

Message October 29, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church  
“Joyful Generosity: Cherish & Tend Respectfully” Rev. Trish Eckert

In this morning’s reading from the Book of Genesis, we are told, *In the day that you eat of it, you shall die*. This story relates how humans traded life for knowledge of good and evil – rather than living in the freedom God gave them (meaning us) just to be who we are. Certain awareness and knowledge break the connection between the Creator and ourselves.

This ancient story communicates something about human nature, something about **our** alienation from God. It serves to narrate aspects of human brokenness and it helps us understand more about the way we disobey God by eating false foods of all kinds. And it describes how we invite others to join us in our disobedience. Human beings – individually, corporately, and institutionally – all know the pull of the quest for power. What could be more human? And, we have seen throughout history as well as in today’s present context, the way in which the quest for power corrupts. The awareness that was revealed to us ultimately fumbled up our “wiring” and has made it possible for us to take offense, seek revenge, to destroy, rape and pillage. This knowledge makes us vulnerable to our base nature. We seek whatever means in order to gain power. Power *over*...power over the natural world, over other people, over ecosystems, food chains, power over the web of life for our own purposes without an eye toward the future.

We came to believe that we own land, that we shape it to our will, that we can use and abuse it for our own short-term purposes and gain. Stories among indigenous people created a different narrative because they acknowledged that they were part of creation; they were one with the earth: another among the many beings created by the Divine that were all part of a system that worked together, in harmony. Indigenous people know that land is not a commodity – it cannot be owned, which is why Native tribes would exchange land, but in their minds that was only permission to use the land, understanding that it is a gift from God, it is an entity unto itself. The land is sentient, encompassing many life forms and spaces.

Revisiting the definition of stewardship: “taking care of something” the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care – in the Bible, the story tells us that we are to “till and keep it” – *Keep* in the Hebrew, *shamar*, means “to exercise great care over,” which over hundreds of years and ultimately over thousands of years, we used to rationalize our belief that we have *dominion* over = sovereignty (supreme power), control, jurisdiction. Yet for all the technical and technological prowess of our species, we cannot come close to mustering a strength equal to the power of nature.

We witness and experience that the natural world has laws of its own, a power of its own - earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, the tides - and that our

treatment of the natural world develops its own consequences. We are seeing the cascading effects of climate change – aspects of this that our scientists are trying to determine, and our computer programs extrapolate, but we still can't fully know what to expect or what time frame we're looking at. "Naturally occurring" events – temperature, rain fall, sea levels – often lead to extreme events and an escalation in the magnitude of the natural disasters we experience.

As we think about stewardship, the health of our planet is integral to our quality of life and to our future, as climate change exposes us to water and energy scarcity, poor air quality and increased temperatures – those with more resources are better able to protect themselves and ignore the impacts, leading to socio-political tensions, rising inequality, financial instability, conflicts, and variable security threats.

What if we truly embraced having "great care over" rather than "great power over" creation? Keep in mind that when we use the language of *resources* (defined a stockpile of materials that can be drawn on to function effectively) – is still about USING rather than cohabitating WITH the natural world. We can shift our understanding of stewardship to be that which supports and maintains healthy states of growth and being, all the while maintaining an awareness of succession – to supplement what is naturally in our surroundings rather than unduly shaping or taming it.

Throughout this week of contemplation and reflection, I tapped into the wisdom of a variety of naturalists, poets, writers, and bloggers. The poet and blogger, Hannah Stephenson wrote a poem entitled, "Ancient Language" – it's a short poem that speaks to our deep connection and interdependence within the natural world:

*If you stand at the edge of the forest  
and stare into it  
every tree at the edge will blow a little  
extra  
oxygen toward you*

*It has been proven  
Leaves have admitted it*

*The pines I have known  
have been especially candid*

*One said  
that all breath in this world  
is roped together*

*that breathing is  
the most ancient language*

“All breath in this world is roped together.” What would happen if we actually lived this way? There wouldn’t be mass shootings, there wouldn’t be genocide, there wouldn’t be fracking or deforestation or pesticides.

How might each of us tap into the lived understanding and awareness that we are beings that are part of the ecosystem rather than above it or outside it? The blogger, Gina Bearne, describes a practice that may echo your own experience or invite you to consider it. She describes spending intentional time outdoors, and she finds a place to settle where she can focus on breathing mindfully. She describes what she calls a “powerful circular experience” – in her words, she’s: “...sitting on the ground on a glorious day blessed by a gentle breeze; the moments when the boundaries between my being and that of water, rock or tree blur into an acknowledgement of oneness, of connection – these are true moments of grace. They are only possible when the boundaries of ‘I’, of ego-self loosen, moments of ‘awareness,’ of being truly awake; the inner experience carries such a certainty, sounds a resounding ‘yes.’ It all seems so obvious at that moment of awareness!” These experiences shape the core of her being and make it imperative to live from a place rooted in mindfulness, integrity, wonder, and joy. This also informs her understanding of stewardship vs. ownership, in which stewardship is viewed and practiced as a deep love and great desire to do right by creation and by all the beings with which we share it. It is a sense of responsibility that underpins one’s actions.

We speak often of awe and wonder of nature. Another word that fits here would be “enchantment.” If we each found our way to enchantment, we would know more deeply our belongingness to a rich and many-layered world, stirring within us a profound and whole-hearted participation in the adventure of life. Enchantment is a natural, spontaneous human tendency – one we possess as children, but lose, through social and cultural pressures, as we grow older. (Which is probably why we are so grateful to children for giving us opportunities to see the world through their eyes whenever possible.) I believe that it is an attitude that we can cultivate – it embraces wonder, and fully engages the mythic imagination – but it is also deeply embodied, ecological, grounded in place and community. To live an enchanted life is to be challenged, to be awakened, to be gripped and shaken to the core by the extraordinary which lies at the heart of the ordinary. We come to see and know God in these places, to see and know one another and the stranger, to see and know ourselves. We more readily notice what we need and who we can turn to, the communities we need and the ways we want to live in those communities – to provide support and receive support. To shift our energy from “power over” to “care over.”

Such a community is what Paul is describing in his letter to the Thessalonians. In the chapter previous to what we heard today, he has been defending his ministry because opponents were challenging him and his colleagues, Silvanus and Timothy. Faithful preaching often stirs opposition because God’s ways run counter to the world’s ways. Faithful preaching often runs against monied interests. When wealthy and powerful

people believe that their interests are threatened, they marshal their resources to counter the threat.

And in the text this morning, what we hear is how these Thessalonian Christians had become very dear to him. His phrase, “to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves,” reveals a great tenderness and connection. He shares with them not only the Good News of God but also his personal love and devotion for them.

Congregations have the capacity to develop that kind of deep affection within their community. I think many of us can relate to Paul here and reflect on our deep love for particular communities, both here at Tippe and beyond our walls. May we steward our inner resources and join with others to live into the true meaning of stewardship rather than confusing it with ownership; rooting ourselves in mindfulness, integrity, wonder, and joy. It is through a deep love and great desire to do right by creation and by all the beings with which we share it that we will ensure our future and that of generations to come. May we recognize God’s abiding love for all of creation and share it abundantly, acknowledging the sacred in all beings and places. Amen.

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