

Faith Reflections on Climate Stewardship
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Prairie Climate Stewardship Conference
July 10-11, 2008 Bismarck, ND

I was just big enough to peek out the window of our 1973 Chevrolet pickup truck as we barreled down a section line when I asked my dad why the field we had just passed had gone unplanted. He told me we had passed a summer fallow field. “What’s that?” I pressed further. He then carefully explained to me the importance of giving fields rest so that they would continue to produce healthy crops in the future. As we passed shelterbelts and rows of various plantings, he explained the importance of crop rotation and the steps we were taking on our farm to ensure the health of the soil.

And thus began my theological education—although I would not know it until years later.

Fast forward nearly twenty years and many miles to Duke University. While participating in a biblical discussion in a study group about the Old Testament principle of Jubilee found in Deuteronomy, I discovered I was the only one in the group who knew the agricultural importance behind the biblical instruction to leave the land fallow every seven years. It was then that I began to see my agrarian upbringing on the plains of North Dakota as a theological upbringing as well.

This should not have been a surprising revelation. After all the Israelites were an agrarian people and the story of their relationship with God is fundamentally an ecological story. “Ecology” literally means, “the study of relationship” so it is not too far of a leap to begin to see the Old Testament record of the Israelites as an ecological story—and that ecology is a very theological subject.

In Genesis chapter two, God creates the first human out of the “dust of the ground” and places this new creature in a garden, itself growing up out of the same ground. In Hebrew *adam* (the human) is made out of the *adamah* (the fertile soil). This little pun actually translates well into English: the *human* is made out of the *humus*.

Then the human creature is given a task, a purpose, a vocation: “working and keeping the earth.” Another reading of the Hebrew could be that the human was put in the garden to “serve and preserve.” And so begins the story of the Israelites and their relationship with their Creator. But this is not just the story of ancient farmers. From the perspective of the Jew or the Christian this is the human story: the narrative of our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our relationship with all of creation.

Of course the story also includes the eventual fracturing of these relationships and God’s continual efforts to repair the damages of sin and death. While we know the beginning of the story, we are a forgetful people and we forget that the narrative still continues today.

We are usually quick to recall that humanity is made in God's image, that our soul is a divine spark of our creator. However, we just as often disconnect our relationship to the rest of creation by neglecting to recall that our physical being was created out of the fertile soil—and we are therefore kin to soil—as well as plant, animal, atmosphere, and human being alike.

We forget that the goodness of creation is a generous gift from God. A gift that is meant to care for us and provides all we need to live. We also dismiss our vocation and responsibility to serve and preserve and instead turn our “dominion over the earth” into an abusive domination rather than the stewardship of a trust from God. Yes, we fail to recognize that we are still caught up, right now, in the middle of this ongoing narrative.

Recently at a meeting, I was having a friendly discussion with a colleague about climate change and global warming. He was systematically trying to convince me that global warming did not exist and was a veritable hoax. I was trying to contain my spontaneous eye rolling and the urge to run from the building screaming. After several minutes of rhetoric, I blurted out at him, “I don't care! I really don't care if global warming is real.” (*A confession that surely might get my speaking privileges revoked here today—so please bear with me!*)

My interruption brought a moment of silence. I continued. “For me it is not about simply believing whether the science is true or not! For me, stewardship of the earth is part of my responsibility as a Christian and part of my relationship with God.”

As a Christian person of faith, I have responded to God's love and grace and answered the call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. As a disciple, I have entered in a particular way into the narrative of God's work to redeem the world and now have become a part of that work of reconciliation. Such is the mission of the church—to carry on the reconciling work of Christ.

And so, giving concern to relationships, ecological or otherwise, is a primary part of being about the work of reconciliation. Yet, by and large, ecological crises have not yet been made a priority for the church or even been given the theological consideration they deserve. As individuals and as a corporate body we have failed as the church to fulfill our vocation as caretakers of creation and therefore we have failed to live up to our calling to be a people of reconciliation. We need to be held accountable and called to make a change of life—we need to be called to repentance and action.

As I close today, I would like to share with you a moment of just such personal conviction I experienced recently. I was watching a Frontline World special on PBS reporting the effects of climate change already impacting people in other parts of the globe, primarily in developing nations. It was noted that these locations have done little to contribute to climate change—yet they are feeling the effects first and in many in many instances with dramatic human suffering.

During this relatively brief television report, I was reminded that if I love God, I love my neighbor and I was convicted that when my actions in this part of the world result in inflicting

suffering on other members of the human family in another part of the world—I have failed to love God and my neighbor.

My theological education began on a farm in Logan County, North Dakota with the basic care of the soil, the very soil our Creator made us from. This education has led me to see that the need for action is great—and for those who are people of faith, the urgency is imperative because our relationship with God is in danger and the mission of the church is at stake.

It is my hope that each and every one here who is a person of faith hears this call to repentance and action. My hope is that over the next two days we do not only think politically or sociologically about climate stewardship—but that we think theologically as well. My hope is that people of faith would return to their faith communities and call others to repentance and action. Make stewardship of creation a priority in your faith life. Make it as vital to your faith as prayer, worship, study of Scripture, and loving your neighbor. Be people of reconciliation—seeking to participate in the reconciliation of all relationships: ecological, human, and divine.

Thank you for the privilege of sharing with you today.