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Stewardship of the Earth

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of this inappropriate woman, humbly yet persistently asserting that she and her daughter, too, had a place in God's kingdom, as even the dogs have a place under the kitchen table. Gently and obstinately, the woman keeps insisting, we belong here, too.

It makes us a little uncomfortable to contemplate a picture of Jesus who's not in complete control, who isn't omniscient—who doesn't know the future, who doesn't necessarily know the intimate details and thoughts of everyone he encounters, who might have to learn along the way what it means to be the Son of God. Maybe Jesus seems a little less than an example of perfect righteousness this way; we think, after all, of perfection as something that doesn't, and shouldn't, ever change. But righteousness doesn't mean getting things right automatically, without having to think about it; righteousness, even the perfect righteousness of Jesus, includes being able to listen to the outcast, and re-learn what righteousness is. So our example of perfect righteousness is one that listens, and learns, and changes—listens even to the embarrassing, inappropriate voice making a scene of proclaiming the truth to the righteous One.

We are bold to declare ourselves followers of Jesus, and to make our goal to become more like Jesus in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. Sometimes this may mean that we are the righteous—who, like Jesus in this story, may need to re-learn what righteousness is. Like Paul, we must ever strive for the goal, without considering that we have attained it; when we find ourselves in the middle of a scene, with an unwelcome voice challenging our notions of righteousness, what shall we do? Stop, and listen, and learn, as Jesus did? Or shrivel in embarrassment and mutter to ourselves, like the disciples in the story? Do we deny a place in the kingdom to those we find inconvenient? Who are the Canaanite women of today, those claiming a place in God's kingdom that we wish wouldn't?

Or perhaps *you* are the Canaanite woman—struggling to boldly affirm that yes, you too may declare yourself a follower of Jesus, despite the muttering of those around you, who find you embarrassing and unacceptable. Hear Jesus' answer: "Great is your faith!" Share that faith with us, the struggling followers, the so-called righteous; teach us. Teach us a more perfect righteousness.

In this world, where we have to learn from each other how to be righteous all over again in every encounter, the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman gives us a picture of profound righteousness. Jesus, the Son of God, allows himself to be corrected by a loudmouthed, embarrassing female who insists that she too is a follower; she too is a part of the kingdom of God. This is righteousness at its truest and most humble: in the stubborn faith of the Canaanite woman, who will not accept anything less than perfect righteousness from her Savior, and in the profound and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, willing to listen and learn righteousness from even the most unlikely of teachers. May we all find the strength to follow Christ's example.



Stewardship of the Earth

ROBYN SHORES FOSTER

Robyn Shores Foster is the Minister to Children at the Manhattan Church of Christ in New York. She received her M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary and preached this sermon in preaching class on February 7, 2005, as if she were preaching to the University Church of Christ in Malibu, California, which is her home congregation.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation,

but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom 8.18–25).

This summer I had the privilege of working at the Pepperdine swimming pool. One Saturday afternoon a group from Malibu Divers was there, training for their deepwater diving test. One woman, clearly an old Malibu local, walked over to me with a Snapple bottle in her hand and asked if there was a recycling bin. “Doesn’t Pepperdine recycle?” Before I could answer she said, “Of course not. They think God will save them.” We know the Malibu community is not fond of Pepperdine and its expansion into the hills around us. I am often frustrated with the Malibuites’ general feeling of hostility toward the University. But perhaps we should take this woman’s comment to heart. Unfortunately, this is how we as Christians are often viewed by those outside the church, as indifferent to the environment, the problems of global warming, deforestation, and endangered animals.

