

Tending the Earth

An Earth Day Sermon by Rev. John Morehouse
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It's always something of a professional hazard to use your own family as an example of anything. But having just returned from the East Coast where Frances and I went to celebrate my oldest daughter's birthday and visit with my youngest grandson, Ashur, I couldn't help but think of how his growing up is effected by the decisions we are making now. How will the fact that by the year 2050 the earth will be 10 degrees warmer and the seas will have risen by about a foot, covering most of the beaches in Southern California, flooded almost all of Bangladesh, destroyed almost all of the polar ecosystems and losing almost another 30,000 species of plants and animal life?

This is not meant to be a Debby downer sermon. I do believe there is hope. But what kind of a world will our grandchildren inherit? And how far is that from the life of light we once promised to them? Permit me to wax theologically first. Both of my youngest grandchildren still gaze up at the ceiling or the sky and start to say something apparently to nothing at all. What do they see? I don't think they are trying to just make out the world. No, I am of the opinion that they see a movement of light from which they came; an understanding of the realm before

this earthly life. In fact, I am convinced we all touch on this realm at least two times in our lives, within the first 14 months of life and within the last several days of life if it is a prolonged illness. I have seen that gaze in the dying as well as the living.

If we consider that the human body is made of flesh and bone and water, what holds it all together is energy. And that energy is really what holds us together. We are, in short, formed energy. And our planet, of which we are a part, is also formed energy. So what we really have here is an issue of energy. How can we transform the mandate I believe we are given in the light from which we came to create and tend the realm in which we live? In short, how can we tend the light so that it doesn't destroy us and all life on this planet?

Thomas Friedman, the New York Times columnist wrote in last Sunday's Times that the new challenge before, the only real challenge before us after our post 9/11 trauma and divisiveness of the Bush years, is how we are going to save this fragile blue globe of light from suffering the heat death. As Friedman puts it "Green is the new red, white and blue." (From the NYT Sunday Magazine "The Power of Green" by Thomas Friedman, 4/15/2007). My friends, this is our issue! This is the issue we can get behind, this is the issue we can rally our interfaith sisters and brothers around, and this is our theological issue. If we have any one theological

position beyond the love of community it is our universal belief that we are part of an interconnected web of all existence. The energy of the universe is continuous from one life to the next, from one species to the other, from our web of a planet to each of us. Duality between us and any part of the creation is, I believe, an illusion. My grandchildren are the least likely to suffer from this tragedy, so many others, much more vulnerable than they will need our help.

The time has come for us to tend this garden seriously. But as Friedman wrote “...here’s the really inconvenient truth: We have not even begun to be serious about the costs, the effort and the scale of change that will be required to shift our country and eventually the world to a largely emission – free energy infrastructure over the next 50 years.”

I picked 50 years from now on purpose, not only because it is our fiftieth anniversary but because the mid-century mark is, by most estimates, the point of no – return for our children, these young people who we celebrate today, from which we will not be able to stop the runaway climate change that could destroy the earth as we know it and us with it. We have time but we will have to apply all of our skills to tend this garden back to health.

Our green sanctuary movement has taken the first steps and we are pleased to announce some new initiatives. But this is not

just a fuzzy green issue, this is a justice issue and it is deeply ingrained in geo-politics or what Friedman calls “Petro Politics”. Because the “first law of petro politics”, the first hoe of tending our garden of Eden here is that when oil prices fall, competition, transparency and political participation rise. The so called clash of civilization is as tied to oil as it is to theology. With the rising scarcity of oil, Iran and Russia have become more totalitarian while the kingdom of Bahrain, which is running out of oil, held free elections just last year. (Ibid, Friedman). Our tending needs to be more than just changing light bulbs and car pooling. It will require serious political will to convince policy makers and businesses that energy independence is an issue of national and international survival.

