

Sermon 7-11-21

Kate Fields preaching

“Land”

“This land is your land and this land is my land, From California to the New York island, From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters, This land was made for you and me”

These iconic words of Woody Guthrie accompany us in the sermon today.

This summer, we have been going through a series of sermons centering on relationships. Pastors Paul, Darren, and Heather have preached the lectionary texts on aspects of relationships like forgiveness and reconciliation, family and creating family when having one with one’s biological family is not possible. We have also talked about relationships with our bodies, illnesses and healing.

It’s been good to talk about these things because let’s be real... relationships are hard, right... I contend that they are some of the hardest things we will do in life. Whether it’s a relationship with a spouse, partner, best friend, coworker, sibling, child or otherwise, it can— be— tough. People work their way into your heart, over your walls, and they can hurt you in very painful ways, having the ability to leave significant wounds.

And yet relationships somehow make life worth the living. They are the Good Stuff. The richness of relationships, the vulnerability, the intimacy, the stories, the experiences which become memories, the jokes, the sacrifices, the love is an unparalleled experience in life. As hard as relationships can be, they can be deep and wide gifts. We absolutely know God’s love better through the love we experience from each other. As Sara Miles writes: “You can’t be a Christian by yourself.”¹ Her idea of doing faith together— coming to know the love of God through each other— is right on.

So, today, let us expand our series on relationships to include something a topic that doesn’t get included much in the conversation on relationships... that is our relationship with the earth.

Our lectionary Psalms today point us towards a relationship with land. So let’s talk for a moment about the land where we are.

This land of middle Tennessee was stolen from the Cherokee, Shawnee, and Yuchi tribes. In fact, the name Tennessee is believed to be derived from the name of a Cherokee village called Tanasi.

Tennessee hosts the Cumberland Plateau, the cedars of Lebanon, the elder Appalachians, the Middle TN basin, the Mississippi River alluvial floodplains of West Tennessee, Cherokee caverns, and the Great Cumberland River. Tennessee is home

¹ Sara Miles, *Take this Bread: The Spiritual Memoir of a Twenty-First Century Christian*, 96.

to the white tailed deer, to a large diversity of salamanders, the red tailed hawk, the eastern cottontail rabbit, raccoons, river otters, red tailed squirrel, opossum, osprey, mallards, herons, the bald eagle, red fox, coyote, bobcat, 21 species of frogs and toads, trout, fresh water mussels, butterflies, moths, and lightning bugs. The native forests of Tennessee are made up of Black Walnut trees, Red Oaks, Black gum, Witch Hazel, Eastern Red Cedar, Loblolly Pine, Sassafras, Sycamore, Sugar Maple, Pawpaw, Redbuds, Hickories and so many more. Our state used to have many savannas which were made up of grasses like little bluestem and big bluestem.

More locally, the land that we are literally standing and sitting on right now (for those of us who are in the sanctuary) is a part of the Middle TN basin biotic system and probably the Harpeth River watershed. The ground here was broken for this church building in 1910. Helen Couch wrote our story, telling us that soon after the land was bought a spring-fed creek was discovered on the site, and during a heavy rain its banks overflowed. Carpenters had left lumber stacked ready for the next day's work and during the night a flash flood washed away most of the lumber, carrying it as far as Wedgewood. The wood was regathered and the construction of the tin roof framed chapel continued. That is a story here of the land that we are on. You may also know of our huge magnolia trees as you enter into the sanctuary of Belmont. Those are members of Belmont... probably the oldest members.

Today, Pastor Ingrid read Psalm 24 and 85. The Psalms are powerful to read and so comforting during hard times, but they are a little bit hard to pin down as far as the context during which they were written. Many scholars think that Psalm 85 was sung in response to Israel's return from exile in Babylon. After those hard years, they were finally home... finally back on the land that God had promised them. If this is indeed a post exilic text then the people were back to their home land after a long exile, but based on the whole Psalm, maybe being home wasn't quite what they expected and they were praying for continued restoration. Somehow they were still in distress and were going back to get the past faithfulness of God as a promise for the future, which is never a bad idea, right?

They were going back to the past faithfulness of God to remember what the promise was for the future. That is one of the incredible functions of the Psalms. Really, we could do an entire sermon series on going back and getting God's faithfulness. What God has already done in your life, in the lives of the people you love and know and in the lives of the people you don't know. That kind of going back is critical and we could talk about it for a long time because it informs our future path. It holds you and contributes to hope when you remember the faithfulness from behind.

That is what Psalm 85 is about and there is beautiful verses about the land here in the Psalms. The land here was not just a home to the Israelites and the Canaanites before it was taken from them but a promise that God had given the people. Being back on the land meant being in right relationship with God because the land was a gift from God and a part of God's covenant with the people. It sustained their very lives as land sustains our lives.

Land is a very big deal in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. The bible begins and ends with creation. From the second creation story in Genesis, we see where the *ha'adam* or the grounding is taken from the ground and God says: "You are dust and to dust you will return." Or you are soil or ground and to the soil or ground, you will return."

Then we see the passion of the Creator in Psalm 104 where God takes joy in the diversity of creation: the badgers, lions, mountains, the moon, birds, cattle, storks in the cypresses, and the Cedars of Lebanon. We wonder, is God's joy sustainable if the species diversity of the earth is diminished as endangered species become extinct species?