Paul, in the text I just read, understands our relationship with all of creation in a very different way. I see his vision for Christ’s second coming illustrated in the beautiful mosaic in the front of the church of Sacré Coeur in Paris’ Montmartre district. The resurrected Christ is in the center. He is as tall as the dome is long, clad in a white robe with a gold embroidered outline. His arms are stretched out wide as they were on the cross, but now they seem to welcome all who know him in an embrace. The great men and women of faith, people from all over the world, and all different kinds of animals, wrap around the inside of the church’s dome. Augustine is there, and Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris, people from Africa and Native Americans in traditional garb. A lion rubs the legs of the saint next to it; a peacock and many other animals are included. All of them are turned toward Christ, some with hands raised up, some kneeling. With awe and joyous expressions on their faces they are praising God with all that is within them. This is a good picture of Paul’s vision of the future for which all of creation excitedly waits (Rom 8.18–21).

This section of Romans 8 is what theologians call eschatology, the hope of the final things, which includes among other things the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life. This is what Paul means by “the glory that is about to be revealed to us.” Paul finds hints of the glory in creation. Verse 19 says, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” Why does creation wait for something to happen to the children of God, to humans? Verses 22–23 explain that the children of God are the first fruits; they will be glorified, and then all of creation shares in the freedom they receive. So creation looks at humanity’s redemption as humanity looks at Christ’s resurrected body, with expectation and hope for their own resurrection.

In my theology class at seminary we looked at the way Jesus’ resurrected body is described in the Gospels. It is definitely real flesh and bones. He isn’t a ghost because he eats fish and people can touch him, but the body is transformed. He can walk through walls and appear and disappear in an instant, and his friends don’t always recognize him at first. His body is transformed by new existence. It is exciting to think about Christ’s resurrected body and realize that is what we will be like. All of the natural world, the plants and animals, stars and planets, wait expectantly to share in that *same* transformation. Creation’s transformation occurs when it “will be set free from its bondage to decay.”

Paul explains in the next verse that it isn’t just the natural world that is suffering in bondage. He says “the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains.” This includes humans. The Protestant theologian Karl Barth explains that the bondage to decay from which creation is suffering is the process of coming into being and passing into corruption that controls *all* living things, from the microbe to the Ichthyosaurus to the theology professor.¹ This wasting away is not genuine life and certainly not eternal life. That is why all of creation groans in labor pains.

If we think about labor we realize that this is an effective image for the suffering world. Labor, as many of the mothers here today could tell us, is often a long, slow, and painful process. The labor of the world includes disease, drought, violence, decay, pollution, and deforestation. And we as humans suffer with all creation in this groaning. This is true because we are waiting for adoption, which is the redemption of our

1. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 308

bodies. What does this mean? In the resurrection our physical bodies will be freed from decay, disease, deterioration, and transformed. That is another reason why Paul describes this time as labor or travail. Childbirth brings something new, a baby, out of something old, the mother. Likewise, when Christ returns, our material bodies—part of the entire material creation—will be made new. That is why we are in solidarity with all that is created. We humans, along with the pine trees, the pigeons, the meteors, the bumblebees, the rainforests, the mountains, the ocean, and everything else in creation, are waiting to be redeemed. If we recognize that this is true, that we are interconnected, co-sufferers with the natural world, how should that shape the way we live?

One of the families I babysit for at school provides a good example. The first day I babysat Brig, the mom showed me the recycling bins and said “You’re from California so you must be familiar with all this.” I have to admit that I wasn’t. I remember elementary school assemblies with big animals that reminded me of muppets teaching me songs about the 3 R’s: reduce, reuse, recycle. During one of California’s droughts our family got those showerheads that spray air with water, thus using less water. And our family recycles newspapers and other paper, and reuses grocery sacks. But I wasn’t prepared for the Gebert family. They took recycling to a whole new level. They recycle everything that is paper, plastic, aluminum, or glass. They have a little compost shed in the backyard where they put all their leftover plant remains (apple cores, banana peels, even tea bags). They have reusable lunch boxes where they put their sandwiches and other items in reusable Tupperware containers to create less waste. They have paper towels in the house but rarely use them. They have reusable cloth towels to dry dishes and use cloth napkins for meals. I haven’t seen any paper plates or cups. They wash and reuse the plastic spoons and forks that they put in their lunch boxes. They are members of organizations that work to protect the environment, such as Heifer International. They have a children’s encyclopedia of endangered animals that I read with their youngest, Vicky. You should hear Theresa, who is eleven, talk with disgust about how humans are the only species that forces other creatures into extinction and pollutes the earth.

