

Ekklesia Sermon
July 10, 2014
Job 12: (5-6), 7-10

[Those at ease have contempt for misfortune, but it is ready for those whose feet are unstable. The tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure, who bring their god in their hands.]

'But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

Pray: Re-orient us, O God, that we might know you and know ourselves as your creatures. Still us, O God, that in the silence we might hear the wisdom of your creation teaching us how to be yours. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

That I began my prayer this afternoon with an appeal for re-orientation was no accident. For those of you who are not Methodist, an important thing to know about those of us who are Methodist is that this season—the end of June, the beginning of July—is when the Methodists migrate. I stand before you today as one who has, over the course of the past few weeks, been uprooted, along with all of my worldly goods, to a new location for ministry. If you include the short vacation that my family snuck into the middle of the transition, my body and spirit have been living in about three locations in just this past month. Today I've packed a bag and landed in a new time zone entirely...and so, re-orientation is a prayer that has not just spiritual, but literal meaning to me right now.

All of that said, there are gifts to living in and through seasons of transition. Moving to a new place has given me what they call "beginner's eyes" on my new homeland, and I've got to say, I've moved to a pretty cool new land. It's not just pride (though I certainly have a bit of that right now) that would say that downtown Durham, NC is *the* place to be. The

NY Times Magazine, US News “Best Places to Live and Raise a Family”, and others have consistently ranked my new neighborhood among the best places in America right now. And, in a state like NC, which has consistently made the news over the past year or two for politics that seem to turn back history, a declining education system, and a coal ash disaster, that’s something to be said. In contrast, my new neighborhood is one of the most progressive, environmentally friendly places one could design in urban America. From the front porch of my church I would quickly run out of fingers and toes on which to count the hybrid cars rolling by. There is a free bus system within a few blocks of my house that runs to all of Durham’s hottest spots. There is a Whole Foods Market in the sightline of my office window. The last few Triangle Green Home Tours have included not just a few homes in my neighborhood...giant old bungalows that have been immaculately remodeled and outfitted with all of the latest in sustainable building technology. Great schools are within walking distance—not just the world-class learning laboratories of Duke, but also a public, residential science and technology high school. And, last but certainly not least, I now live within walking distance of no less than 3 fair trade, local roast coffee shops and 2 award-winning Farm-to-Table restaurants. As you can see, I’m excited by my new community. Compared to my last home—a home at which I learned that there was an asbestos filled movie-theater buried in the field next door, McDonald’s was one of the few local eateries, and one was about 20 miles from anything—this new life seems to offer opportunities to practice care for the created world in a whole new way.

And, with that expectation in mind, you’ll understand why I was particularly distraught when NPR aired an interview just a few weeks ago with Dan Barber, one of the grandfathers and champions of the Farm-To-Table restaurant movement. His new book,

The Third Plate, had recently been released and I tuned into the interview right about the point when he said, “The Farm-To-Table movement is not sustainable.” Talk about popping someone’s balloon! He went on to explain that while the work that has been done over the past two decades to encourage local and seasonal eating is good, it has not challenged the system enough. The menu of his own restaurant, located on the Hudson River in upstate NY, he said, is still based on the fundamental assumptions of the American Way of Life. The “star” vegetables that folks want to eat cannot be grown every year without depleting the land, and nobody really wants to eat the legumes that would be needed to restore the balance. A large piece of meat is still the centerpiece of most of the dishes he serves. We, who call ourselves progressive and environmentally conscious, still live under the presumptions that we “can have it all.”

Looking around my neighborhood following that interview I began to see that, while perhaps a step up from buried asbestos, McDonalds and the many miles I put on my vehicle last year to simply go shopping for groceries, mostly what has happened in my part of Durham is that the American Way of Life has been covered in green paint. By placing solar panels on our 3000 square foot homes, putting hybrid engines in our private cars, and growing organic vegetables and meat on an industrial scale, Wendell Berry, in his essay *Faustian Economics*, would say that we have simply with all of our “green” practices delayed the day of reckoning without ever challenging the presumption of limitlessness and prodigal extravagance upon which our economy is based, nor have we challenged the real names of global warming which are “greed and waste.” We have fallen prey to an idolatry that says that we can technologize our way out of the environmental crisis we face without ever asking questions about how we got into this mess in the first place. If you

were to ask Job the same question, he would not hesitate to name this reality for what it is. Before we can understand verses 7-10, which are our theme verses for this weekend, we must reckon with the condemnation he offers first: **“The tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure, who bring their god in their hands.”** We might wince a bit at the accusation of robbery and divine-provocation, but it is what he calls those of us who live at ease and without consideration of the limits of our existence. It is the foolishness of us who have forgotten that we are creatures in the hands of God who believe that we can hold God in our own hands.

BUT, (and you’ve always got to love a but in the Bible after a declaration of condemnation because it means that there just might be hope). **“But, [says Job], ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?**

In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.”

In a world where we have greedily bought into the notion that there are no limits to our potential, Job points us back to the wisdom of creation so that we might discover again what it means for us to live as creatures in proper relationship to one another and our Creator. What might the plants and animals teach us about being creatures, and how might they call us back to a way of life lived in dignity and beauty in the hands of God?

What I hope to do with this time is suggest one or two ways that we might learn how to be more fully human from our brethren in the kingdom of flora and fauna, but ultimately

spark a conversation that will continue through this weekend as we begin to shape for ourselves and our congregations a set of practices aimed towards the healing of creation.

