

Making the Earth Sacred Again

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Opening Words

From feminist philosopher and poet Susan Griffin, from her book, "Woman and Nature":

"I know I am made from this earth, as my mother's hands were made from this earth, as her dreams were made from this earth and this paper, these hands, this tongue speaking, all that I know speaks to me through this earth and I long to tell you, you who are earth too, and listen as we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us."

Sermon

I have been at this church for seven years, and for seven years I have never preached about our Seventh Principle, about environmental issues, until today. Now, I had to ask myself, why have I chosen to preach on any number of topics which might, on the surface of things, seem less important to the planet—topics like Viagra, topics like Elvis Presley—while the earth is going to that proverbial hell in a hand basket? Well, there are several reasons. First of all, I thought that I should probably have a personal relationship with nature in order to preach this sermon, and truthfully I hate nature. Now before some of you get too upset, hear me out.

Nature and I seem to be at odds with each other. As soon as I moved out to the Northwest almost seven years ago, I could tell that I was supposed to be more of an outdoor type than I am. No sooner I would meet someone than he would ask, "Do you hike? Do you cycle? Do you ski?" Sure, there were lots of ski slopes in Louisiana, where I grew up. And it snowed once in my childhood, a light dusting that turned us all out of school. After I arrived here, I tried to hike. I injured my foot and for about two years, I could hardly walk more than 30 yards. I tried to ski—not downhill of course but cross-country. Starting was simple, it was stopping I could never get the hang of.

The truth is I think of nature as "red in tooth and claw," as the enemy of my safety and well-being. I think of nature as bringing discomfort at the least and death at the worst. I identify with some of the suggestions left by backpackers last year on Forest Service comment cards: "Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill." "Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the area of these pests." "Please pave the trails so they can be plowed of snow in the winter." "Chairlifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them." "The places where trails do not exist are not well marked." And then this is my favorite: "A McDonald's would be nice at the trailhead."

The second reason for my reluctance to preach on this topic is that it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems—and to feel guilty, because we all know that we are a part of the problem—and that we can't help being so, because we live in this culture. With awareness comes a blessing, but also a burden, always, in human life. In no area is this truer than with environmental concerns. There, to know is to grieve. But I hope that you will not leave this sanctuary today feeling guilty and depressed. You didn't invent the automobile and then pave over half the country. You didn't spill oil from the Exxon Valdez. Your factory doesn't pollute the streams. Your company doesn't clear-cut. Today I'm going to ask you to become more aware of what you can do, and to not burden yourself with what you can't do—to not burden yourself with guilt and cynicism and shame, which have never empowered people to virtue.

Making the earth sacred again. Once it was considered sacred. Before the established religions emerged—before Christianity, before Buddhism, before Hinduism—human beings articulated their worship through the earth. People venerated nature instead of deities. The sun, bringing light and life, was worshipped; prayer and ritual dancing were directed to the rain god, whose water caused the plants to grow. The Spirit was alive, diffused through all of nature, and tribal people felt at one with nature.

Instead of seeing ourselves as spiritually connected to family, clan, and land, we now see ourselves as separate individuals relating to other separate individuals. Applying our minds to the natural world, which we now view as dead matter to be used, we have produced an extraordinary culture in some ways: we have cars and airplanes that give us mobility, we have computers which let us communicate instantly with others on the other side of the globe, we have amazing medical technology. On a more mundane level, we have microwaves and blenders. But with technology, as with any change, there is always a cost. We find ourselves separated, lonely, fearful. As we have moved to objectify and control nature and harness its riches for ourselves, we find ourselves no longer at home in the world. We are strangers here. Says Native American Lone Deer, "Only human beings have come to a point where they no longer know why they exist. They have forgotten the secret knowledge of their bodies, their senses, their dreams."

There is a strange ache inside for what has been lost, and mostly we don't even know where that ache comes from. Then we see the ocean at sunset, and we feel at one with the sea and the earth and the stars, and we know. Or we simply take a walk in our neighborhood and gasp at the beauty of a tulip tree in full bloom, like the one across the street from my house, and we know. We know what we have lost. Our problem is not at base a technical problem—it is a spiritual problem. It is estrangement from the earth and from one another. How do we make the moon speak to us again of love and not see it just as a mass of rock where we planted our flag, our first colony in space? How do we make the earth sacred once again?

First, let's take a look at how we arrived where we are. Perhaps our exile from the Garden started with Plato and Aristotle, those giants of Western thought, who separated the world-as-idea from the world-as-experience. There it started—this split of mind from body.

