

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 22, 2007

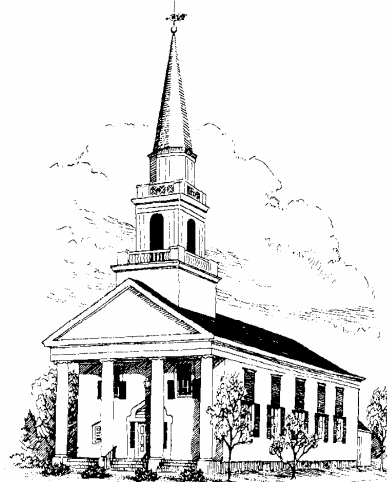
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Dominion as Stewardship”

Scriptures:

Genesis 1-2:4

1 Timothy 4:4



We are gathered here today to be reminded of things we already know. We gather today on this anniversary of *Earth Day* to remember and to be reminded that God is the creator and that God is the source of the universe and all life.

We heard in our reading from Genesis this morning that God looked around at the created order in its entirety and in its wholeness and declared that it was all very good! We also heard that God gave humankind “dominion” and “authority” over all the earth. We are reminded in Timothy’s letter that “Everything created by God is good” and that “Nothing is to be rejected.”

We gather here today as a religious community some 37 years after the first *Earth Day* to reconsider a terrible truth—we seem to be at war with God’s creation! You don’t need to have seen Al Gore’s movie *An Inconvenient Truth* to know that we humans living on this marble in space seem to have upset, distressed, and ravaged our entire earth’s ecosystem in many serious ways.

We all know that something is not right with the wholeness and order that God created and continues to create. We all know that something has happened to God’s vision of *shalom*, of harmony, of well-being for the earth and all its creatures. We all know that we have an environmental crisis taking place all around us. We all know who is responsible and that reality makes us all squirm. We, who are the very ones gifted with the opportunity and the responsibility to care for this creation, are the very ones who spoil, pollute, and destroy it at every turn.

There is nothing that I can see that suggests in the Genesis story that God’s decision to give humankind authority on earth implied privilege as much as it implied responsibility for the care of that creation. Yet, sad to say, we have repeatedly failed to see the larger picture.

I think we can agree that something amazing and astounding, that we call God, created and gifted this spaceship we call earth (as well as the entire cosmos in which we float). It is clear that this earth was carefully designed and constructed to last a long, long time. And we now know, more clearly than ever and with greater and greater clarity, that the universe was created as an incredibly complex, interconnected and inter-related whole—a sacred whole, in fact. Yet we seem to be the ones who fail to recognize that we are only one part of the creation. We are only one piece of the entire puzzle.

For too long, we have presumed to believe that we human beings were gifted God’s creation exclusively for our benefit. For too long, the gift of authority has justified selfish and exclusive use and abuse of all creation—its air, its forests, its oceans, its waterways, its land, and all its wildlife.

What have we done? Rose Bird, one of the Chief Justices of the California Supreme Court has made this observation:

We have probed the earth, excavated it, burned it, ripped things from it, buried things in it, chopped down its forests, leveled its hills, muddied its waters and dirtied its air. That does not fit my definition of a good tenant. If we were here on a month-to-month basis, we would have been evicted long ago.

Now I want to be sure to communicate this morning that there is reason to hope. Nothing tells us that all is lost. We know we can become better tenants. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that we can improve our record and that we can make a difference. I do not want everyone here to shut down and get overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenges we have. I do not want you to simply tune out this morning because it can all seem like such bad news.

On the screen in front of you this morning, you will be offered many amazing images of this world we call home and this amazing gift that God has offered us to care for. Yes, you may see, as well, images of things we have done to not take care of it very well.

I highly recommend that you go see Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth*. This movie brings a very strong warning and a well-documented and scientifically-based message, specifically about the reality and threat of global warming. Yes, it is a haunting movie and, yes, it reminds us of how much we have to do. It also quite clearly reveals how close to a real global disaster we might be if we do not take it all very seriously and work for change.

There is much work to do. We have made and are making change and we have the capability of creating more healthy ecosystems. We are promoting sustainable livelihoods. We are nurturing new generations of committed, active citizens around the world. We are expanding our perspective as one of a global nature whose focus must be that we are all a part of an interconnected whole creation. And there is much to do.

For too long, we have neglected to take seriously the many warnings that have been out there for us to see and hear and read. These problems have not come all of a sudden or out of nowhere. These problems and challenges of our global ecosystem have been identified and named as realities for many years now.

It is too easy for us to remain comfortable in the relative safety and security of our homes and livelihoods here in New England, here in North America. It is too easy for us to pretend that the problems only impact someone else, somewhere else. But let's be boldly honest. Those of us who live here in North America have developed a culture which is so human-centered in its world view that we have actually developed what many would name a predatory relationship with nature and the creation.

