

Love's Call
Sunday, May 2, in the Year of Our LORD, 2010
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Was is it a coincidence?

Last Sunday was the third in a series of Sunday gatherings when we as a congregation took stock of who we are, what we are about as part of Christ's church and how we might be, share and proclaim our mission and ministry to our community and world. On Monday morning, Ann Lee and I shared regrets that we had, in the process, let Earth Day go by unannounced, much less incorporated into our celebration in worship as a people who recognize our sense of responsibility for all that God has created – including this marvelous globe we call earth. To that end, Ann Lee asked if we could do something in today's worship and whether it could fit in with the motif and scripture for this, the second of May in the Year of our LORD, 2010. I gave her a blank look ... because, frankly, my very next task was to go to my office and *start* looking at worship for May – in large measure because Nancy, our secretary, wanted my contributions for the May Chimes – and one of my submissions is the worship schedule that she places to the left of the calendar that goes right in the middle of our monthly publication. So at that point, I didn't have the foggiest idea if a delayed "Earth Day" would fit worship on May 2.

As you can see, Ann Lee and I were delighted that it fit quite well. The scripture lesson from the Revelation to John is about a "new heaven and a new earth," the Gospel Lesson is an admonition that we "love one another," and while the back of our worship bulletin imagines how a "new world" might address the needs of people, the bulletin cover, with either a rising or setting sun behind a tree, ... the bulletin cover can very easily serve to remind us that if we don't care for the earth, we won't be able to ensure the well being of its inhabitants either.

While I am not prepared to address the coincidence of our delaying singing "The Core of the Apple" until today with all else that suggests better stewardship of God's creation, I do need to tell you of other "coincidences" that speak to us today.

Sally's very best friend of twenty-seven years is visiting this weekend. Indeed, the two of them, Sally and Dawn are still waking to a beautiful dawn on Galway Lake. While I could really push the pun of their names further by thinking of how they are, instead of being here in worship, *sallying* around on a new *dawn*, it is Dawn whose name kept me pondering all week. Frankly, I don't think I have ever known anyone else by that name. So what was it? It finally occurred to me at about 4:45 this morning when I woke to the dawn and the singing of dozens of birds. ...

Here's your chance to interact! Raise your hand when you know what it is that occurred to me. What connection did I make? Here are the clues. Let's see how far I have to get ... dawn, ... birds, ... the environment, ... *oil* ... why I hope the United Church of Christ Pension Fund is selling any stock they have in BP and buying Proctor and Gamble. [Because the dishwashing detergent *Dawn* is the best if not only way to safely clean oil off seabirds and other aquatic animals

impacted by an oil spill – like the disaster unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico and on its way into the Atlantic – see map from today’s Times Union.)

Ah, so called “coincidences!”

Back to this past Monday, the day I assemble my thoughts in order to create a month’s worth of sermon titles to be listed in the Chimes. That is also the day I take a stab at cleaning my desk. While I consider myself to be pretty well organized, there is always a fear that when I dig into a pile of papers that I will find some important task that was due to be accomplished days before. That fear is balanced by a sense of wonder at what surprise I might find, at what hidden treasures lie beneath the day to day correspondence and paper work of serving as your Pastor.

This past Monday, I uncovered this book - “Creation Spirituality – Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth” by Matthew Fox. While my first thought was – “Oops, to whom does this book belong? Who loaned it to me with every expectation that they would get it back in a timely manner?,” the second thought was “wow – how can this *not* fit a sermon about love, creation and our stewardship?”

Coincidence?

Let me clarify a point. Initially, today’s message was to give evidence, indeed I intended to logically make my way to a certain theological conclusion which instead I am now going to abbreviate and present to you as a given: Jesus’ command “to love one another” as found in our morning’s Gospel Lesson, when taken to its logical conclusion, means ensuring the earth’s sustainability. If we deplete the world’s resources, and if we of this country abuse those resources, using far more than our fair share, then we are depriving others – in the here and now and in the future – of all that we enjoy if not take for granted as our due.

From Matthew Fox’ work – written far more eloquently:

Creation ... at its core, is about relation. It is the spiraling, dancing, crouching, springing, leaping, surprising act of relatedness, of communing, of letting go, of being. Being is about relation. Eckhart says that “relation is the essence of everything that exists” and that “isness is God.” Thus all creation is a trace, a footprint, an offspring of the Godhead. Creation is the passing by of divinity in the form of isness. It is God’s shadow in our midst. It is sacred. All our relationships are sacred. Native peoples know this. Jesus taught it. (“I am the vine, you are the branches.” “My father and I are one.”) Christians and other believers must learn anew the sacredness of creation. Without this, the “first article of faith,” we are lost. Our children will be adrift and without a future. Despair rules and any talk of the “reign of God” lacks energy and truth.

My caveat: We are called to love one another and to find ways to bring a message of salvation, redemption, grace, hope, peace, joy, faith and love to all peoples – but, but our world needs to be saved and redeemed from the onslaught of what we do to “it” with our abuse, not just with oil spills but with how we rape the land, our deforestation of precious places, our insistence on turning to concrete places where wonderful things should grow and flourish!