Judeo-Christian thought certainly played its part, as well. The Bible rejected the pagan worldview of nature permeated by many spirits in favor of the worship of one God. Animistic religion, in which every stream, every tree, every animal, had a guardian spirit, demanded that these spirits be propitiated before the stream was dammed or the tree cut or the animal killed. In denying pagan animism, in demystifying nature, some say Christianity opened the door to exploitation of the natural world. The Bible also suggests that humans are superior to nature and that nature exists to serve humans. From the first chapter of Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after 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 earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'"

The matter is not that simple, however. There are passages in the Bible that suggest that the natural world should be respected, even revered. The earth is exalted, is seen in the Psalms, for example, as alive and praising God: Psalm 148:2: "Praise the Lord, sun and moon,/ praise him, all you shining stars!/ Praise him, you highest heavens,/ and you waters above the heavens!" The Bible puts restraints on how humans use the earth, and the earth is never seen as dead matter to be exploited by people. For the theologian Augustine, the creation is infused with the grandeur of God. The Christian figure most notably associated with love of nature was Francis of Assisi. An early account says of him: "When he found an abundance of flowers, he preached to them and invited them to praise the Lord as though they were endowed with reason. In the same way he exhorted with the sincerest purity cornfields and vineyards, stones and forests and all the beautiful things of the fields . . ."1

In Christian thought humans were placed above the earth and her creatures, but as good stewards, with the understanding that all creatures, including humans, were radically dependent upon God. It was during the Renaissance that the paradigm change came. During that time, human beings were increasingly elevated as the measure of all things. Humans became godlike in their intelligence and creativity—it was their destiny to master the creation. When we come to the writings of Bacon, Descartes, and Newton, we see a view of nature that is mechanistic, lacking any sense of the sacred. For them, the physical world was created by God, but was not divine. The world of nature could be dissected, studied, used for the benefit of man. Whatever was not human could be modified at will, exploited for gain. And so it stands, until this day.

Western culture is seriously questioning these assumptions for the first time. We do not, of course, want to deny scientific truth for poetic truth. We do not want to deny the

¹Roger Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 68.

benefits of technology. We certainly do not want to go back to a world of superstition in which animals and even humans were sometimes sacrificed to appease the gods of nature. But is it not possible even in this mechanistic world we have created to cultivate attitudes of thankfulness, of connection with the earth, of recognition of our interdependence with all other species? To cultivate a spirituality that is more inclusive than just our personal relationship with the Divine, just our personal salvation, but rather a spirituality that acknowledges our relationship with and dependence upon the earth and all her creatures? When it comes to the woes of the environment, we can never save ourselves individually—and if we are damned, if we literally choke on our garbage, we will be damned together.

And we are choking on our garbage. I remember back in the 60's when I heard Senator Margaret Chase Smith being interviewed by Hugh Downs on the "Today" show. I'll never forget that interview. Hugh asked her, "Senator Smith, what do you think is the biggest problem facing humanity today?" And she had a one-word answer. She simply said, "Garbage." I remember being puzzled. Gee, couldn't she come up with a better answer than that? Now I understand.

We can learn about a more earth-based spirituality from several sources: from the pagan groups in our midst, from eco-feminist thought, and certainly from Native Americans. Anthropologist Paula Gunn Allen, who comes from a Pueblo background, writes in her book, *The Sacred Hoop*: "We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life; the land and the people are the same. . . . The earth is not a mere source of survival, distant from the creatures it nurtures and from the spirit that breathes in us. . . . Rather for the American Indians . . . the earth is being, as all creatures are also being: aware, palpable, intelligent, alive . . ." ²

Bear Heart, of the Muskogee tribe, writes, "When I was three days old, my mother took me to a hilltop near our home and introduced me to the elements. First she introduced me to the four directions—East, South, West, and North. 'I'm asking special blessings for this child,' my mother said. You surround our lives and keep us going. Please protect him and bring balance into his life.' Then she touched my tiny feet to this Mother Earth, and said, 'Dear Mother and Grandmother Earth, one day this child will walk, play, and run on you. I will try to teach him to have respect for you as he grows up.'" Bear Heart was introduced, then, to the sun, to the wind, to the water. Next his mother put some ashes on his forehead, saying, "Fire, burn away the obstacles of life for this child. Make the way clear so that he will not stumble in walking a path of learning to love and respect all of life." ³ This is a different kind of baptism, one that places the child in clear relationship to the earth, all the days of his life.

² Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, p. 60.

³ Bear Heart, with Molly Larkin, *The Wind is My Mother: the Life and Teaching of a Native American Shaman*. New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1996, pp. 3-4.

If we are in exile from nature, then how far have we gone? Can we be redeemed? The facts are scary. Tropical deforestation is taking place at the rate of 25,000,000 acres a year, an area the size of Indiana. Every year we convert 3,000,000 acres of cropland to urban uses. Every day three species go extinct. Crop rotation has been abandoned, and pesticides and herbicides are used so that agri-business can plant the same crop year after year: two bushels of topsoil are lost for every bushel of corn produced. DDT is showing up in Antarctic penguins. No longer just a theory, global warming is here. From the Book of Deuteronomy: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses," says Moses. "Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to God's voice, and hold fast to God." (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

How personal has this desecration of the planet become for you? For me it is becoming increasingly personal. My son Kash went to college at U.C.L.A., and some days he couldn't do his usual run, because the smog was so bad. If he tried he would cough and choke. I went to see him—once. It took me an hour and a half to drive sixteen miles. What about all the immune-deficiency health problems people are having, all the allergies, chronic fatigue? And I worry about the amount of cancer I see. Oh, yes, we've gotten better at curing it, but why do we have so much? Why is there so little emphasis on environmental causes and prevention? Who stands to gain? Who stands to lose?

