

## Good Stewards

I learned pretty quickly after we joined you all a little over three years ago that the celebration of Earth Day has long been honored in this ecologically-minded congregation. Like many of you, I remember the first Earth Day back in 1970 and I've continued to be aware of how the day was noted or not in the communities in which I've lived. I thought three years ago and still think that Good Shepherd's communal interest in ecological issues is yet another indication that we have a good fit here between us.

So, I thought it was important to be able to say something germane during the week of Earth Day and I was delighted to find a scripture passage that allows me to do so within our study of I Peter. As you may have noticed, we're skipping chapter 3 for now, although I'm sure we'll look at it some other time. Chapter 3 continues the themes in chapters 1 and 2 of honoring others, or as Paul wrote, being "subject to one another," and of being willing to endure troubles in the same manner as Jesus. As we turn to chapter 4, though, Peter's emphasis shifts slightly, from enduring trouble or mistreatment to giving up voluntarily some of the things that we might think will bring us pleasure.

Peter's call to Christians in this passage is to follow the example of Jesus in his spirit of self-sacrifice and to live, not "by human desires but by the will of God." Peter goes on to call those hearing his letter to abandon the life common to the culture around them, giving up "licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry." Now, while those expressions of human desire are still very much with us nearly two thousand years after Peter's letter to the new believers in Asia Minor, I'm not harboring any delusions that those of us who come to this place on Sunday morning are spending the rest of the week in revels and carousing. So the question we need to address this morning is, "How does this passage relate to us?" What human desires are we still pursuing that are outside of God's will? And how does any of this relate to Earth Day and ecology?

To begin with, perhaps it's best to get back to basics and to think about the positive case of how God's will relates to ecology. Some of us began a conversation about the creation stories in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 this past Wednesday night and we read of God's creation and how at every step along the way, God looked at Creation and called it "good" and ultimately, "very good." Genesis 2:15 tells us that God put the human into the garden, "to till it and keep it." The will of God from the very first was that the human should take care of the Earth. But almost from the time the human was put into the garden, human failings negatively affected the beauty of God's creation. Those who told the stories of Genesis linked the arrival of thorns and thistles to human sin. Less poetically, we can point to hard scientific data today that shows humankind's baleful influence on the Earth and its creatures. Deforestation and mountain top removal are commonplace in the lumber, agriculture and mining industries, causing erosion, loss of habitat for endangered species, and the destruction of entire micro-ecosystems. The pollution of our air and water are a continuing plague, brought about primarily by poor human choices. Even if we were to follow the example of some of our co-religionists and discount the scientific data which links global climate change to human action, it's clear that we, as a species, are not following the will of God to properly tend our garden.

The question now becomes, "why?" Why are we not doing everything we can to stop and reverse the environmental degradation for which we are clearly responsible? The answers may

range from “it’s too expensive” to “it’s inconvenient” or “I’m just one person; I can’t have an impact.” But the real answer is tied to what Peter would have called “human desires.” We live in a society that values short-term economic gain over sustainable ecological solutions, a society that values personal convenience over global responsibility, a society that has made idols of wealth and pleasure. The human desires for the easy life, the quick buck, pleasure taken at the expense of another are every bit as degrading and destructive to communal life as “licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry” are to individual health and just as much out of God’s will.

In his letter, Peter holds up a warning to further motivate his readers to abandon an undisciplined life: “The end of all things is near.” Based on the witness of the New Testament writers, 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians clearly expected the imminent return of Jesus, resulting in the final judgment and the establishment of God’s Kingdom in the New Heaven and New Earth. Most of us no longer look for that sort of End of All Things in our lifetimes but we must begin to face the very real possibility of the end of our lifestyles and what the 80s band R.E.M. called “The End of the World as We Know It.” Our lifestyles are simply unsustainable. Listen to these facts gathered by Brian McLaren for his book, Everything Must Change: “For example, one-fifth of our planet’s tropical rainforests have been cleared since 1960, and rainforests are currently receding at 1 percent per year. According to Worldwatch.org, we are currently operating at one hundred to one thousand times the normal extinction rate, which means that today, one in four mammal species, one in ten bird species, one in four amphibian species, one in five reptile species, and half of all primate species are threatened with extinction, with 5 to 20 percent more in each category falling to near threatened status. In our lakes, rivers, and oceans, fisheries are being depleted at twice their replacement rate. And, speaking of water, by 2020, one in three people will suffer from fresh water shortages.” In this country, we comprise approximately 5 percent of the world’s population, yet we use approximately 30 percent of the world’s resources. Michael Helms, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Moultrie, GA, writes, “We should ask the question, ‘When have we used enough resources?’” It is a question we can trace back to the time of the prophets. In a passage that might have been written for our time, Ezekiel 34:17-19 says, “As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: ... Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my other sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?”

Like all good pastors, Peter doesn’t just point out the problem; he also offers the solution. “Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” I want to say a few words about hospitality before turning to the more expected topic of stewardship.

Hospitality was and is a key virtue of the civilization of the Middle East. Indeed, it is perhaps misleading to call it a virtue; it was an expectation. In that day before superhighways and Holiday Inns, travelers were dependent, like Blanche DuBois, on the kindness of strangers. Perhaps you remember Jesus’ parable about the householder who was caught short by the arrival of a guest and went to his neighbor for food with which to feed the traveler. In Jesus’ story, the expectation is clearly that, even in the middle of the night, hospitality is not optional. Or you may remember the story of Abraham, encamped at the oaks of Mamre. Seeing three travelers in

the distance, he hurried out to them to invite them to his tent for a meal and rest. It was only after the meal that it became clear to him that his guests were divine messengers. Status was not a factor in hospitality. Nor was hospitality a function of how full one's pantry might be. Biblical hospitality, the kind of hospitality still practiced by the poor in many parts of the world, is not a hospitality of abundance but a generosity with the necessities of life, necessities for the host as well as for the guest.