As ever, Saturday's mail included my copy of TIME magazine. The "Special Double Issue" is headlined – "The 100 Most Influential People in the World." OK, I thought, where on that list would I come across the first person identified as being among the most influential whose work is related to the environment and our globe's sustainability? The list starts on page 42 and it was not until page 109 that we come across Michael Pollan and his work on "the ethical bonds that connect our bodies, farms and food;" page 116 and Lisa Jackson, the new Chief of the Environmental Protection, known for being "driven by science and an unbiased interpretation of the law;" Jaime Lerner, the Brazilian Champion of green cities; Amy Smith, an engineer at MIT who is known for her work as a Peace Corps volunteer who invented "simple machines that meet particular needs and then build them locally" like "an incubator that does not require electricity;" Valentin Abe and his work with Haiti's fisheries and Will Allen whose works to turn parts of urban areas into gardens that grow produce to be consumed by those who live in urban areas.

OK, so 6 of the 100, 6% of TIME's 100 Influential People, can be tagged as those whose primary work is about the earth, God's creation. But then it hit me – as subjective as TIME might be, as much as any of us might conjure a different list of the "100," ... not one, a flat 0% of TIME's list were from any religious community – which is suggestive – and not in a particularly good way. Indeed, one of the most touching compositions that had at least a modicum of a moral if not religious overtone was written by Jack Nicklaus about his friend Phil Mickelson – and in this instance I watched the moment in time of which Mr. Nicklaus wrote. As ever, I had watched the last ten minutes of a major sporting event, and in this instance it was the Masters and how just after Phil Mickelson won, he was sure to embrace *his* hero, his wife Amy, who has so bravely struggled with cancer over the last number of years but found the strength to finally make it to the golf course for the final round and to be there to be embraced by her love in his moment of triumph. That kind of fidelity is worthy of note – particularly in light of how most of the golf world has been caught up in the lesser attributes of their former hero, Mr. Woods.

The "call of love" is all about ... fidelity – fidelity in all of the promises we make to each other and fidelity to all that is good that is part and parcel of God's wondrous creation. As part of Christ's church, we are called, summoned to believe, care and do – and to stretch our imagination in new and fresh ways – that we might respond as God calls us to.

It is *no* coincidence that God calls us this day to be stewards of all that is good.

When Ann Lee and David arrived this morning and greeted me, I mentioned a few of these coincidences. Without revealing how "Dawn" is the best product to clean animals and birds of oil in instances like the spill in the Gulf of Mexico, I did speak of the gorgeous dawn of this morning and Sally's friend, Dawn visiting this weekend. I spoke of coincidences. At that point Ann Lee reminded me of yet another – the anthem for our offertory – "Wings of the Dawn."

If there is to be a "new heaven and a new earth," if we are to indeed learn how to love one another as God would have us, then we need to be about the tasks of accomplishing that, of working towards grace and redemption for all of God's creation – the earth and all that on earth do dwell.

Finally, we are privileged as a people to worship this day in a place that is filled with celebration – the celebration of creation by so many of God’s people. [The church is hosting the 52nd Annual Fulton County Art Show.] Appropriately, much of the art depicts the earth in all of its wonder and beauty – but art is also to be found in the printed and spoken word and to that end I invite you to join me in prayer with what is also a piece of art, a prayer by the United Methodist clergyman, Ted Loder, from his work “Guerrillas of Grace, Prayers of the Battle:”

“Thank You For Each Moment.”

~from Guerrillas of Grace by *Ted Loder*

Lord, thank you for each moment,
for the blue-sky moment,
the softening earth,
the refreshing wind,
the yellow bush,
for my full heart
and the joy rising in me.

Soften me to receive whatever comes as a gift and to praise you in it.

Lord, thank you for each moment
for the twilight moment,
the pause,
the good tired,
for the quiet reflection,
the slowing down,
the mysterious sunset,
for the wisdom growing inside me.

Gentle me to feel whatever comes as a gift and to praise you in it.

Lord, thank you for each moment,
for the midnight moment,
the loneliness,
the fretful wondering,
for the watchful stars,
the long ache,
the sleepless wait,
and the hope straining in me.

Focus me to see whatever comes as a gift and to praise you in it.

Lord, thank you for each moment,
for the high-noon moment,
the job,
the necessary routine,
for the sweaty struggle,
the impulse to change,
and the courage gathering in me.

Ground me to wrestle with whatever comes as a gift and to praise you in it.

Lord, thank you for each moment,
for the shared moment,
the listening,
the unguarded word,
for the fragile openness,
the ready smile,
the accepted difference,
for my passionate heart
and the trust rooting in me.

Stretch me to grow with whatever comes as a gift and to praise you in it.

Thank you for each moment,
for the charged moment,
the confrontation,
for the hard decision,
the unexpected growing,
for my intense heart
and the truth expanding in me.

Free me to be open to whatever comes as a gift and to praise you in it.

Thank you for each moment,
for the holy moment,
the music,
the child's eyes,
for the sunlight,
the touch,
the tears,
for the trembling pleasure,
the unutterable beauty,
for the life and love and heart in me aware,
and the wholeness spreading in me.

Touch me through whatever comes as a gift That I may be grateful and praise you in it.

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