

“Whose Planet?”**Psalm 24****The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 13 July 03**

Let me start by asking you a question: Would you ever consider chucking your garbage or even a candy wrapper or a Coke can on the front lawn of the church? I'm guessing that none of you answered in the affirmative. Of course you're not going to throw trash on our front lawn: not only would you not throw trash where it doesn't belong, messing up a church also seems like a great way to generate some really bad karma!

So, here's the question: if you aren't willing to sully the grounds of the church, are you willing to support the desecration of God's planet? It's not a lot different, but the scale is dramatically dissimilar. We're essentially dumping on God's front yard when we clear-cut forests, pour toxins into the air, water, or ground., that's stating it rather broadly, but we Americans, in particular, are not doing a good job of preserving this precious planet. 20 or so of us rode our bikes to church a few weeks ago (back when we still had rain), but how many of us rode today? I didn't!

We have failed to ratify the Kyoto Treaty on Global Warming, and we are absolute hogs when it comes to using the resources of the planet. Our attitude seems to be “abuse it,” rather than “use it” in a sustainable, responsible manner that reflects stewardship of God's earth.

The United States of America is the world's largest energy producer, consumer, and net importer.¹ Not surprisingly, we're also the earth's largest producer of greenhouse gases. And the Energy Act of 2003 again fails to enact greater fuel-efficiency standards for cars and light trucks. The trend is going in absolutely the wrong direction in this country: we hit a 22-year high in average passenger vehicle fuel efficiency; we went from a high of 22 miles per gallon in 1986, and fuel efficiency has been declining steadily to just over 20 miles per gallon in 2001.²

Like it or not, it's up to us to turn around the way we're abusing the planet. And I don't say that just because it's good policy; it's also good theology. (I'll get to the theology in a minute...don't worry.) It's up to us as individuals to make prudent choices about the cars we drive, the waste we produce, the energy we use, and the federal policies we support (whether it's in regard to petroleum extraction or responsible forestry or preservation of wilderness areas or population control or any other aspect of safeguarding our planet).

We are on a trajectory we simply can't sustain: our over-consumptive lifestyle is becoming a model for the rest of the world, and it's not tenable to have China become an automotive society. But why should we have a living standard that is so much higher than most of the world? Unless we are willing to simplify our lifestyles dramatically, we are in no position to preach to the rest of the world about sustainability and conservation.

Here's a question for you: how seriously do you think we should take the words of the Psalmist when he writes, “The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it?” Do we assume that it's here for us to abuse and consume or is our fundamental assumption that it's here for us to sustain and nurture?

¹ U.S. Gov't EPA statistics www.fedstats.gov

² Source: Light Duty Automotive Technology and Fuel Economy Trends: 1975 Through 2001, U.S. EPA Office of Air and Radiation (September, 2001).

I think of this as a matter of stewardship at its core: conservation is all about using the gifts God has provided for us in a way that is sustainable and life-giving for **all** God's people: including those in coming generations. When we fail to do that – through our personal choices, through our cultural norms, and through our governmental policies – we are committing a grievous sin, opening a chasm between God and humankind. I can say with some certitude that God minds it a lot less when we use God's name in vain than when we pump toxic waste into God's oceans, rivers, and lakes.

But, we also do things right on occasion. Just this week, one of our Trustees, Gail Knoblock, set up a great recycling and composting system for Plymouth, and John Henry Peck has been hauling our office paper and cardboard to the Recycling Center for a long time. We also just had an "energy efficiency audit" by the City of Ft. Collins to point out ways we could use less electricity and gas. And of course the Social Concerns Committee has helped us be a leader in the use of sustainable, wind-generated electricity.

One of my favorite contemporary theologians is an eco-feminist named Sallie McFague who teaches at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She writes that "piety and praxis [or application] go together... Two things have stood out for me in the lives of ... extraordinary Christians: first, a profound relationship with God as the basis for their works of justice and mercy and, second, the growth of their love in ever-widening circles.... Great praxis demands great piety... The Christian practice of radical love knows no bounds: it does not stop at any border, even the human one."³

So, if we extend that idea further: that our radical love goes beyond the bounds of our species, we should be loving toward animals, plants, sky, sea, river, and the earth itself. That's a little difficult to get your head around. Here's another way of saying it: it is your duty and blessing as a Christian to love not only your neighbor as yourself, but also to love all aspects of God's creation.

Meister Eckhart, the 13th-century German mystic writes that "God created all things in such a way that they are not outside himself, as ignorant people falsely imagine. Rather, all creatures flow outward, but nonetheless remain within God."⁴ That's taking it a step further, isn't it? All creatures are not just God's *belongings* or God's *beloved*, but are actually **within** God.

That might be troubling to think about if you think of God as only being "out there" or "up there." But, if you think of God as being *within us* and that we are contained *within God*, it provides a different way of conceiving of God. It eliminates the separation between humanity and God, creation and God, humanity and creation. All of us are *within God*, and God is *within us*.

Does that make it harder for you to think about damaging the planet? Perhaps it does, and you're going to run off the recycling center down on Prospect Street right after you get home from church. If you do, that's great, but I'm not saying this to be overly didactic. I just hope it helps provide you with an additional access point in your relationship with God and with the world we inhabit.

I'm going to take it one step further, using a metaphor developed by Sallie McFague. She invites us to see the universe itself **as the body of God**. (That takes it pretty far away from the wizened man with the long beard floating on a cloud, doesn't it?) "Were we to speak of the universe as God's body," she writes, "it would not be this body or that body, but *all* the bodies that have ever been or ever will be, from quarks and exploding stars to microorganisms and centipedes, rocks, mountains, and water, but not

³ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, p. 11

⁴ Quoted in Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 88.

forgetting tortoises, pine trees, buttercups, giraffes, and, of course, human beings in all their various shapes, conditions, and colors.”⁵

Think about that for a minute: what if we began to think of the universe as God’s body. That means that God is inescapable: there isn’t anyplace where we can be absent from God’s presence. What a wonderful, scary, comforting, awesome thought that is!

And if you were to start thinking of the universe as God’s body, it means that if you throw trash on the front lawn, it isn’t just throwing it on God’s lawn, it’s throwing it on God.

Sallie McFague writes further: “What if we were not only allowed but encouraged to love the earth? What if we saw the earth as part of the body of God, not as separate from God (who dwells elsewhere) but as the visible reality of the invisible God? What if we also saw this body as overlain by the body of the cosmic Christ, so that wherever we looked we would see bodies that are incorporated into the liberating, healing, inclusive love of God? Would we not then feel obliged to love the earth and all its many bodies?”⁶

So, I would ask you to go out and enjoy being in loving relationship with God’s body: go for a hike and smell the sage, ride your bike and enjoy the sunshine, or just go into our front flower bed and smell the wonderful lavender that’s growing there. I have a sense that developing loving connection to the planet will help build our faith, our relationship to God and one another.

One of my favorite ways to write a sermon is something I used to do when I was serving First Congregational in Kittery Point, Maine: I would make a Xerox copy of the scripture for the week, seal it in a ziplock bag, strap it to the deck of my sea kayak and then go out and paddle in the Atlantic. What a great form of connecting with God and nature. (Unfortunately, I confess that I wrote this sermon sitting in front of my computer in my study...but then again it was in the mid-90s, and the Atlantic is 2,000 miles away.)

God’s body sustains your life; may you enjoy God’s body and also help to sustain it so that all life may enjoy it for generations to come.

Amen.

⁵ McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 38

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 102.