One of the most delightful stories that I learned about as I began mining for examples of what animals and plants might teach us about living as creatures in right balance with one another and the world was the beautiful story of what happened in Yellowstone National Park following the re-introduction of wolves in 1995. Prior to 1995, due to the devastating decline of the wolves within the park, the environmental situation in Yellowstone was dire. After almost 70 years of wolf-absence, the deer population had spiked and grazed away much of the vegetation that was vital for keeping erosion at bay and the smaller animals in that ecosystem properly housed and fed. Yellowstone's entire ecosystem was on the verge of collapse. When the wolves were reintroduced, within just a few years the balance of the entire system was restored. The wolves controlled the deer population, but what the wolves' presence really did was change the grazing and migration behavior of the deer, which allowed those overgrazed portions of the park to re-vegetate, particularly in the valleys. There the trees came back, which then brought back the birds. The riverbeds were strengthened by the increased strength of the trees on their banks which created a prime environment for the beavers who then made niches near the rivers that were perfect for the flourishing of otters, small reptiles, and amphibians. As it turns out, each of these creatures had a natural instinct to live in balance with the others and with their natural environment. What is most beautiful about this story is that it is an example of what can happen when creatures properly assume their place in the coherent ecosystem of creation. In proper balance, the wolves did not over-consume, the deer no

longer over-consumed, and each and every creature down and across the layers of the food chain flourished by the restored balance and interdependence of these living parts. The second reason why this story is so beautiful is that, above and beyond the things that we might learn from creatures of Yellowstone about how to live in healthy interdependence and harmony, it is the story of human creatures finding again their proper role in the order of creation: not as ones created to subdue and have dominion, but ones whose vocation is that of “serving and preserving” (as Ellen Davis translates those verses from Genesis 2) the earth.

All too often, caught in the traps of individualism, limitlessness, and greed we humans seem to have, to the detriment of the creatures and earth around us, lost that sense of interconnectedness and radical dependence upon the world around us. The flora and fauna of Yellowstone park teach us that in proper balance with one another we will not only have enough but more than enough to thrive, that abundant life has been written right into the very fabric of creation by the grace and providence of the Creator, and that we human creatures are not above or outside the created order but rather servants of its flourishing.

For us who have lost our sense of interdependence I can think of no better place to begin that journey back to the sanity of limits and interconnectedness than in that most creaturely practice of gathering for worship, and in particular as we gather in our communities around the Eucharist Table. It is in the practice of worship that we, too, are restored to a proper balance with one another and our Creator. In worship we are forced to name that we are not God, but creatures whose flourishing has been fused to the flourishing of one another in Christ’s body. As we humbly receive that which we did not

create but that which has been graciously shared with us by the soil, the vine, and our Creator God, we practice not only the gratitude fitting of a creature who rests graciously in God's hands, but the Spirit then inspires us to follow the example of Jesus to give ourselves and our lives to the work of serving the world.

A second idea of how the wisdom of the created world might lead us back to sanity draws me back to that interview with Dan Barber about his restaurant garden. The challenge that Dan faces as he runs his restaurant is that the vegetables most desired by his customers—the rock stars of the vegetable world like tomatoes—require more nutrients from the soil than other vegetables. For a sustainable garden one needs to put these vegetables in rotation with more humble foods such as buckwheat, legumes, and greens. And yet—a guy could go broke trying to sell those! Additionally, the land needs to rest from time to time as the farmer leaves a field fallow and rotates to a different bed for a season. Without even going so far as offering a critique on those who douse their land with chemicals in the name of productivity, what Barber has named is the greatest of American values: the felt need to push the land to breaking point with an ever-increasing supply-demand curve in the hopes of producing more and more quickly. And yet, if we slow down long enough to listen, we discover that the land and the plants on it have a natural rhythm that can be sustained only by seasons of high production, more humble production, and then rest. For those of us who quite often—in the name of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I assume—push our bodies, families, and churches to the breakpoint with a 'round the clock schedule of activity and programming, this second lesson from the garden is pure gift. It is a reminder to us that we were also created to live with a rhythm, that the greatest fruit for

the kingdom is bourn not out of our persistent striving, but rather by finding a pattern of life that includes work, the humble (yet sustaining) work of prayer, and ultimately rest. In the same way that any one of us here might expose the prosperity gospel for its lie, the lie of our culture (which our broken and dying world exposes) is that more doing will never save the planet or bring the kingdom come. What just might save us and the world is discovering a rhythm of life that breaks the cycle of non-stop consumption which assumes there are no limits to what we can do.

Now, I suspect that for most of us and our congregations—particularly in my neck of the woods where folks get paid big bucks to come up with solutions to the world's problems—that it will be humbling to learn that the solution to our current environmental crisis will not come out of our big brains or by working faster, harder, and more efficiently. While the technology of the creation care movement is certainly good and needed, without the wisdom to know how to use this technology in the service of our true human vocation, we are simply fooling ourselves into a new kind of idolatry which imagines that God is in our hands and not the other way around. My deep prayer for the Church as we begin to face the looming “day of reckoning” for this way of life that so many of us take for granted is that we might find some relief, some hope, and even joy in recognizing that everything we need to be creatures properly oriented to our God and for the healing of creation has always been at our disposal. Listening to the animals, the fish, the birds, and plants we find them pointing us back to a way of life we've always known at our core to be the source of abundant life. In the practices of our faith—in worship, that daily training in the art of sufficiency, in Eucharistic living, that practice by which we recognize ourselves as

dependent on God, one another, and the world, in the work of servant ministry through which we sacrificially begin to share the gifts of God's good creation beyond the bounds of our affluent world and into the food deserts and environmental wastelands of our cities and towns, in the art of Sabbath keeping in which we begin to recognize that we are not God nor does our security come from holding God in our hands—we might just discover how to be fully human again. By releasing our hold on the gods who, in the end control us, we will be freed to discover again our place as creatures living gratefully and patiently in the hands of the One who has shaped and formed the world in love and for love, and who, in and through his creation is bringing the world to salvation. Amen.