

"The Earth's Been Good To Me"
April 18, 2010
Earth Sunday
The United Church of Gainesville
Larry Reimer

SCRIPTURE - II Corinthians 4: 7; Kabir; Genesis 1:31

Leader: We who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay jars,
in

order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us.

People: *Inside this clay jar are the canyons and pine mountains
And the maker of canyons and pine mountains.*

Leader: We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt,
but

never in despair;

People: *All seven oceans are inside and hundreds and millions of
stars.*

Leader: there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend;
and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed.

People: *The acid that tests gold is there and the one who judges
jewels, and the music from the strings that no one touches, and
the source of all water. If you want the truth: Friend listen:
The God whom I love is inside.*

Leader: In the beginning... God saw everything that God had made.

People: *and indeed, it was very good.*

Simply changing the words of the traditional "Johnny Appleseed"
song from the "The Lord's been good to me" to "The earth's been good
to me" had quite an impact on me at three levels.

First, Reisa George heard this morning's choir anthem at a great
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Asheville, North Carolina. I
actually worshiped there on our last sabbatical. Now some of my best
friends are Unitarians. In terms of classical theology, I am quite close
to the founding principles of Unitarianism in emphasizing the oneness

of the divine rather than the complex theology of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. We at UCG and Unitarians have somewhat similar issues with God language. It's been said that the reason both Unitarians and UCC members don't sing well out of the hymnal is that we're always reading ahead to the next verse to see if we agree with it. It's also been that UCC could stand for Unitarians Considering Christ.

So my hunch is that somewhere, in order to make the Johnny Appleseed song palatable to Unitarians, someone changed the words from "The Lord..." to "The earth's been good to me."

And it's not only Unitarians who have trouble with "Lord". The UCC hymnal doesn't like "Lord" because it is a medieval male title. It has eliminated "Lord" from most of our UCC hymnal. They often insert "Sovereign" in place of "Lord", which is a superciliously silly substitute, if I may say so. Imagine (to the tune of "Johnny Appleseed"), "The Sovereign's been good to me, and so I thank the Sovereign..."

Wow, have I digressed here.

Second, I love "The earth's been good to me" because it moves me to a grateful belief in God as Creator at the center of my faith rather than "belief that God is Creator (to pick up the terrific terminology Vince used last week). There's a word for this theological perspective which is called panentheism. It's printed in your bulletin, and it's not spelled wrong. Pantheism, without the "en," is the belief that God is nature and nature is God. Panentheism, with the extra syllable maintains that God is in all nature but not confined to or defined only by nature. God is with us and among us in the trees and the blue sky and the sparkling waters and the shining stars, but God is not only trees, sky, water and stars.

Creation, like human nature, is set free and subject at times to chaos. Thus we have terrible earthquakes, which should never be called "Acts of God" any more than cancer is a willful act of God. Beautiful and terrible things happen in all life. God is not the earthquake or the cancer, but God's faithful love is never absent to anyone who is caught in the chaos of the earthquake or cancer.

Saying "the earth's been good to me" with this background reminds me to celebrate, thank, and work with and toward the healing of the earth in the same way I celebrate, thank, and work with God. It reminds me to stay close the natural world as it is so often celebrated in native and aboriginal religions.

"The earth's been good to me," reminds me of the sheer luck of grace to live in a portion of God's creation as beautiful as Alachua County, Florida.

Thomas Aquinas said that the pinnacle and culmination of creation is not the human being, but creation itself. We are part of, not superior to or above, nature.

There is much in traditional Christian theology that sees creation as an enemy to be subdued, the source of temptation to be resisted. When you're at Lake Yale next week, you'll see the architecture of this theology. There in the beautiful setting of overhanging oaks, a sparkling lake, glorious varieties of birds and marvelous meadows, the builders of that camp closed off all views of the lake from their chapels. All the windows of the activity rooms have been sealed, boarded up, so the only light is fluorescent and the only air is conditioned. You'll notice in North Camp this year that the outdoor worship center sits in the middle of an empty, shadeless field facing away from the lake. The buildings of Lake Yale are an example of anti-creation architecture.