Is there hope that we can turn things around? Yes, I believe there is. Thomas Berry, a leading theological thinker on environmental issues, says that though there is more pollution—much, much more—than say, in the '70's, many organizations have been formed to increase our awareness and to deal with the problems. No longer can any politician be anti-environment and be elected—young people today are too well educated about these issues to allow that. Never again will a politician say, as Ronald Reagan said of the giant redwoods, "When you've seen one tree, you've seen them all." Not to mention Dan Quayle, who is remembered for several gems: he once said, "It's time for the human race to enter the solar system." And on another occasion, he intoned, "It isn't pollution that's harming the environment. It's the impurities in our air and water that are doing it."

How do we heal this soul sickness? In contemporary North American Hispanic communities, soul loss is called *susto*. The loss occurred when we withdrew from nature, when we began to think of ourselves as the only sentient beings. Indian people relocated to an urban slum of Peru seek healing by returning to the forest at night, to the land that they once knew. They renew their connections through visions of the river, of animals, of plants. The cure for *susto*, soul sickness, says Native American Linda Hogan, cannot be found in books. "It is written in the bark of a tree, in the moonlit silence of night, in the bank of a river and the water's motion. . . . A person seems so little and small, and without is the river, the mountain, the forest of fern and tree, the desert with its lizards, the . . . movements of life. The cure for soul

loss is in the mist of morning, the grass that grew a little through the night, the first warmth of sunlight, the waking human infused with intelligence and spirit.”⁴

The paradigm needs to shift again from the literal and utilitarian to the sacred. When we deeply respect the earth as something sacred, we would never desecrate it. Our way of knowing needs to be holistic, connective, participatory, systemic. We must see the earth as a system of intricate patterns, and see ourselves as a part of those patterns. We have a sense of incarnation, and now we must move to co-incarnation, and see the Divine interwoven in all.

You may be asking at this point, what can I do to make a difference? The problems seem so immense, and the solutions so difficult to get hold of. Actually, many, many people are working in various arenas to get at specific problems, and some of them are in our Seventh Principle group right here at the church. Stop by their table in the Parish Hall after the service to see how you can become involved.

In your personal life, you can't do everything, but you can do something. Start small. I have started by walking a mile to the grocery and then a mile back rather than driving. And the Associate Minister Tom Disrud and I carpool to meetings whenever we can. I eat organic foods as much as possible. These are small things, but they are a beginning. Some people in our church have gone much farther than I in living out our Seventh Principle. John Allison is a creative recycler. John recently found new homes for old appliances and cabinetry when friends remodeled their kitchen. Leslie Pohl-Kosbau has been the director of Community Gardens for 23 years, where she enables city dwellers to grow their own fruits and vegetables. Roberta Richards takes her two pre-schoolers to church on the bus rather than driving. Joe Walicki works to protect wild places by getting them designated as wilderness areas. Lin Harmon-Walker left a lucrative career as a lawyer in 1996 to become the Executive Director of Friends of Trees. The point is not to save the world—the point is to do your part and to raise consciousness so that more and more people understand. That's all.

Nobody is asking you to be an ascetic. I like Theodore Roszak's concept of "sustainable extravagance." Yes, sometimes we want to be excessive. So buy a delicious foreign cheese, or try a wine you've never tried, or take a luscious bubble bath, or purchase a single red rose, just for yourself. These little splurges are satisfying, and they don't take a high toll on the environment.

For me, the biggest reason for us to turn things around is our children. We want to pass on to them a world where they can breathe the air, where they can drink the water, where they can feel safe in purchasing food. One day they will ask questions, awkward questions. A twelve-year-old girl gave a remarkable speech at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June of 1992. She said, "I'm only a child and I don't have all the solutions, but I want you to realize, neither do you. You don't know how to fix the holes in the ozone layer. You don't know how to

⁴ Linda Hogan, "The Great Without," *Parabola*, Spring 1999, pp. 22 and 24.

bring the salmon back up a dead stream. You don't know how to bring back an animal now extinct. And you can't bring back a forest where there is now a desert. If you don't know how to fix it, please stop breaking it You teach us how to behave in the world. You teach us not to fight with others; to work things out; to respect others; to clean up our mess; not to hurt other creatures; to share, not be greedy. Then why do you go out and do the things you tell us not to do?" Why, indeed.

We're not talking about giving a donation to Greenpeace once a year, or the Sierra Club. We're talking about seeing the earth as holy and us as conscious participants in its holiness. We're talking about passing on to the next generation a viable living space for them and for their children. What, I ask you, could be more important than this? So be it. Amen.

Prayer

Creator God, we ask for forgiveness when we have failed to respect the magnificent creation you have given us. Wake us up, and help us to see with new eyes. Help us to heal the scars on our home the earth. Help us to cherish your good gifts and care for them as we should. So be it. Amen.

Benediction

Go now in thankfulness for the beauty and fruitfulness of the earth. Go in peace and go in love.