Tending the earth will require moving fuel efficiency standards to 60 mpg, increasing solar power 700 fold, cutting packing in half, increasing efficiency in energy by 25%. It’s doable but it does require a lifestyle change. How many families here drove more than one car here today? My point exactly. Tending the earth will require the proverbial paradigm shift, and we have to be the ones who lead the way.

It will also require us to rethink our place on the planet. We see the world as a thing. At best we are stewards of the “thing”. What we need, to come full circle to my metaphor of light, is to see us as

part of it all. Remember the story book *Yertle the Turtle* by Dr. Seuss. Yertle the king of the turtles wants to be king of more. He stood on top of an every greater stack of turtles proclaiming himself King of more and more, I'm king of the trees, King of the Birds and the Bess. I'm king of the butterflies, king of the air. Ah me! I'm Yertle the turtle, marvelous me! For I am ruler of all that I see!" And of course, pride goeth before the fall, and higher, higher goes Yertle to be king of the sky and the moon until one little turtle named Mack burps and Yertle falls into the mud.

Can we see ourselves as something more than rulers of the earth? Is it possible to see our selves as humble, humus, human beings? Part of the earth, the real *Adam*, the earthlings we were made to be.

The untold story of the Hebrews, from whom so much of our way of looking at the world comes from, is that they left Sumeria and the worship of earth goddesses to lead a nomadic life and worship the great male sky god. When a people are not rooted to the earth as the Hebrews were, they are less likely to see the earth as part of them and more likely to see the earth as a thing to be used. The Hebrews were the children of a great divine divorce between the Sumerians who worshipped the earth goddess and the Semites who worship a sky god. This ancient understanding, which we now celebrate as mono-theism creates an objective

understanding of land and our planet. The earth is to be used. And this bias led to our present situation, indeed to the conquest and terrible subjugation of any native peoples including our own.

But if we are just another form of energy, then we are no different from the planet we are on. Tending the garden may not be good enough. BEING the garden is the better metaphor. As part of the garden we have more at stake than being sure it still produces. By being a part of the earth we move to what Yeats called “the sublime in all that I see”. We can, with the right perspective, with the right theology - that we are the earth - , focus on the *earth as part of us*. Mother Theresa began each day with a walking prayer in her small garden in Calcutta, there amongst the teeming masses she had a small garden of roses where she was reminded of the Eden in all of us.

Tending the garden, BEING the garden, taking seriously our theology that we really are part of the web of interconnection means we have to challenge some assumptions about the way we look at the world. God as a force rather than a parent, humanity as light rather than as separate beings. You as part of a community, a family, rather than some supreme individual. Mother earth as a single mom. Mothers and fathers as parents rather than just one or the other. If we see life and our place in it as a continual whole, a continuum and not a duality then we begin to shift how we see the

earth as somehow apart from us. It was Emerson who wrote that “Everything in nature contains all the power of nature.” Part of that power is us. The power of creation is the power of the garden of Eden. We were thrown out of the garden to become creators ourselves of the garden and at the same time to be the garden. How can we look at the earth any other way but as part of us, same light, same energy, same force? Creators of the spirit of life that creates yet more life.

Here is the great truth: Our greatest power lies not in our being, but in our becoming. It’s a journey without end. Becoming means seeing the earth, this garden as the same as us. To tend the earth is to tend to life, to ourselves and the rest of the creation we are a part of.

Wrap your mind around this for a while: Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we are already made of the earth. To treat the earth with care is more than just being responsible. Its survival. Anything less is suicide. I propose we begin telling people we meet that our church believes that the earth is sacred just as life is sacred. That is our theology. Move beyond seeing ourselves as stewards of the earth which is what Judeo Christianity teaches to seeing ourselves as rooted in the earth. At the burning bush God commanded Moses to “remove thy sandals from thy feet for the place on which you stand is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). We say your feet are the

same as the ground. Remove them says your mother and dance.

Annie Dillard, one of my spiritual heroes once wrote: "We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each others' beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house." (From *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) We are the house and it is far from empty. Let's start dancing.