The third thing I like about the theology of proclaiming "The earth's been good to me" is that it is a great reminder that we're all imperfect. That's the kindest way to put it. The less kind way is to say that we're all self-centered, screwed up, two faced hypocrites when it comes to care for the earth. In traditional language, the word would be sinners. While labeling ourselves sinners may have truth to it, that word is so overused by now that I think it's basically counterproductive.

But I think that in our desire to be people who care for the earth, it's also important to acknowledge that we're all imperfect. Those who don't agree that we need public policy to protect the earth from the human causes of world wide climate change, love to point out the

hypocrisy of Al Gore's Tennessee estate's energy usage, or the inconsistency of vegetarians who wear leather shoes.

The answer is that the critics are right. And the best thing for all of us who care for the earth to acknowledge, in the same ways that churches traditionally included a corporate confession of sins in worship, is that yes we all fall short. We all miss the mark. Alone each of us is incapable of healing the earth or of healing ourselves.

Yet that is not a reason to give up on doing what we can every day to not trample the earth, which is the heart of God, with our selfish, consumerism. Together and aware with each other and with God, we are powerful beyond measure to renew and heal the earth.

So let's simply acknowledge that no matter what we do to be more energy conscious, to use skoycoths and green bags, to buy locally or from fair trade food exchanges, to eat in ways that are not only healthier, but better for the earth, to bike to church, to care for the poor as well as the earth, we all still have our blind spots.

I am thrilled to drive a Toyota Prius hybrid that can get me 50 mpg on a trip to Jacksonville. I admit it; I can get smug if not downright self-righteous about it. And then I remember - I am also part owner of a boat. But then I justify my boat by saying we put a Honda four stroke engine on that boat that uses half the gas of a conventional outboard engine. But then I realize that even that gas is used for no utilitarian reason at all other than riding around in circles on a lake. And I have to keep gas hungry old Ford Explorer, the quintessential clunker of the cash for clunkers program, to pull that boat.

There's also the imperfection of falling into what is known in the diet world as the "Snackwells Syndrome." Snackwells were early low calorie cookies, and those who bought them tended to eat twice as many since they had half the calories of a normal cookie. In like manner, I found myself figuring that since I was using CFL bulbs, I didn't have to worry about turning off lights when I left the room. That's the Snackwell syndrome of the green diet.

We are all imperfect in the theology of "The earth's been good to me, and so I thank the earth." But that is not a reason to give up making every attempt to do what we can to love the earth with all our

heart, mind, soul and strength. None of my inconsistencies are reason for me to not drive a Prius or to give up CFL lightbulbs. Because we can't do everything right is not a reason to do nothing well.

Therefore in the spirit that we learn from and strengthen each other, I'm going to ask you to split into groups of 2-3 in a moment, and let each of you share one thing you feel good about in changing your own habits to thank the earth through green living. You don't have to worry about being a hypocrite; that's a given. Share one thing you do well in your care for the earth. Then share one thing you are learning or hoping to add to your life style to care more deeply for the earth. Then let your partner speak. Do not comment on or critique your partner's commitments. Affirm them and reinforce them. Celebrate one another and learn from one another.

SHARE

After the service, write down something you do or that you learned this morning on one of the pads of newsprint in the memory garden. We'll collate them and make them available.

Finally, remember the scripture and its response from the Sufi mystic Kabir. We are the clay jars in whom the divine creator lives. Inside us are the canyons and the pine mountains and the maker of the canyons and the pine mountains. In us are the seven oceans, the stars, and the source of the music of the strings that no one touches. We are one with all that is within us and around us. The God whom we love is inside not only us, but also inside this earth. To paraphrase the psalm, it's not just that the earth is the Lord's and all that dwell therein. It may just be that the earth is God and all that dwell therein.

Prayer

Be part of this ancient Celtic prayer found in various forms in gardens, churches, homes, and walking paths in Scotland and Ireland.

Deep peace of the running wave to you, of water flowing, rising and falling.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you, which imparts to you energy, consciousness, life.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you, who herself unmoving, harbors
the movements and facilitates the life of ten thousand creatures.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you, beaming down in compassion on
our turning world.
Deep peace of the Child of Peace to you,
Who breathes into us divine peace and Holy Spirit.
Deep peace to you.
(Mary Rogers, adapted from the Gaelic in Earth Prayers)