

This sermon was preached by Greg Newswanger as the last sermon in a six-week creation care series at Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster. Each of the six Sundays included the Genesis text for that day of the creation story. (The series did not include the day of rest on the seventh day.) The focus of this sixth sermon is on humanity.

Greg Newswanger is a lay member of the congregation and member of the congregational council. He has lived for the past ten years with his wife and two children in an intentional community in Freeland, MD, about fifty minutes from Lancaster. Greg received his M.Div. from Chicago Theological Seminary in 2001.

Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster

6/5/11 Sermon

Greg Newswanger

(An audio link can be found at: <http://www.jmundok.com/cmcl/>)

Scripture - Genesis 1:26-31

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Scripture - Mark 7:24-30

From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet, he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ... Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Sermon

Today is the last Sunday in this Creation Care series and the focus for the morning is humanity. I didn't pick a title for today's sermon, but if you would like one as a reference point for my words this morning, I refer you to the last line of the children's story that Susan shared this morning. "When we change ourselves, the world is changed." It is humbling to be asked to speak and my sharing this morning is as much for myself as anyone else.

One decade ago I completed a Constructive Theology paper as part of my seminary program. Upon reading it, a friend mentioned that she was intrigued that one of the sources I included was the phenomenon of the dying frogs. I was intrigued too. Just a couple of years prior, I would not have thought of including dying frogs as one of the things that shape how I think about the world, God, church, and human community. But, in the late 1990s reading articles about dying frogs, holes in the ozone layer, and the destruction of the rainforests, helped to expand my awareness and shift my consciousness. I could no longer take environmental issues for granted.

In the late 1990s frog species in decline were described as the canaries in the coal mine. Unfortunately, that has proven all too true. Today, scientists suggest that planet Earth is on the verge of a 6th Mass Extinction – this one caused by the human species.

When Jesus walked the earth there were about 300 million of us humans on the planet. Now we are 6.9 billion and counting. Collectively we are a planetary force. We alter landscapes - clear forests, turn swaths of land into crop production, build cities, roads, dams. We extract, consume, pollute. Now island nations, impoverished communities, subsistence farmers feel the brunt of consumption and pollution decisions many times made halfway around the world.

The reality is that there are currently a multitude of challenges to life systems on planet Earth. Life, Reality, the Universe is inviting us to confront these daunting environmental challenges. How we as individuals, communities, and institutions respond to this Reality is a key question of our lifetime. Failure to fully engage these challenges poses a risk to our own species as well as many life forms with which we share this spinning blue orb. These environmental challenges will be with us - continually inviting our responses - for the rest of our lives.

I want to turn to the scripture passage from the book of Mark that was read this morning as suggesting one avenue of response to these environmental challenges. This is the story of the Syrophenician woman and Jesus.

In this story it appears that Jesus is trying to get a little downtime. But it is not to be. He is immediately approached by a Gentile woman who pleads with him to help her troubled daughter. Jesus' response "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," seems harsh. Jesus appears to be calling this woman a "dog". Some commentators prefer to interpret the word "dog" as the more endearing "puppy dog" and not as "wild thieving dog." Regardless, Jesus' message is that his focus is on the Jewish people and that this woman and her people are not deserving of his time and attention.

The woman does not leave, but responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She is saying something like, "Even though you may consider me a dog, I still deserve some measure of respect and attention."

It is at this point in the story that I imagine Jesus experiencing a moment of realization. As Jesus is present with this woman and hears her response, something shifts. He moves beyond his preconceived notions of what his mission is and his expectation of some downtime. He expands his circle of care, compassion, and love to include this Gentile woman in front of him. In that moment he is able to respond, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." I hear it as, "In saying that, you gave me an opportunity to broaden my awareness. I recognize and respect you. I give you my attention and my healing power."

Jesus is confronted by reality in the form of a pleading Gentile woman. He attempts to dismiss her and go about what he understands his life to be. But gradually he realizes that to truly engage the woman in front of him - the reality of the situation - he must broaden his circle of care, compassion, and love and include this woman, her daughter, and the Gentile people.

I suggest that interpreting the story in this manner holds possibilities for us as we confront the reality of the environmental crises of our time. We too are in the presence of a

reality that is not going away. It is asking for our time and attention. The reality of the environmental crises was not part of our plan. But now it is everywhere we look; a question of our lifetime. In what ways do we need to broaden our awareness and expand our consciousness as we find our responses?

I want to offer a couple ideas drawn from the realm of Integral Spirituality and Evolutionary Christianity that can help us broaden our awareness.

The first has to do with our relatedness. The human species has been on a journey of gradually expanding our circles of care and compassion - from family to tribe to nation to all of humanity. While there are still divisions based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etcetera there is also an awareness of our shared humanity. We are finding bonds of relatedness to all of the human community.

