

Reflection: Tillers of the Soil

Genesis 2:4b-15, Matthew 6:25-34

Sunday, July 7, 2024

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Back when I was graduating from college, comedian Eddie Murphy decided to leave *Saturday Night Live* to pursue making movies full time. Murphy's decision soon proved right. That year was also the year "Beverly Hills Cop" was released. The movie was an instant success, and became the highest grossing movie of the year.

And with it came the earworm by Glenn Frey, "The Heat is On." And now, forty years later, the heat is still on, and Murphy is still chasing bad guys across the screen as police detective Axel Foley.

The heat is on, but not just in movies. The heat is on across in the United States and across the world as we endure a sweltering summer that will likely break all records. Weather forecasters have said that only one state in the lower 48 states has chances to experience below average or average temperatures. So, if you want to beat the heat this year, forget the beach. Go to North Dakota.

It's not just that Eddie Murphy is rolling out a new movie, or that Glenn Frey is continuing to sing an old song. The heat is on, and will continue to be on for some time. In some cases, cities across the country are measuring 47 more days above 100 degrees a year than 50 years ago. The impact of climate change, and especially changes driven by human behavior, are unmistakable.

If the heat is on, what is our response? Back in 1984 we knew about recycling. We knew about greenhouse gas emissions. We knew that earth was a beautiful, but fragile place. More than 10 years ago, when Woodlawn first explored becoming a Presbyterian Earth Care congregation, we knew the warning signs. We knew that being involved in caring for creation was more than just a denominational catch phrase. This was not just a matter of political correctness. It was a matter of theological integrity. We knew that it was an act of faith that united human responsibility with the praise of God.

So that is why we sing today. The service today comes out of a little book I wrote called "Charged With Grandeur." It began first as a resource for this congregation and has been since sold to other churches and worship leaders across the country. I borrowed the title from a wonderful poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; / It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil Crushed."

We sing today because we believe that praising God leads us to a better life. Indeed, both of our scriptures today point to what could be called "the best life." Jesus, in Matthew, points us beyond the cares of today to a life built around seeking the things that matter most to God. The things which matter most to God are not things at all, but, as Genesis tells us, are the ingeniously created web of life.

You may have never noticed that there are two stories of creation in Genesis. Actually, there are several stories of creation in scripture, including both Genesis 1, Genesis 2 and Psalm 104. We are most familiar with the words of Genesis 1, those words which a bad joke tells us that God's favorite sport is baseball. You know, "In the big inning..." Most of know well that story of creation, that wonderful, poetic, hymn-like song of creation. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void." In Genesis 1, God spins creation like a potter throws clay at a wheel. All creation is formed out of the speech of God. "And God said, Let there be light, and God said, let there be a dome amid the waters, and God said, let the earth sprout forth..." God says, and creation occurs. And the crowing event happens in 1:26 when God says, "let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, animals, all the earth, and all crawling things that crawl upon the earth."

In Genesis 2, the story is different, and was probably written four centuries earlier. In Genesis 2:4-15, there are not seven days of creation, but one. The two accounts differ in many ways, but perhaps most significantly, in this older account, human beings are given a job before we are ever created. "There was no *human* (in Hebrew, "adam,") to till the soil, (in Hebrew, "adama.") Thus, God forms the human from the dust of the soil, a reminder of our relationship with the earth.

God reaches down into the soil of creation – not, as Rich Voth will tell you, the dirt of creation – but the humus, the living matter – The word *Adamah* is better translated fertile soil. We are made of the same stuff of creation.

We are created to be caretakers of this planet, entrusted with its care. We are called by these words in Genesis chapter two, to remain connected with all creation. Unless we do this, the good life God intends for all creation will slip through our fingers.

And that good life begins, as John Calvin taught us, with acts of praise. Belden Lane, a Presbyterian who taught spirituality at Saint Louis University for decades, writes that the theological heart of our Reformed/Presbyterian heritage is summarized first by the profound awareness of awe before a grand and powerful God, seen in the majesty of sky and sea, and in the transformed lives of those whose stories are told in scripture. (Lane, *Ravished by Beauty*, p. 5).

Lane tells a story which has long fueled my interest in visiting Scotland. (There's still time to sign up!). Lane visited the Isle of Iona, as we will next June. It is a spiritually significant place where Christians have worshipped for thousands of years. As he settles to worship at Iona, he notices something which he says can only be labelled as praise. "Suddenly, two blackbirds entered the church, seeking shelter from the coming storm. Their songs echoed from the wooden ceiling and stone walls like a descant to the urgent melody of the wind. One of the birds walked up to me, stopping three feet away, and then turned to enter the choir stalls, as if to attend more properly to its song. All of this seemed natural in that place, as if nothing more ordinary than a choir of blackbirds managing the psalms with exquisite beauty..."

Dare we imagine, says Lane, that the company of praise does not include the rest of creation? Dare we imagine how we might sing that song as well?

I close with this amazing video which was recorded seven years ago when we celebrated Eric Henson's retirement. You may remember it. What is amazing is that as Eric plays that wonderful hymn of praise, he is soon joined by all of us, but especially by so many who now sing with Eric in heaven. Dare we not imagine that this is the song we are to sing, the song that leads us to care for creation, to care for our home, to care for each other?