It was a beautiful, eye-opening experience to see how the Geberts live. There is hardly any trash left when you recycle everything you can and compost the rest. I hadn’t thought about cloth napkins for anything other than fancy meals at restaurants, but it is amazing how much paper you can save when you don’t use paper napkins and towels. To live like the Geberts definitely requires intentionality, and the kids do get tired of sorting for recycling and taking things to the compost pile, so we would turn it into a race. But, it opened my eyes to simple things I can do to be a steward of the earth, to recognize that humans, plants, and animals are all in this together. I don’t think anyone consciously thinks to themselves, “I want to abuse creation, be wasteful, or use all our natural resources.” We just don’t always realize how our lives affect the planet and what we can do to be better stewards.

As Christians we have an obligation to care for the earth. Romans 8, Genesis 1, Colossians 1, Revelation 5, the Leviticus codes requiring rest for animals and the land, and so many other places in the Bible admonish us to care for creation. We are called to exercise dominion over the earth as God exercises dominion over us, not as tyrants but with compassionate care and protection for everything that creeps on the earth, swims in the sea, flies in the air—everything that lives. We are to be God’s gardeners and caretakers of the world that God made and saw was very good. Martin Luther puts it this way, “For created things are good in themselves, and those who know God know also the things of nature not as something vain but as they are in truth; and they use them but do not take advantage of them.”² If we know the Creator of the earth then we know that the things God created are not just for us to use in whatever way we like. They are valuable in and of themselves and are not to be exploited or endangered by our overuse. Jesus consecrated creation by showing how lilies of the field, birds of the air, hens, and seeds all declare the coming kingdom of God. And Paul reminds us that we, with the rest of the cosmos, are waiting for Christ to come again, to set all of creation free from wasting away, death, and destruction.

Paul ends this section about Christ coming again with hope. He says it is impossible to hope for what

2. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* trans. and ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 238.

we see; we hope for what we do not see. That is Christ's redemption of all of creation. We are to wait for this with patience. But this patience isn't suppressed energy or subdued silence, but has a note of eagerness, excited expectation. Let us wait in patience by actively caring for the created world of which we are a part, hopeful for our collective redemption and treating creation, not as a prop or something purely for our use, but as participants in this groaning with whom we will share eternity.

I think the mosaic in Sacré Coeur gives expression to Revelation 5.11–14, a vision of what the redemption of the world will look like.

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders, they numbered myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" Then I heard every creature in the heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.
Amen.



Trust in the Lord

JENNIFER HALE CHRISTY

Jennifer Hale Christy is a graduate of Abilene Christian University, where she received her M.Div. This sermon was presented in graduate chapel at Abilene Christian University on April 12, 2006, while she was a student there.

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,
For the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?"
Our God is in the heavens;
He does whatever he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold,
The work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
Eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
Noses but do not smell.
They have hands but do not feel;
Feet but do not walk;
They make no sound in their throats.
Those who make them are like them;
So are all who trust in them.

O Israel, trust in the Lord!
He is their help and their shield.
O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord!

He is their help and their shield.
You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord!
He is their help and their shield.

The Lord has been mindful of us;
He will bless us;
He will bless the house of Israel;
He will bless the house of Aaron;
He will bless those who fear the Lord, both small and great.

May the Lord give you increase,
Both you and your children.
May you be blessed by the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.

The heavens are the Lord's heavens,
But the earth he has given to human beings.
The dead do not praise the Lord,
Nor do any that go down into silence.
But we will bless the Lord
From this time on and forevermore.
Praise the Lord! (Ps 115, NRSV).