

Called to Care for Creation
St. John's Church, Tallahassee, Florida
The Third Sunday of Easter 2009

By the Rev. Richard Lindsley Walton

I once told you that the best gift that I ever received – in addition to my young family, of course – is the cross that I wear next to my heart nearly every day. This cross was given to me by my father the day before I was heading out on a trip to Tanzania, just as my grandfather had given it to my father many years before, and his father to him many years before that. I'm assuming that almost everyone has some such special gift: a mother's ring, a grandfather's pocket watch, or a book from a favorite teacher. And whatever the gift, I'm certain you treasure it with all the care in the world.

The reason I've begun with this reminder about gifts is because I want to discuss stewardship, that is, the way we care for our most prized possessions. But not the way we usually hear of stewardship on Sunday mornings, as in giving the church of our time and talents and treasure. No, I want to talk about the very first vocation humankind was ever given by God, which is the stewardship of creation. As we celebrate Earth Day this week, when it comes to the stewardship of creation the critical question is not whether we humans were meant to have *dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over all the wild animals of the earth and every creeping thing that creeps upon it*. The critical question is, as people created in the very image of God, what sort of masters are we meant to be?

The Scriptures tell us the Lord our God will always be our master. God continues to have dominion over our lives. But that doesn't then mean that God treats us cruelly or uncaringly, callously or indifferently, using and abusing us and then throwing us away. I certainly hope that is not what our image of the Lord our God is like. Yet for some, I'm afraid it is, because as St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, "Any error about creation also leads to an error about God." And if any error about creation leads to an error about God, then it furthermore seems true to say that any error in the way we treat creation, the way we relate to creation, must also lead to an error in our relationships – our relationships with God and our relationships with one another.

Ecological destruction does, in fact, affect our race relations, as in a country like America, for instance, by far the majority of toxic waste sites are located in African American and Latino neighborhoods. Ecological destruction also affects our class relations, if you will, as once again the majority of toxic waste sites are located in poor African American and Latino neighborhoods. But ecological destruction not only concerns our race and class relations. It also concerns our global relations, as the majority of the worst destruction occurs not in America, but rather in the poorest parts of the world – in New Delhi, Nairobi, San Paulo and beyond (Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, Baker Academic 2001).

Most already know that we humans are destroying our rainforests at the staggering rate of approximately 50 million acres a year, which is larger than the size of New England, and nothing can be done to bring these original forests back. But what many may not know is the current situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where portions of the second largest rainforest in the world were recently traded to an American logging company (among others) not in exchange for schools or hospitals or infrastructure development, but rather for sacks of salt,

bicycles and crates of beer (*Carving up the Congo*, Greenpeace International Report, 11 April 2007).

Most also already know that our land, water and air have become so choked with pollution that three species of life are extinct every day, and nothing can be done to bring them back. But what many may not know is that around the world deserts are expanding, and in much of the developing world where rainforests are retreating, areas subject to drought are increasing as well. Kathleen Norris, from her days on the Great Plains of the Dakotas wrote, "I had not realized that a long soaking rain..., a straight-down-falling rain, a gentle, splashing rain is more than a blessing. It's a miracle." In the developing world, however, local wisdom tells us that long soaking rains are miracles of the past and have been replaced by extended dry seasons bordering on drought, which finally give way to more severe storms, washing away the vital topsoil along with the farmers' future.

And finally, most already know that our world population is growing so alarmingly fast – that our numbers continue to expand exponentially while the earth's natural systems never do – that approximately one out of every five persons in the world today lives in poverty. Yet the critical issue is not only one of population in some far off foreign land, but is also one of consumption, as the average newborn in America consumes two times as much food as the newborn in Brazil and ten times as much fuel. In fact, Americans as a whole consume upwards of 25% of the world's resources all by themselves. But what is consumed must be ex-sumed, so to speak, in one form or another, by air or land or water. Hence, the Texas-sized field of garbage floating in the swirling waters of the Pacific Ocean at this moment.

Now I'm sure some are starting to question the use of rehearsing all this, when much of it's been said before, when there are some justifiable reasons behind much of what is occurring, when much of it seems out of our control. But my point goes like this.

When I first arrived in Peshawar, Pakistan, riding in a taxi from the bus station to the compound where I would be staying, I was greeted by graffiti on almost every street corner which read, "Down with the USA" or "America is the Great Satan," sometimes in Arabic, sometimes in plain English. When we would ride in the mornings to work – which was to provide food and tents and clothing to Afghan refugees during the Soviet invasion – we would usually pile into the beds, or hang on to the sides, of small pick-up trucks. But one day I needed to take a longer trip, so I boarded what would be more like a city bus for many of us, and found a seat by myself. Yet at the very next stop a young Pakistani man climbed on board, took one look at me, and sat down beside me even though there were other open seats. For most of the journey, after introductions, we sat in silence. He didn't ask me for money, or for my address in the States, or for any contacts in Peshawar. He only wanted to know where I was from. And what I will always remember is the incomprehensible smile that spread across his face as we traveled along.

Now this was not some kind of schizophrenic love-hate relationship – like those who publically promote Sharia Law yet privately make reruns of "Baywatch" the most popular show in their countries – as the same thing happened when I was in Tanzania, taking another long trip. As in Pakistan, I got on at the beginning of the bus line and found a seat by myself. But before long I was joined by a young man named Obadiah, and then by his one year old son Samuel, who was literally handed in through the bus window by Obadiah's sister at a brief stop halfway through the journey. Obadiah asked nothing of me along the way other than companionship – and to hold Samuel from time to time – but when we reached our final destination late that

evening, fearing for my safety on the darkened streets of Dar es Salaam, Obadiah insisted that I come to stay with his family for the night.

The point is, whether we know it or not, whether we find it embarrassing or over-whelming, there are millions of people around the developing world who simply long to touch the hem of our garments. And therefore, the way these millions witness Americans treating creation, especially I dare say American Christians, will have much to do with the way they treat their own piece. But the question remains: How will they witness the way we care for creation? Once the rainforests have been logged, once the coral reefs have been trampled under, once the dry seasons have become unbearably hot and the hurricane seasons unmanageably extreme, who will stand with the most vulnerable then? It may not be in our national self-interest. But if not the wealthiest, most politically powerful Christians in world, if not the Western church, then who?

The most important point, however, beyond pragmatism, justice or compassion, has been forcefully summed up by Wendell Berry, saying, "Our destruction of nature is not only bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility. It is the most horrid blasphemy." You see, creation is a gift. It is a gift which God has entrusted to us. Think about how we all treat those precious gifts given to us by one we truly love. I know I would be absolutely heartbroken if I were to lose my family cross. Because it is irreplaceable; because it symbolizes so much about who I am and to whom I belong, where I've come from and where I'm going; and because I love my father, who loved me so much that he entrusted it to me.

In closing, let me assure you that this is not meant to be a comment on any current legislation facing the Florida House. This is not a Democratic versus Republican issue. It's not about hugging trees versus supporting our troops; nor is it about the United States economic interests versus those of Western Europe or even the developing world. This is about our first calling in life, the first vocation given to us our God, which is to preserve and to protect, to cultivate and to care for life.

So what is the good news in all the destruction and dire predictions? Where is the grace and the redemption? To begin, creation, in and of itself, is good news. The adoration of creation is a spiritual path that Christians have traversed from the foot of the cross forward. We all long to find God in this broken world, and St. Augustine points us in the right direction, I think. Augustine writes: "Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?" (*The Book of Nature*).