

Expanding Our Neighborhood
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Genesis 1:1-3; Psalm 24: 1-2; Revelation 5:13
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Martin Luther King Jr. once preached a sermon about the story of the Good Samaritan. In an interesting twist, King didn't villainize the priest and the rabbi for their reluctance to stop and assist a wounded neighbor on the side of the road. King asserted that the Jericho Road was a dangerous place, and it's entirely possible that deciding to help a traveler in distress would have resulted in even greater peril for these clergy, perhaps an assault by cunning thieves. King says that what sets the Samaritan apart is that he didn't ask the question, "What's gonna happen to me if I stay?" The Samaritan asked, "What's gonna happen to my neighbor if I don't stay?"

I know that I supposedly tackled the concept of salvation four weeks ago, and Tim atonement two weeks ago. So I don't want re-open that entire can of worms. But if you ask me what kind of healing or saving or reconciling this world needs, I think it begins and ends with the kind of empathy – that is love and compassion for our neighbors – exhibited by the Samaritan, our brother, our sister, our fellow child of God. Jesus taught a Samaritan-kind-of-love, whereby dignity, respect, and safety for our neighbors is paramount above our own self-interests, privileges, and convenience. When we see each other as created beings, made wholly in the image of God, just as we are, and JUST as we are, little by little, the world is transformed.

The Jericho Roads of our time reveal dangerous scenarios for our neighbors near and far: hunger, homelessness, systematic poverty, asylum-seeking from violence, war, and famine, racism, the list goes on. As people of faith, our hearts, our souls, our spirits, the texts we hold sacred, the words we speak in our liturgies and prayers all tell us that we cannot ignore such dangerous roads. We have to ask what's gonna happen to our neighbors if we don't stay with them, if we don't advocate for them, if we don't acknowledge and respond to their needs.

I don't think I'm saying anything surprising to any of you. As a matter of fact, I've seen you in action. You love your neighbors.

But I want to challenge you over the next few weeks to broaden your understanding of neighbor. Along the Jericho Road, another neighbor cries out. Her name is creation. Her rivers and streams, her skies, her creatures from tiny creeping things to great running beasts, her trees and plants and flowers, her ecosystems are all under assault. They have been polluted and discarded. And we have a choice to make: Do we move along to more pressing things, because we need to preserve our conveniences and privileges? Or do we stop, and help our wounded neighbor, a created child of God, because we know that not stopping would mean her certain peril?

In the First-Thoughts session, we're working through a book by Elizabeth Johnson entitled: *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*. She asserts that humanity must understand its interconnectedness to all created beings before it can begin to help bring about sustainable, impactful environmental change – change that is needed urgently. She offers ways that congregations can make a heart connection to creation, the kind of connection that's needed to overcome our desire for convenience, and our assumption of unlimited natural resources.

One thing Johnson does is to encourage us to think about the view of Earth from Space. A little ball, dangling in all this matter and energy and cosmic wonder. And we humans are part of that, but certainly not all of it. God created the whole thing. Together. How wonderful! And therefore, God is always working to celebrate, restore, renew, make whole, and bring into its intended purpose, all of creation. Not just us humans who keep acting as if we're a rock band living in hotels and tearing out walls, who have accountants to pay for it all.

There's been a tendency in traditional Christian theology to emphasize the spiritual over the physical, rendering our bodies, and indeed the physical world we inhabit as temporary and less important. If our bodies are but a layover en route to our final terminus, why worry about their preservation?

But Johnson points out that our scriptures are overflowing with texts that describe a renewal not just for humanity, but for the whole earth, and all of its components. What would happen if we were more intentional in interacting with such texts?

7 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
(Micah: 6:8)

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.
(Matthew 25:40)

I cannot read these familiar passages, and not feel called to a life of service and empathy for my neighbors. These words provoke my heart, my soul, and my spirit. They redefine neighbor for me. They remind me that my connectedness to humanity transcends all of the artificial constructions Caesar concocts for us.

The same is true of this morning's passages. Is it coincidence that all of creation is celebrated in the first and last books of our canon, not to mention so many Psalms? I don't think so. The ancient writers understood their place within a cosmic neighborhood.

In Genesis One, God orders a universe, creating structure out of chaos. And every piece fits together. Light is good. And sky, and sea, and land are good. And so too are the creatures that fill them. And so too are we. And collectively, NOT SEPARATELY, we as creation – that's you and me, and the itty-bitty bugs, and the great big mountain peaks, the stars in the sky, and even the flamingos – together, we are deemed VERY good. Do you hear that? In God's cosmic engineering, it's the fusion, it's the symmetry, it's the chorus of creation that is the divine purpose for the world.

The Psalmist proclaims that the Earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it. Not portions of the Earth, and not parcels of those portions. No. All of it. And the Earth shall receive the Lord's blessings. Think about how cool that is. St. Francis was on to something. Today, here at Sardis, God's not just holding us. God's holding our oak trees, and our Lenten roses, the bugs our toddlers collect on the playground, and the air we breathe, and the sun that warms us, and green grass that keeps creeping ever-outward. Therefore, we thrive, we love, we grieve, we wound, we heal, we praise, we ponder, we exist as created beings, not in isolation, but in connected community with our natural neighbors.

And Revelation. (Uh-oh, I may have lost some of you!) But even Revelation, regardless of how you feel about its eschatology, and regardless of your concern for rapture and end-times – even Revelation speaks to a broader creation. The author (eventually!) offers comforting words describing a new heaven, and a new earth, and gone are crying and pain, and God is present here, now! And guess what? It's not just humanity who rejoices and feels such a blessing. Armstrong reminds us that every creature in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth and in the sea, and ALL that is in them sings – I imagine them dancing, too: headbanging, locomoting, macarana-ing, train-riding, Dabn', Roger-Rabbitn' -- you imagine the dance – but all of creation dancing like nobody's looking as they give all glory, laud, and honor to their maker, who loves, who stewards, who holds, who guides, who parents, who maintains justice, for ALL of US...FOREVER.

Sardis Baptist Church, if you didn't know it, if you didn't hear it; if you knew it and heard it, but just didn't want to pay attention, that's okay. Today is an invitation to view creation in a broader sense. It's an invitation to join in a cosmic chorus. It's an invitation to let the natural world enhance, not inhibit your connection with the divine. It's an invitation to know your neighbor.

Our planet lies stranded, wounded on the Jericho Road. And Jesus tells the scribe of two kinds of people: priests and Levites who ask, "what'll happen to me if I stay and help her?" and Samaritans who ask, "what'll happen to her if I don't stay and help?"

"And who was the neighbor?" Jesus asked the scribe. "The Samaritan," said the scribe. "He stopped. He assisted. He helped procure care. He promised to come

back and ensure this man would be okay. And perhaps, he even established a friendship with this man to see for his long-term well-being.”

“Indeed,” said Jesus. “Now go and do likewise.”

Friends, I know Jesus was talking to the scribe, but I think he’s talking to us as well. May God give us the strength to stop and help our neighbor, and ensure that she too will be part of God’s renewal.

May it be so. And may it begin right now. Amen.