

February 14, 2010

**Last Sunday after Epiphany**

2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Have you ever been to a preach-in? No? Me neither! Well guess what? You're at one now! The All Saints' Earth Stewards alerted me to the fact that the nationwide Interfaith Power and Light is calling all congregations to celebrate God's love for creation on Valentines Day. And we're taking part, along with over 400 other congregations, in a preach-in, sharing "green" stewardship sermons. So now you can tell all your friends you've been to a preach-in. Lucky you!

The Kingdom of God is like an iPod... no, wait...

The Kingdom of God is like a Cadillac... that's not it...

The Kingdom of God can be compared to a bulldozer... a skyscraper?... a plastic bag?

The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. Aha! That's more like it.

Jesus used a lot of images from the natural world to help illuminate his teachings. Some of them still speak to us today. Some of them seem foreign or quaint.

It is true that pastoral images of farmers, shepherds, plants and animals were the most logical choice for Jesus' parables. They were the most accessible images around. They were relatable to Jesus' followers. Everyone would have understood the parable of the lost sheep because sheep were a present reality to the people Jesus spoke to.

But it was more than that. The nature parables were also effective because they used the natural God-created world to explain human emotions and motivations, to speak to something familiar and primal within each of the listeners. They spoke to the movement of God in the world.

But we're no longer so connected.

Have you ever seen a fig tree sprout figs? Have you ever seen birds pick the seeds off a rocky path?

I can't imagine Jesus using the primary images of our day to construct parables. I just don't think that the kingdom of God is enough like a cell phone that Jesus would even bother. Cell phones and bulldozers and plastic bags are fine tools for the modern world, but they are not the stuff of God.

As of yet, we can still sort of tune in to what Jesus is saying in the nature parables. You might have never seen a sheep up close, but you get the gist

enough to understand the good shepherd. How much longer will this be true? With each passing generation, there is a greater and greater distance from the stuff we are made of: soil and roots, air and water.

What will be the images that our children use to relate the parables of Jesus? Will my grandkids be able to relate at all to the parable of the sower? Will they know what happens when a seed enters the earth?

When we lose this connectedness, we are losing something important. Not just an intellectual appreciation of biology of food, and not even just a hippy-dippy dirt-under-your-fingernails love of the earth. We are losing our connection to the world God created. The world God created BEFORE God created us. And when we lose that connection, so, too, we begin to lose our connection to God. If you can't appreciate the creation, how can you fully appreciate the Creator?

We were not all called to live on farms. Heaven knows I wasn't. We're not all even called to have patches of land where we grown our own vegetable gardens. In another part of Paul, we hear about the different gifts that we are each given, and the same applies here. Some of us are bankers, or lawyers, preachers, administrators, teachers, contractors, and some are farmers.

But you don't have to be a farmer to care about the production of your food. There is a problem when we don't have a clue where our food comes from. We don't actually know what a mustard seed looks like, we don't care how far our asparagus has traveled and we don't give a whit about what gets sprayed on our strawberries.

And this disconnection from God's creation extends far beyond what we eat. By our apathy and sometimes by our knowing misbehavior, we are poisoning our air, killing our water and thinning out the diversity of the planet.

And as a reminder, this is not just about plants and animals.

The crisis that our planet is spiraling down into is already impacting the human populations, though rarely in ways that we encounter on a daily basis. The environmental crisis affects the poorest of the poor, those who contribute the least to the problem, most of all. And the most vulnerable? Children. Always. Our excessive need and excessive waste contribute *directly* to widespread starvation.

We are clearly not living in a way that is sustainable with the rest of Creation. In fact, we are choking the life out of the very Creation which sustains us – bringing into question the ability of that Creation to continue its sustaining of us.

Like so much else in the realm of caring, it is up to people of faith to care about our world, about the environment that our children grow up in, but also in the environment that children we will never meet, see or hear about will grow up in.

There is a veil over our eyes, my friends, just like Paul describes in his letter to the church at Corinth. But this is a self-imposed veil that protects us from seeing the truthful consequences of our actions. We are citizens of the world. The whole world, but the way we live would suggest that we have forgotten that. It is a luxury, this veil. Being so distanced from the consequences of our excess means that we do not have to own them. The veil means we don't have to see what we've done. And when we don't see it, we don't have to change our actions in order to better the world.

It is time for us to recognize our complicity in the downfall of our planet, repent for the damage we have caused to the earth and to its inhabitants, accept our forgiveness with a grateful heart and then move into being the beloved creatures that we truly are. And in order to live into that belovedness, we need to take care of one another, take care of ourselves, take care of our home.

Every time we make a conscious decision in favor of protecting the earth God has loaned to us, the veil is a little lighter. Whenever we choose to bring our own bags to the grocery store, to change the lightbulbs to more energy efficient ones, to buy a hybrid car or eat locally-grown produce, we are choosing to recognize that we are citizens of the earth and of the kingdom of God. The veil is lifted a little more.

Whenever we choose to recognize that our everyday actions have an effect on our next door neighbors, on our parish friends and also on impoverished children in developing countries, the veil is lifted a little more. We can see God a little more clearly.

For as Paul reminds us:

When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.