

**"Becoming a Good Samaritan
Tending to God's Creation"**
Psalm 65:9-13, Romans 8:18-27

As you know, today is Mothers' day. Mothers can be pretty wise people. Whether they start out wise or not, the work of caring for a child, or multiple children, tends to give mom's a real education. Of course, I only know this by observation, but from what I've seen, mother's learn pretty quickly that everything that happens in their home is connected. If one child get's a special gift, the other children are going to feel jealous. If one child is behaving badly, the others will probably either join in, or become tattle tales. If Dad comes home in a foul mood, everyone knows to leave him alone. And of course, if mom isn't happy, nobody's going to be happy. The lesson that most mothers learn is that their family shares a **common destiny**, and that what happens to one family member affects all the others.

This lesson from the home also applies to our lives in the global human community. Each nation affects the others. All people share a common destiny. In fact, this isn't just a matter of human relationships: we share a common destiny with the entire natural world; with the universe itself. Not only are we created out of the same stuff as the physical universe; not only does our physical life depend on the material world; not only does God give us responsibility for caring for creation; but our ultimate destiny is also tied to God's creation. We see this very clearly in today's reading from Romans.

The Book of Romans was written by the Apostle Paul in the late 50's A.D., at least twenty-five years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Christianity had spread from being a reform movement within Judaism to being a cross-cultural phenomenon, with many non-Jews becoming followers of Jesus. In fact, it was getting to the point that soon there would be more non-Jewish Christians than there were Jewish followers of Jesus. Paul played a big part in that happening. He saw himself as the Apostle to the Gentiles, that is, the one God had sent to bring the message of Jesus to non-Jews. And while Paul had successfully brought Christian faith to many people, he wasn't the only one spreading the faith. Already, twenty-five years after the resurrection, there was a Christian community in Rome. And Paul had nothing to do with it. But Paul wanted to go to Rome. He wanted to share his version of the gospel there, and he also wanted Roman support so he could travel to Spain and spread word of Jesus there. Since the Romans didn't know Paul - outside of his reputation, that is - Paul needed to introduce himself. So, it would seem that the Letter to the Romans is his personal letter of introduction, in which he tells the Romans what he is all about. This letter contains the fullest description we have of what Paul believed. Because it was such a major statement of faith, Paul addresses big issues. He talks about sin and forgiveness, faith and doubt, life and death; he talks about our eternal future, and even about the future of creation. It's a major statement of faith, and it is comprehensive. It recognizes the common destiny of all humanity, and the common destiny we share with all of God's creation. Drawing on what he says about our connection to creation, and in keeping with the theme of our sermon series, "Becoming a Good Samaritan", we're going to explore what it means for us to be good neighbors to the non-human world, and to tend God's creation.

There are at least two key themes in Paul's discussion of creation. They are **frustration and hope**.

Creation is subject to frustration, to futility, Paul says. In fact, **creation is virtually held captive...**in bondage to decay. How did this happen? Paul tells us that this is something God has allowed to happen for a time - but not forever. But why would God let this happen? Because God has given human beings a job: to be caretakers - stewards - of creation. And yet, because of human sin, creation suffers. We've done a pretty bad job caring for the planet. It comes down to this: creation is held captive to humanity's poor stewardship. The careful balance of global and ecological systems is being thrown out of kilter because people haven't exercised good stewardship of the planet.

It's amazing how insightful Paul was. When he was writing, the depth to which creation would suffer at our hands was by no means evident. In fact, it is fully understandable that it has taken us a long time to recognize our impact on the physical world. After all, for the vast majority of human history, we appeared to have very little impact on nature. Quite the opposite - our main concern was that we be able to survive the dangers of the natural world. But, in large part, this is less the case now. We have arrived at a point where the things we do have a major impact on the environment, and it's hard to ignore.

