

The Picture Of Planet Earth
Luke 24:36-48
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 26, 2009

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde tells the story of a handsome young man who, after seeing a new portrait of himself became so bewitched by his youth and beauty was willing to sell his soul if his portrait aged rather than himself. He realized his wish was granted when he noticed his portrait's once innocent smile was mysteriously altered by a subtle smirk. As the years passed and Dorian descended into a life of total depravity his portrait aged, and became horribly disfigured while his outward physical appearance remained the same, causing Dorian to banish his telltale portrait to the attic, hidden from everyone but himself.

Too late Dorian regretted his Faustian bargain and tried to mend his ways, but his portrait continued becoming even more vile and disfigured than ever. In desperation he tried to slash it with a knife, only to be found later with the knife plunged into his own hideous corpse while his portrait reverted back to the handsome young man he once was.

Certainly Oscar Wilde's intention was to show how unrepented sins can poison and destroy our humanity but I think for today's purposes, we can stretch his metaphor to illustrate how unrepented behaviors can poison and destroy the beauty and livability of planet earth.

In Genesis we read in the beginning after God created the world and everything in it he pronounced it "very good." Later after creating Adam, in the divine image God granted Adam dominion over the earth saying, "Have many children so your descendants will live over the earth and bring it under their control. I am putting you in charge..." (Genesis 1:28)

Unfortunately, from the beginning, humankind has confused dominion with domination. Dominion means having supreme authority, but the word domination implies a more sinister connotation of power abuse. But while having dominion infers control, it's not necessarily arbitrary or abusive. Case in point, God has ultimate dominion over the universe, but his rule is governed by justice and love. It's that brand of authority over the earth God has given humanity with expectation we will use it wisely for the common good, and the glory of God.

No matter where you stand in the current environmental debate, specifically global warming, you have to be a fool to think polluting the environment in the name of progress and profit is a good thing. No one wants to breathe contaminated air drink foul water or live near chemical plants that dump waste in your back yard.

Two hundred years ago people threw their trash out the window, a real boon to 20th century archeologists who dig up 18th century artifacts. Yes, even our ancestors lived in a throwaway society, but with population growth and

synthetic products, we no longer have the luxury of throwing our garbage out without it impacting the soil, air and water God gave us dominion over.

But the care of creation isn't just common sense, it's a biblical mandate because the earth isn't our personal property. Instead the Bible makes it crystal clear: The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it... (Psalm 24:1)

Once Andrew Carnegie, the premier Robber Baron of the late nineteenth century, went to his native Scotland to scout out property for his retirement castle. After finding the perfect spot he sought out the man who lived there determined to goad him into selling it. The farmer replied, "I can't sell you this property. It doesn't belong to me, it belongs to my family. We've lived here for generations and God willing we'll be here many more. Right now, I'm just the caretaker, all this is purely on loan from God and when God calls me home, my son will be the next caretaker and his son after him." Frustrated anybody would dare refuse him, Carnegie stomped off.

When the Israelites, after forty years of wilderness wanderings, finally came home to the Promised Land, it was with the tacit understanding they were stewards or caretakers of the land God gave them.

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it."

I think it's absolutely amazing these ancient peoples had this insight but then again, maybe it isn't. Unlike them we can buy fruit, vegetables and meats from all over the country, but our ancestors were totally dependant on the land. If droughts ruined the harvest and dried up drinking water, they couldn't order carry out. That's why the Law of Moses mandated guidelines for the stewardship of the land. Technically, in Israel there were no land "owners," but land "inheritors" with God granting the inheritance. Leviticus 25:23 reads, "The land must not be sold permanently because the land is mine (the Lord's) and you are but aliens and tenants." What's more in Numbers 35:33-34 commands, "You shall not pollute the land where you live... You shall not defile the land where you live, where I also live, for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites." In short, God's people recognize the land is holy and keeping it holy is part of our worship of God.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century. As far as God's concerned, nothing's changed. The earth is still the Lord's, the whole world's in his hands and he still expects us to take care of his creation.

God also said at the creation, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish...the birds...all the wild animals and every creeping thing," (Genesis 1:26) Being created in God's image we are wired to be rational, moral and spiritual beings capable of living in relationships with God and others. But we are also created with the ability to be in relationship with God's creation so we can rule as God would, with justice and love.

That's God's plan, but then God gave the gift that put everything in jeopardy: free will. We have the divine right to choose between rule by either dominion or domination. These are the two choices we have and we must

choose wisely because the choices we make today will impact the environment for generations to come.

Environmental issues have made regular headlines over the past thirty plus years. Before that time pollution seemed to be accepted as a necessary byproduct of industrialization and progress. When I was a boy growing up three miles from the Hudson River, it was one of the most polluted rivers in the nation. Ironically 100 years earlier the Hudson River was celebrated as one of the natural wonders of the world but by the 1960's it was an open sewer, until concerned citizens convinced law makers and industry to clean up the mess and restore the Hudson to its original pristine condition.

Here in Maryland, concerned citizens have worked together for decades to save the Chesapeake Bay which seems at times a losing battle, but the fight continues because, after all what's the alternative?

I mention these campaigns to save the Hudson and Chesapeake Bay as examples of what concerned Christians can do to honor the Lord of creation. We are especially called to see the connection between caring for the earth and caring for the ones Jesus called, the least of my brothers and sisters. Those living in poverty in the poorest nations around the world are the ones most directly impacted by ecosystems damaged by man made pollutants.

God created the world to sustain humanity, the animal world, vegetation, water, clean air and everything else that dwells therein. What's more God created the world to be in balance, that is all living things are related and dependant on each other and contribute to the greater good. Our calling, as God's children and Christ's disciples, is to participate in God's plan to care for his world because after all it's the only home we have, we have no where else to go.

As I said at the beginning, wherever you stand on the debate over Global Warming, we can find common ground in finding simple but practical ways to impact our environment for good.

First we must resist any selfish impulse to abuse God's creation. That could mean something simple like not littering. Avoid using Styrofoam and buy biodegradable products. Maybe you want to consider carpooling, maybe reconsider using bottled water. Educate yourself, be aware of community groups coming together to clean up a stream, a woods or a vacant lot. Support efforts to restore the Chesapeake and other natural resources.

And here's something else you can do: go for a walk in the woods and as you become aware of the beauty of the earth and the wonder of animal life, especially be aware of God's enveloping presence, watching over his world and calling you to care for his world and our home.

One of the great hymns of the Church was composed by our own Maltbie Babcock, is not just a song about the beauty of nature, but the love and power of God energizing the world he loves.

This Is My Father's World

This is my Father's world,
and to my listening ears
all nature sings, and round me rings
the music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world:
I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;
His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world,
the birds their carols raise,
the morning light, the lily white,
declare their maker's praise.
This is my Father's world"
He shines in all that's fair;
in the rustling grass I hear him pass;
He speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father's world.
O let me ne'er forget
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world:
why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is King: let the heavens ring!
God reigns; let the earth be glad!

Let's pray all people realize the earth is our only home, on loan from God,
with the expectation we will take such good care of it, when future generations
are born the world we leave them will be in better shape than the world left to us.