Then Psalm 148 shows us that all God's critters have a place in the choir praising God.

I could go on and on into the Gospels. Land and creation are everywhere in the Bible. Faith is inextricably tied to the land.

Somewhere along the way though, our faith became untied from the land. Land was no longer a part of God's promise and even though land sustains our lives today, there is a disconnect between God, the land, and us. Theologian Norman Wirzba labels it an ecological amnesia. A forgetting of the ecology that sustains our lives, what we eat, what we drink.

That disconnect is everywhere and it's tough when we aren't connected to the earth, because it is easier to allow or participate in its devastation.

Though we are officially still in the Holocene geologic epoch, some scientists argue that we have now moved into a new geologic epoch called the Anthropocene. "Anthro" of course referring to human's impact on the climate and on earth. Our plastics, they say, are fusing with rocks and indeed changing the face of the planet.

Many of the most toxic factories and resource extraction sites are placed in poor communities. The health repercussions of living near a resource extraction site are nearly insurmountable, with cancer and blood diseases seeming to be the norm. In Chattanooga, TN the "region's most polluted stream," Chattanooga Creek runs directly through impoverished African American communities.² Ethicist and Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity, Emilie Townes writes, that "toxic waste landfills in African American communities" are "contemporary versions of lynching a whole people"³ and indeed a 1987 report by the United Church of Christ Commission of Racial Justice found that "race proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the

² John Nolt, et al, *What Have We Done? The Foundation for Global Sustainability's State of the Bioregion Report for the Upper Tennessee Valley and the Southern Appalachian Mountains* (Washburn, TN: Earth Knows Publications, 1997), 4.

³ Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 55.

location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. This represented a consistent national pattern.”⁴ This is environmental racism.

Not caring for our earth neighbor is deeply interconnected with not caring for our human neighbors. Exploitation is exploitation.

Our faithfulness, our discipleship, our following of Jesus is centered around relationships. How we love God. How we love ourselves... these bodies, spirits and minds that we have been given by God and named beloved. That is the only name you have. Beloved.

And our faithfulness, our discipleship is centered on how we love each other. Over and over and over and over, Jesus said, love each other...love each other past the fantasies and stereotypes that the world wants us to believe about each other— love each other past the greed and selfishness that thrive around us and in us, love each other past the hate... in fact, there is no one that is excluded from your love mandate... not even your enemy, because as hard as it is, the grace of the gospel is that your enemy is your neighbor too.

That is Good News. And our faithfulness, discipleship also include our relationship with the nonhuman realm, with the earth, with the land and the creatures on it. The earth is our neighbor too and it can never be excluded from the mandate we have to love our neighbor. We love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We mutually belong to each other.

When you love someone, you give them the space and support to be their fullest selves.

So when we make decisions about how to be faithful in loving our neighbors, let us also include our neighbor, the land.

How do we do that?

The best starting place for deeply caring for creation is not guilt or fear, but it is awe and wonder.

Philosopher, Jerome A Miller wrote: “the event of wonder is the original conversion.”⁵

Astrophysicist Howard Smith said to a group of scientists: “I am not religious because I am ignorant, I am religious because I am in awe.”

⁴ Benjamin Chavis, *et al.* “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites,” *Commission for Racial Justice: United Church of Christ*, 1987, Accessed on 8 Jan 2016, Retrieved from http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/13567/toxwrace87.pdf?1418439935, xiii.

⁵ Jerome A. Miller, *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Post-Modern World*, 175.

Our awe and wonder can lead to a deep love and respect for the land we live on... the land and watersheds which quite literally sustain our lives. Did you wake up and drink some water this morning? I did!

Our awe and wonder can turn to love and our love can turn to service and faithfulness. We work on solutions... creating counter narratives that resist saying we should dominate creation but instead that we mutually belong to creation and creation belongs to us. We can advocate for the needs of our watersheds and land. We can do stream restoration, we can support local farmers, buy their produce from farmers markets, give them our church parking lots for CSA pick ups, let them use our commercial church kitchens. We can teach our children where food comes from, we can direct our learning and energy to food insecurity and food deserts here in Nashville. We can support the local food co-op that is trying to get off the ground here, we can plant native TN species, we can support groups who are trying to restore savannas which used to be here hundreds of years ago. This list goes on and on but I will stop there.

So, I hope you will not chalk this up to PK just preaching a tree hugging sermon. And also those trees gives us the oxygen we need and take away the carbon dioxide our lungs don't need. But I hope instead that you'll see this as an invitation into the part of discipleship that so often gets overlooked. A chance to reintegrate our faith and discipleship with the land, as the Israelites did so many years ago.

Let us be people who plant sequoias as Wendell Berry says. We may only ever see those slow growing sequoias grow a few yards in our lifetimes but our grandchildren and great grandchildren will get to play under those majestic huge trees.

We are part of a community of saints that have a cloud of witnesses. We know how to do faithfulness.

So let us remember this call as people of faith to be faithful to love, cherish, co-exist with and care for the land that God created and whose produce sustains our very lives.

The Psalmist writes: "Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky."

As I close, let me ask this: "what is it that the earth can teach us about faithfulness?"

If we want to know faithfulness, we need look no further than the ground we stand on.

May it ever be so.