We have somehow come to assume that we have the right and the authority to use creation in whatever way suits our lifestyles and our needs, regardless of how it impacts other people around the world or how it impacts the land, the air, or the water on which we all depend. We have, I believe, erroneously assumed that dominion of God's creation has meant domination, exploitation, and exclusive ownership instead of stewardship. We have come to assume that we have exclusive access instead of a caretaking function. We have assumed a "Me, first" approach instead of a partnership with creation. We have raped and pillaged the earth repeatedly, and the saddest part is that we continue to do so.

We have not only failed to keep in mind the goodness of God's creation but we have allowed our own comforts, our own pleasures, and our own lifestyles to become more important than preserving

this planet for future generations. We have probably all heard the oft-quoted statistic that 6% of the world's population consumes nearly 60% of its raw materials but do we make the connection that we (here in North America) are that 6%?

I could stand here this morning and shower you with loads and loads of statistics. I could bring you the bad news in numerical conclusions. I could batter you with all the evidence out there that we here in the United States consume unbelievably vast amounts of food, sugar, gasoline, and waste unbelievable amounts of money on lottery tickets, prostitution, entertainment and recreation. But this morning, instead, I'm going to let the visual images on the screen in front of you speak for themselves.

I think we can all agree that we do love and enjoy God's creation. I think we can agree that we love and appreciate this spaceship on which we live. I have no doubt that we all want this creation to continue to be available for all of our children, our grandchildren, and their grandchildren for many generations to come. What many of the statistics do reveal is that our priorities and our lifestyles are not in line with a world where our future on this planet is seriously jeopardized. Many of the hard facts reveal that we easily lose sight of being good stewards of this planet.

We know by now that there are problems with the air we breathe. We know that there are major problems disposing of chemicals and nuclear wastes. We know that the forests and jungles are being cut down and destroyed at an unprecedented rate. We know that there have been significant changes in land usage in this country as well as in places around the world which impact us all. We know that there have been threats to the ozone layer that surrounds this planet and protects us from harmful radiation. We know that there are problems and threats to our water supplies. We know that there are ever-increasing problems of overpopulation. We know that half of this earth's population do not have a reliable source of food and are hungry some or all of the time. We know that there is no real shortage of food in the global village and that if all the food were divided equally, everyone would have enough to eat. We know that there is a terrifying rate of destruction and extinction for various species of both plant and wildlife on this globe. And we know that the rate of extinction exceeds the evolutionary process by as much as 1000 times.

What can we do? How can each of us contribute to the re-creation, instead of the destruction, of our home we call earth and of God's creation? As faithful people of God, we all need to continually recognize and affirm the goodness of all creation. We are called in faith to be good stewards of God's gifts. We must take seriously that we are all part of the great web of life. We need to comprehend anew that God's creation is never completed or finished once and for all, but that we can be part of the ongoing process of creation. We can help! We can make a difference!

Each of us has a responsibility in our own lives, in our own homes and in our own places of work and play to see that we can make a difference—for our own lives and for the future of our children and the future of all creation. We need to accept the responsibility to think globally and to act locally. This is not new news.

By now I have to hope that we all know about recycling, reusing, and reducing our consumption in all areas of our lives. I have to hope that each of us knows that it is up to each of us to live ecologically sound lifestyles. It is up to each of us to protect and preserve God's good creation. We may find ourselves so horrified by the facts that we simply shut down about it all. It is difficult to observe the images of desecration and destruction on the screen in front of us.

Again, I hope you trust that my intention here today is not to overwhelm any of us. I am not trying to scare you or distress you this morning, although I do hope my words make a difference. I am trying to suggest that, in light of the creation story and in light of our faith which suggests that we love

one another as much as we love ourselves, that we do indeed have a role as responsible stewards on this good earth.

I can highly recommend a book called *The Greening of Faith: God, the Environment, and the Good Life*. This book contains a series of essays written by a wide variety of people of faith. These essays focus on how much, as people of faith, we need to care for the creation and share in the responsibility for repairing and renewing the earth in an ongoing way. There is more to be said about these matters. But let me, for today, close with this prayer:

*How wonderful, O Lord, are the works of your hands!
The heavens declare your glory, the arch of sky displays your handiwork.
In your love you have given us power to behold the beauty
of your world robed in all its splendor.
The sun and the stars, the valleys and the hills, the rivers and the lakes
all disclose your presence.
The roaring breakers of the sea tell of your awesome might.
The beasts of the field and the birds of the air bespeak your wondrous will.
In your goodness, you have made us able to hear the music of the world.
The voices of loved ones reveal to us that you are in our midst.
A divine voice sings through all creation. (Jewish Prayer)*

Let us go out committed to work as good stewards of all of God's creation.
Amen.