I recently watched a DVD curriculum piece about Christian stewardship and the earth. From this video, it is apparent that we Christians are still struggling with our sense of responsibility. One segment of the video was about global warming - something a majority of scientists believe is a reality about which we should be concerned. But in the video, the focus wasn't on what Christians could do to help care for God's creation. Instead, it focused on the question of whether global warming is really happening. They focused on the relative minority of scientists who question the idea. Fair enough. We can discuss things. But then, they move on to another level of argument: If global warming is happening, they ask, "Can we really do anything about it anyway?" They suggest that it's beyond our ability to make any significant difference. And then, even allowing that it might be happening, and that we might be able to do something about it, the teachers on the video then raise the question, "Is it necessarily a bad thing?" They suggest that global warming could give us longer growing seasons in the northern hemisphere, and so that might be good. They conclude, then, that global warming probably isn't happening, and if it is, we probably can't do anything about it, and it could be a good thing anyway. I know, this is an issue that's become part of partisan political debate, and I don't really want to go there. My point is that you can see how we humans, and Christians in particular, are struggling with how we exercise our responsibility to care for creation.

Perhaps a less controversial issue would be the current oil well leak in the Gulf of Mexico. This is clearly something humans have caused, and it will undoubtedly have a negative impact on many non-human species, as well as on the people who make a living from the Gulf waters. One prominent talk show host has suggested that we don't need to do anything because this is a natural problem and that nature will take care of it. But seriously, nature didn't cause millions of barrels of crude oil a day to flood into the ocean. We did that. We are responsible for its creation, and we humans are responsible for its cleanup. In this case, BP is first in line for responsibility. But whether they get the job done or not, all of us are going to be touched by it. As a species we share responsibility for what we do to creation, and for trying to fix the problems we cause. If this example doesn't work for you, then consider the issues of acid rain, or chemical and nuclear waste. What we do does affect the planet.

However you view global warming, the current oil spill, or any other number of environmental issues, the point is that we're all in the same boat together - humans, plants, animals and ecosystems. If, through our poor stewardship of resources and polluting, we humans keep poking holes in the boat, the whole thing could sink, and we'll all go down together. This is not what God wants for creation.

Thankfully, Paul gives us good news too. Even though creation is temporarily held captive by our sin, he tells us that, ultimately, **creation will be set free**. By this, he doesn't mean creation will be set free when humans kill each other off and the planet is no longer afflicted by our presence. No. He means that, when humanity is fully transformed by God - when we realize our destiny as children of God and are no longer hampered by sin and ignorance and hatred and fear, then the creation will share in our glorious freedom. That's why he says the entire creation waits with eager longing for the revelation of the children of God. He knows that, just as our sin holds creation captive, our transformation will mean liberation for creation.

Now, there are different ways of understanding what this will be like. There are Biblical visions of creation transformed such that the planet is no longer recognizable: there will be no more night or oceans, and the predators will become herbivores. Or maybe these are just symbolic ways of saying that a perfect balance will be restored to creation when humanity is liberated from sin and evil. Either way, the key is that our transformation by God is meant to be good for God's entire creation.

So what are we to do with this? I suppose you could just wait for God to change us without any effort on our part. But I don't think that this is the message of the Bible. When we have come to faith in God and are following Christ as our Lord, we are already being transformed. We are to put our best effort into becoming the kind of people God created us to be. No, we can't create some kind of perfect utopia without God's intervention - but we can begin to live out of the new reality God is bringing about in Christ. We can't fix everything, but we can do something. Just as the call to follow Jesus means we will be good neighbors by helping people in need, honoring the poor, and seeking justice in society, it also means we will be good neighbors to the other species on our planet by being good stewards of creation. We can't escape our responsibility to learn about the consequences of our actions, and to make faithful decisions on both the large scale and the small scale - both when it comes to public policy and personal behavior. In the bulletin you'll find an insert about things you can do as an individual to start being a good neighbor to creation. The sermon outline page has some web resources you can go to for more guidance. But whatever you do, remember this: **Creation waits!** Creation waits with eager longing for you and I to be fully transformed by Christ, to enter into the glorious freedom of the children of God, and, consequently, to begin living in harmony with God's good creation.