

Homily – The Blessing of our Land

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Our home is on three acres in the country just outside of Arroyo Grande. Being a wildlife biologist, Jeff is very good at gardening, and he enjoys it too. He has decided to make our yard attractive to butterflies and birds – and more specifically to monarch butterflies and finches. As many of you know monarchs are indigenous to this part of California and finches don't bother the monarchs. So, he planted milkweed to attract the monarchs and some special seeds in feeders for the finches.

Jeff was successful on both counts. The monarch butterflies put their larvae on the milkweed since milkweed is one of the few food sources for monarch caterpillars, and he is constantly filling the feeder with more seed for the finches. Success!

But, then a problem arose. There were so many monarch caterpillars eating away at the milkweed that they ate it all. So, Jeff planted more milkweed, but the caterpillars ate that up pretty quickly as well.

And, you can imagine what happened. The caterpillars ate their entire food source and died off. There were too many for a limited amount of food.

I don't know why I thought this would not happen. Somehow I thought nature and evolution would make the monarchs smart enough not to lay more larvae than the food source could handle. But, I was wrong. Nature did not keep this from happening.

Now, it is possible that clumps of milkweed almost always come in larger lots. Maybe our clump of milkweed was just not as large as usually happens, so the monarchs were fooled by our garden. I guess that makes us partially responsible, but I still thought nature would take care of itself. I thought there would still be balance. Very disappointing.

Now this story is a pretty obvious analogy to our human condition, and our use of the Earth and its resources. Might we assume that balance will continue to be achieved by nature or is it possible that our use of the Earth could get out of balance?

For some of you here today the answer to this question about our future is a definite "yes". Human beings have altered the earth in ways that will have negative consequences. And, for some of you here today the answer is a definite "no". We have not altered the earth. And, for many of you the answer is somewhere in the middle or maybe you don't feel you have enough data to make an accurate

conclusion. I have my own opinion, but I want to make space for the fact that we are all over the board with our opinions, or dare I say truths, on this question about the earth.

Again, this is not a homily advocating one opinion. It is not a sermon sharing a bunch of data about the environment. Instead, I want to make another point. I want to lay claim to the space that says these questions about the Earth are not just political questions, but they are also spiritual questions. The way we interact with and steward the land and the Earth and creation is a deeply spiritual question.

You have heard me say that I think spirituality is about relationships. It is about the healthy, loving relations with God, with others, and with self. This sounds like the Great Commandment. However, I actually add a fourth leg into this equation. After lots of reflection, I think that spirituality is also about loving, healthy relationship with non-human creation. As Christians we think of God as a Trinity – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Other terms we use are God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer of Life. We honor God the Creator when we make spirituality about the Earth that God created and the Earth that God declared as good. So our spiritual life is about healthy loving relationships we have with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation.

However, honoring God the Creator can get a little complicated for we have two related but distinct theological concepts about how we understand God. These concepts are called pantheism and panentheism that shape our understanding of God the Creator. First, ancient theologians were very particular that all of creation is not included inside of God. This is called pantheism. All of creation is not inside of God. However, there is a second theological concept called panentheism which sees God in all of creation. This fits in with the universal Christ concept that has Christ throughout all of time and space. Christ is in the planets and stars, Christ is in the land and the seas, Christ is in all animals and plants, and Christ is in all people. I am a panentheist who sees Christ in and around all which means we see and appreciate the beauty of God in and around all. Seeing God in and around all of creation means I think of creation differently, and hopefully treat it differently as well.

And, this treating creation differently gets a little more complicated because there are also different ideas on what it means to steward and take care of creation.

In the reading we had earlier from the book of Genesis, we heard a second version of the Creation story. The first Creation story is a bit more familiar. God worked on six days and then rested on the seventh. In this first version of the Creation story God said, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion. And, in the second creation story, the one we read today, there is no creation over

seven days. The language and imagery is different. And in this second version “God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” In both versions of the Creation story, God the Creator, is the main actor, and in both versions God tells humans to manage the land and all of Creation. The Book of Genesis celebrates God as Creator. But it also places humans within that creation. All of creation is under the feet of humans. All the Earth is to be under the control of humankind, or as we often say we are the stewards of the lands and seas.

Being stewards is so foundational to our western thinking and to Christianity that we often don’t take a second look at it. But, it is a theology that is different than some Native American spiritual traditions and it is different from some Eastern spiritual traditions. In those traditions, humankind is equal to creation or in some instances even servants of creation. This would be more consistent with the content of the Old Testament’s Song of Solomon and with the reading we heard from Psalm 148. Psalm 148 gives us a glimpse into the diversity of God’s creation. *“O PRAISE the Lord of heaven... Praise him, all ye angels of his... Praise him, sun and moon...and ye waters that are above the heavens... Praise the Lord upon earth: ye dragons, and all deeps... Fire and hail, snow and vapors... wind and storm... Mountains and all hills... fruitful trees and all cedars... Beasts and all cattle... worms and feathered fowls... Young men and maidens, old men and children, praise the Name of the Lord”* In these readings land and the Earth are described with amazing beauty and tenderness, and we are to honor the Creator by honoring Creation.

So Christian tradition seems to range on a spectrum. On one end we can do whatever we want to the land and to the creatures of the Earth. We are to subdue and have dominion. On the other end of the spectrum there seems to be an equilibrium and caretaking element. And, since this is a spectrum between two points, there can also be spiritual values that range between these two end points.

Where do you think you fall in this range? Are you on one end or the other or somewhere in the middle?

How do you honor God the Creator? Is it more on the side of be fruitful and multiple and have dominion or is more on the side of balance and equilibrium?

Notice that I am trying to convey the spectrum in a way that does not place my own value judgment. Where are you on the range?

As you think about this consider your values and how those values honor God, and also consider your actions. Do your actions with the land and the Earth and with creation itself also honor God?

Now, one of the pitfalls we can fall into is when our values and our actions are inconsistent. For me one of my most important values is integrity. Put simply, integrity is when there is consistency between one's values and one's actions.

If I value purity, do my actions correspond with purity?

If I value honesty, do my actions correspond to honesty?

If I value money, do my actions correspond to money?

There are spiritual implications to our values and whether those values are consistent with healthy, loving relationship, but there are also spiritual implications when we lack integrity, when we lack consistency between our values and our actions.

When we lack integrity, our subconscious knows it, and this dark knowledge of self dampens our love of self and the relationship one has with oneself. Conversely when we have integrity there is a boost to our sense of self. Self-integrity is foundational for self-esteem. So, improving love of self and the related spirituality means we should be moving towards values and actions that are consistent with one another. We should make sure we have integrity.

And more specifically we should make sure our value of honoring God the Creator and honoring the Earth, we should make sure our actions are consistent with our values.

This is what we are trying to do here on our nine-acre St. Barnabas campus. We have been blessed with the beauty of this land, and I hope we honor God with our care of this land.

And on a personal note, November is the start of monarch butterfly season here on the Central Coast, and at home we continue to plant more milkweed. And earlier this week I noticed a monarch butterfly fluttering around. Is the butterfly cycle starting all over again? This year, should we be doing something different with milkweed?

Be that as it may, let our values and actions as individual and as a community reflect the love of God and the beauty of God our creator.