Indeed one can understand Jesus' life and message as pointing us towards ever expanding circles of care, of love, of relatedness. His reaching out to women, Gentiles, Romans, people with leprosy, tax collectors, beggars – were a challenge to his Jewish people to begin to understand what it means to expand one's circle of care. A love beyond tribe and religious identity; a love that included perceived enemies - was a different way of thinking and being. It was a radical challenge to his listeners to expand their circle of love.

And, it remains a challenge for us today as well. For today the challenge is to continue to expand our circles of care to include the entire world. It is imperative that we find ways to be in right relationship to all that is. As westerners, we have inherited a heavy dose of dualism - us separate from/over and against nature. Our awareness needs to expand to a deep knowing of how intricately connected we are to everything around us. Our bodies (touch body) are star dust. The oxygen we breathe (take an audible breathe) generated by maples and elms. The water we use – carried by cloud. We are not separate from nature. We are it and it is us.

How do we cherish the oak, the brook, the air? Can cardinal, polar bear, dolphin be brother and sister? If we understand God as the creator of everything, can we shift from seeing everything as resource for our own use, to truly living from an awareness that it all is a precious gift?

A few weeks ago my two children, Ursa and Avin, and I were getting ready to leave our house to pick up my wife at the Baltimore train station. We were leaving at dusk and would return after 10:00pm. I was already at our car at our parking pad and noticed as my children were coming that three outside lights were on. I thought one outside light would be sufficient and called back “turn those two off and leave the lower one on.” As I was getting in the car I looked back and saw that all three lights had been turned off. I thought, “maybe they hadn't heard me quite right.” So I called back and said, “You can leave that one on.” But they just ran to the car. As they came they said, “We heard you. But, dad, think of the polar bears.”

It took me a second, but I quickly realized that upon return it would take 15 seconds to turn on a light that otherwise would be left burning for an hour and a half. It was with a sense of satisfaction - and dare I say pride - that I realized how my children were internalizing an expanded sphere of care and relatedness to the polar bears and the world.

So, one way to expand our awareness has to do with relatedness. A second has to do with how we understand our place as human beings in the universe. Current scientific understanding is that the universe is about 13.7 billion years old. So the human place comes after the universe has already unfolded for billions of years. Over time, humans have developed unique capacities for observation, study, and reflection. The universe has developed through the human species the capacity to observe and reflect - upon itself. We study the stars and galaxies, the molecules and atoms, ecosystems and habitats. After billions of years, the universe has developed the capacity to reflect upon itself. ... And we are that reflective capacity. We are the eyes of the universe reflecting on itself.

This idea can take awhile to digest. For me it has been a shift of consciousness to think about 13.7 billion years of history “invested” in me. Reflecting on this notion creates a sense of awe for the vastness of processes that have given rise to life on this planet. It creates a sense of gratitude for all that has come before - to make life possible. It also creates a sense of responsibility. Recognizing that it has taken 13.7 billion years for the life communities to come into their present form, evokes a desire to do what I can to promote the continuation and thriving of these life communities.

My hope is that as we come to understand our sense of place and our relatedness to all that is, our living and being can flow from a deeper place. May the human personal, political, economic and technological responses to the environmental challenges be informed by a spiritual depth of awareness and breadth of perspective.

I suggest four practices as we continue on this journey.

One – discernment. There is no one right way to respond. There is no magic bullet. Pay attention to what bubbles up from within, the still small voice, God’s call, the nudge of the universe. What is stirring within you, within us?

Two – rest. In the first sermon in this series Chad reminded us that the Genesis creation story has seven days. Day seven is a day of rest. With reflection and rest come new insights that lead to further engagement.

Three – embodiment. Living into these questions calls for a fully embodied, fully human response - song, dance, poetry, humor, art, play, imagination, creative endeavor, and critical thinking. We need our full range of human capacities to respond to the crises around us.

Four – trust. As institutions totter and the world seems to be in crisis, chaos, and collapse is it easy to cling desperately to the known, to comfort, security, stability. This is a natural response. It is also a response based in fear.

It is both a principle of the universe and a message of the Jesus story that out of chaos, collapse, and death, new life emerges, something new is born, resurrection happens. I invite us to trust this Gospel message and universe principle. Trust taking a step into the unknown. Trust that in the midst of chaos, new seeds are being planted. Trust that new life, relatedness, and possibility are taking root within and around us. Indeed, as we experience change and loss, we must grieve. But let not our grief lead to a perpetual despair. Let us choose instead to trust that the new is being born, even in the midst of death.

In conclusion I would like to share a poem that wrote itself through me several months ago. I entitle it Prayer for My Life.

Prayer for My Life

13.7 billion years
Universe history
Alive in me.

Ancestors all the way back
To Big Bang,
Great Radiance,
Radical Outpouring
I am stardust become conscious.

God, Spirit, Evolutionary Process
Ongoing
Alive in me.

How large is my circle of compassion?
What is bubbling forth?
Can this manifest in my life?
Am I saying, "Thy will be done?"

Not only for me
But for 13.7 billion years of ancestors
And ... and ... for my children's, children's children.

Amen.