

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-18
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, ROGATION SUNDAY, APRIL 27, 2008, AT ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Until fairly recently, I was an armchair environmentalist, often sitting on my porch on a good day and thinking pleasing environmental thoughts. I must confess that I was too spoiled and too insularly human to worry about the impact of my wasteful ways on those who dwelled thousands of miles away on a remote island of the Pacific or those who would come after me generations later. I remember when I was growing up, the idea that "humankind has somehow conquered nature" was considered a major achievement of modernity. But already, this fragile Earth, our island home, has started to feel the negative effect of our fossil fuel culture, when we discovered a large hole in the ozone layer above Antarctica, when we witness the disappearance of the snow cap on Mount Kilimanjaro, and when we experience the increased frequency and intensity of tropical storms. Harmony with nature has not been a forte of modernity; harmony with nature has not been a forte of much of Christian history. Entrusted with dominion over all of creation by God, what are we to do as faithful Christians in our own day? Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And Jesus' commandments are mostly succinctly summarized as the love of God and neighbor.

God is the reason for all that exists. But who is our neighbor. Intuitively, we think of "neighbor" as the household next door. But in our context and setting nowadays, we should perhaps expand our understanding of who counts as our neighbor. All of God's creation, in a theological sense, can be counted as our neighbor. Jesus gives us some insight into oneness with God, and harmony with neighbor in our Gospel lesson today: On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. For the first time in John's Gospel, Jesus expresses his oneness with us. Previously, we have heard Jesus explaining to us that his oneness with the Father. This also reminds us of the Eucharist through which we have communion with Christ and through Christ, we have communion with God.

This very biblical language necessarily challenges the concept that God is a totally separate entity, having no direct connection with the rest of creation. If God cares about us so much to the extent that he sent his only Son to become one of us to express his deep concern love for us, how much should we extend that love to each other, and to all that God has created? Beloved, I believe that Jesus has given us the basis for a Christian form of environmentalism. That Jesus and the Father are one, and that Jesus is in us, and we in him connotes a sense of theological harmony in our faith, a sense of peace which encompasses all being, and a sense of responsible stewardship of creation.

Stewardship of creation means that as Christians, we are commissioned to model for all humankind how to love and serve this earth, the part of the creation upon which we dwell.[1] Just so that we are clear, Christian stewardship of creation is not a byproduct of contemporary environmental activism. In fact, our concern for the environment has had a long history in our tradition. Today is Rogation Sunday. "What is it?"---you may ask. Traditionally, the faithful typically observed the Rogation days by fasting in preparation to celebrate the Ascension, and farmers often had their crops blessed by a priest at this time, which always occurs during the spring in the Northern Hemisphere. There was the ceremony of "beating the bounds", in which a procession of parishioners, led by the clergy, churchwardens, and choir members, would proceed around the boundary of their parish and pray for its protection in the forthcoming year. (After yesterday's high-energy Celebration of our New Ministry, I figure that it would be better for us to stay put and rest in the church.)

If we think of our stewardship of creation as a modern extension of the tradition of Rogation Sunday, we may indeed find further harmony with God, and with the tradition of the Church. "Rogation" comes from the Latin verb "rogare" meaning "to ask." The Christian perspective of safeguarding the environment differs from our

counterpart in the secular movement in terms of “rogation” literally. In all that we do, and all that we are, we acknowledge that God is supreme. We acknowledge that we cannot reverse the long lasting global effect of our “conquest” and “subduing” of the rest of creation since the Industrial Revolution all by ourselves. In other words, we do what we can as individuals such as reducing our reliance on fossil fuel, recycling, composting. But more importantly, we see this as a form of stewardship. As King David says toward the end of his illustrious career, “All things come of thee, O Lord; and of thine own, have we given thee.” Stewardship of creation is simply the spiritual act of gratitude to God expressed through the conservation of the resources in nature endowed by God.

Do not let the preservation and conservation of God’s gifts to us become a politically divisive issue. And let’s be reminded that “conservation” and “conservative” do in fact come from the same root. How can we then become responsible stewards of God’s creation, exercising wise “dominion” over nature? As individuals we can choose lives of voluntary simplicity, rejecting habits of wasteful consumption and making thoughtful choices for decent living. As a parish, we can practice conservation and care wisely for our church properties. Together, we can become powerful examples of wise stewardship and provide leadership to our local communities.

The Church is sometimes described as the Ark of Salvation. The heavenly expression of this Ark is the Communion of Saints, both past, present and to come. The temporal expression of this Ark is an institution of holiness on this planet that God has allotted us. We cannot afford to be out of touch with the reality of our world if we are to be an effective vessel for the souls of this world to find salvation and communion with God in Jesus Christ. May we work hard through our prayers and examples to advocate for a world where development will not undermine environmental sustainability! May all our children and our children’s children be able to enjoy the same fresh water, the same fresh air, the same pristine nature that a minority of us on this planet are able to enjoy today! We can indeed make that happen, so that as the Father is in Jesus Christ, Christ will be in us, and we in him. Oneness with God is both spiritual and material, as we experience in the Holy Eucharist. Oneness with God can also be expressed through our prayer life and in our stewardship of all of God’s creation.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Creator and Redeemer of all that is, source and foundation of time and space, matter and energy, life and consciousness; grant to all who conserve and preserve the mysteries of your creation, grace to be true witnesses to your glory and faithful stewards of your gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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[1]Catechism of Creation: An Episcopal Perspective, Part III