the worst remnants into the “rag bag” for cleaning and painting projects.

My grandparents were stingy with utilities. They caught rain water in cisterns, and used gray water on their gardens, for washing clothes, and for keeping the toilets running when the power went out. A conventional windmill pumped water for the livestock, and served as a backup for the house. They shut off the lights when they left a room. They set the thermostat low and wore sweaters in the winter, and opened windows and pulled down the shades in the summer, long before Jimmy Carter suggested these ideas.

Table scraps were fed to the pets. Peelings and rinds went to the chickens, and whatever the chickens wouldn't eat was distributed to the hogs. Plastic containers from the grocery store reappeared as containers for leftovers, “freezer food,” and “care packages” filled with applesauce, frozen vegetables, and the like. Paper, glass, and tin that couldn't be reused on the farm were recycled at the county dump. Yes, every day was Earth Day for my grandparents and their peers.

When I became an adult and moved away from home, I realized how rare my grandparents' everyday commitment to stewardship was, and how their innate sense of stewardship ensured that they who had relatively little were able to raise us with a profound sense of abundance, and a sense that what we had was not ours to hoard or consume, but to steward and share with family and neighbors and future generations.

Knowing how formative the old people's ways were for me and my generation, it's heartening to think of the opportunities yet untapped for our young people to learn from the seniors among us, and how much the advances of modern science that the younger generations are learning about can further inform and guide us as a community of faith.

V

As we move forward to Earth Day 2009 and to the 40th anniversary of Earth Day next year, we would do well to renew and make new connections across the generational lines. We can look for meaningful ways to express the early Judeo-Christian principals of good stewardship, which are naturally compatible with the vision and values of the environmental movement, and to get there we would do well to do what might be called “theological recycling” as we go.

Not everything, as you may know, can or should be recycled, because some recycling efforts either introduce additional toxins into the environment by their processes, or because recycling some materials requires more energy or expense than creating a new product.

The fifty-some members of our congregation who volunteered with “Save the Bay” last year can attest to the fact that Styrofoam is a menace, partly because it’s not a good candidate for recycling and takes forever to decompose and partly because it breaks into miniscule pieces that look like food to wildlife and is unhealthy when ingested, and is difficult to clean up.

Since the early first century when Christian communities were initially formed, some ideas have been propagated by the Judeo-Christian faith that have a lot in common with Styrofoam and should be reduced in use (or contained, like asbestos), and not be reused or recycled, because these ideas (like these substances) are very bad for the environment.

Some notable examples include the following ideas:

- 1) That “man” is to have “dominion” over the universe.
- 2) That the “physical world” is less important than the “spiritual world.”
- 3) That the focus of faith ought to be on the “next world” rather than “this world.”

VI

Quite possibly the most environmentally destructive idea that has been taken from our Judeo-Christian tradition and co-opted to serve big business and our consumption culture is the idea that “man” should have dominion over the universe. This idea is grounded in the first creation story found in Genesis 1:26–28, where God creates the heavens and the earth, and all of the inhabitants, and grants Adam and Eve dominion over other living things.

“Dominion” has to do with the exercise of power and control over the environment and its inhabitants. John Calvin’s theology of creation was based on this concept of dominion and sadly was interpreted and utilized in ways that fostered a culture of consumption and the exploitation of the environment which began during the Industrial Revolution. A biblical improvement over this “domination relationship” with the environment is the ideal of a benevolent monarch fostered in Psalm 72, where ancient Hebrew kings were encouraged to use their power and authority to care for and protect their subjects. An even better model for our relationship with the environment—which is espoused by several progressive Christian theologians—calls for a sense of partnership or co-creation with the God in the universe (or multi-verse) as scientists would say.

Progressive contemporary theologians, like Matthew Fox, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Douglas John Hall, and Sally McFague have helped Christians reclaim theologies of creation that foster good stewardship, divine and human partnerships, and the sharing

of natural resources in a manner that better reflects the early apostles' vision of a faithful community, which was articulated in Acts 4:32–35.

In addition to dodging theologies of creation that are grounded in concepts of dominion over the environment, we must reclaim and reaffirm the goodness of the natural world. The early apostles lived in cultures where Greek and Roman philosophies permeated the beliefs of everyone, including members of the first Christian communities. An artifact of many of the Greco-Roman philosophies was their fascination and elevation of the spiritual world over the physical world. As progressive Christians, it's good for us to reclaim the passage that we see waved on placards at football stadiums and in public protests so frequently. That passage is John 3:16, "For God so loved the world . . ."

We must remind ourselves and others who would dismiss our mission in this earthly reality that God loved *this* world—not just the spirit world—but God loves THIS world, so much that God sent Jesus here that we might know, love, and serve him. God is good. Creation is good. Jesus came to remind us that *this* world is also God's ultimate concern.

A third artifact of our culture which we must handle with care in our grand recycling project is related to the second. Emphasis on the primacy of the spiritual world has led some Christian groups to discount the need to focus on the stewardship of creation, because they believe that this world will soon pass away and God will magically sweep the whole mess into the trash bin of eternity where global warming; the operation of coal-powered electric plants; the disappearance of wetlands; and the effects of crude oil spills, strip mining, and overfishing don't matter anymore.

Here again we need to point to alternate texts in scripture that reaffirm the goodness of creation and God's ultimate concern for this world. In addition to the texts already mentioned (Genesis 1, John 3, and Acts 4), I would add, Revelation 21, which is a crucial counter for those who imagine the end time as a great rapture, when the faithful are gathered up to God, sort of like the crew on the Starship Enterprise being beamed up by Scotty.

In Revelation 21, John describes a new heaven and a new earth descending from the clouds, and God dwells with mortals in the end time rather than mortals being gathered up into the clouds. Again, we see in Revelation 21, even in the midst of a community permeated with the spiritualism and otherworldliness of Greece and Rome, a vision of God's sense of the earth's goodness, God's concern for our earthly home, and God's deep desire to live in harmony with us in this created order.

VII

To review, not everything that we have received through our Judeo-Christian tradition has proven to be good for the environment or other living things. Not everything we have received promotes the Christian community that the apostles envisioned and

created. Not everything received should be maintained or passed on to future generations.

We would do well to sort out and contain the theological concepts that have been the most toxic to our environment—such as dominion, the supremacy of the spiritual world over the physical world, and pie-in-the-sky religion—and renew, reuse, and recycle theologies that proclaim the goodness of creation, that underscore God’s love for the whole world, that capture the apostles’ vision of a mutually sustainable and supportive community, and that imagine and bring heaven on earth.

As we strive to participate in this important ministry of theological containment and recycling, every day will be Earth Day, and we modern apostles will live the vision of our ancestors, and do our part to pass on our posterity, a taste of heaven right here on earth. Thanks be to God. Amen.