We are not often called upon, individually, to practice immediate hospitality. Rarely will a footsore traveler arrive unannounced at the door of our homes. I do see them at the door to this building and I think it's important that we continue to welcome those strangers with food and the proceeds of our Benevolence Fund. But there is another, extended kind of hospitality that it is necessary for us to consider. We are often told, as Americans, that our national interests and sphere of influence stretch far beyond our continental shores. And, as citizens of the world in the television and internet age, we are immediately connected to people we will never see in the flesh. Since these things are so, we have both the ability and the responsibility to practice hospitality to those far from our doors. It is up to us to make sure that the policies of the government which we elect and the corporations for which we work or from whom we buy, treat men and women far from us as honored guests in our household and not as those of no account, to be ignored or exploited at will. When we read that those at most risk from climate change are the poor, we must remember that Jesus enjoined his followers to be especially hospitable to those who could not repay them. And we must always remember that hospitality implies a willingness to do with less so that others may have what they need. We must heed Peter's admonition: "Be hospitable to one another without complaining."

Peter continues, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." We have been blessed with abundance but God's gifts are not meant to merely fulfill our selfish human desires. Instead, they are gifts meant to be shared in service to one another. We are called to care for and to share all that we have and all that we are, even to our very lives. In her book, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*, Elizabeth Newman writes, "Our lives are always gifts of God; the divine spring continually supplies what we need. There is never a time when we can sit back and say, 'Ahh, now my life is mine.' Such a way of thinking distorts not only our lives but more fundamentally the nature of God, whose superabundant giving never ceases because it lies at the heart of God's triune identity." Stewardship and hospitality come together as we tend our gardens, metaphorical and actual, in order to share the produce with others.

To apply this calling of hospitality and stewardship to our present situation, to Earth Day 2008, what practical steps can we take, as a church and as individuals? The Baptist Center for Ethics published this week a list from Kristina Brown, minister of community ministries and communications at First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Ten Things You Can Do Now:

"1.) Purchase canvas bags for your groceries. Think you'll never remember to use them? Write at the top of your grocery list each week "take bags." Also, once you empty your groceries, put them back in your car. Also, if you're just buying one or two items that you can carry, skip the bag altogether.

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- 2.) Sign up for a curbside recycling program. (That's much easier to do here than in many parts of the country.)
- 3.) Expired Drugs/Prescriptions: Do NOT flush them down the toilet, where they can end up in our water supply. Dispose of them in the trash in closed containers.
- 4.) Personal Care Products: Avoid using any products that contain triclosan, phthalates or parabens.
- 5.) Consider purchasing a hybrid vehicle. You may qualify for a tax credit if you purchase it before 2009. Your insurance company may also offer incentives such as discounts. Find out what current incentives are available by going to [www.hybridcenter.org](http://www.hybridcenter.org). (I would add to that, if you're thinking of a hybrid SUV, stop kidding yourself. Ask Connie what she found out about their carbon footprints when she was researching cars. And besides, how many of us really need that much cargo or passenger capacity on a regular basis?)
- 6.) Buy meat, dairy products and produce that are organic, hormone-free and antibiotic free. Buy coffee that is Fair Trade Certified, Certified Organic, Shade Grown, or Rainforest Alliance Certified. Try to buy locally grown produce and shop at the Farmer's Market.
- 7.) Run your home more efficiently. When selecting cleaning products, avoid antibacterials, aerosol cans, and fragrances. Baking soda and vinegar make excellent cleaning agents for a multitude of chores.  
  
Replace all light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs. They use 66 percent less energy and last 10 times longer. Replace your antiquated computer monitor with a laptop or a LCD monitor, and don't forget to cut them off when not in use.  
  
Use a programmable thermostat that will allow you to set the temperature for daytime and evening comfort. It can save you as much as 20 percent if you reduce temperatures by 5-10 degrees.  
  
Make sure your appliances all have the Energy Star certification. Instead of replacing appliances and other electronics, see if you can repair it. Go to [www.repairclinic.com](http://www.repairclinic.com) to find parts and do-it-yourself tips.
- 8.) Eliminate all those catalogs you receive. Go to [www.catalogchoice.org](http://www.catalogchoice.org) to find and decline catalogs you no longer wish to receive or to eliminate duplicates.
- 9.) Recycle your clothes, furniture, computers, cell phones and musical instruments. This is the time of year when we clean out our closets. Numerous agencies have information on how and where to put these items to good use.

10.) Be kind to your yard. Cut back on fertilizers and pesticides. Start a compost pile. Plant native plants. Use organic products on your plants. Switch to manual or electric yard tools instead of gas.”

“Don't forget the 3 R's,” she concludes, “Reduce, Reuse or Recycle.” By the way, this list and many other informative articles about the environment and the Gospel can be found at [TheGreenBible.org](http://TheGreenBible.org), a website I've listed on the back of your bulletin.

We are doing or can do some of these things as a congregation, too. As we look at what kind of alterations to make in our building, we should be thinking of environmental impact. As we consider new light fixtures, we should be thinking of fluorescent lamps or LEDs. Can we make a switch to all Fair Trade, shade-grown coffee for our fellowship times? Will our new arboretum be low-impact and sustainable? I'll be attending a one-day seminar on May 1 at Seattle Pacific University entitled “Greening the Congregation: Stewardship as an Act of Worship” and I hope to bring lots of good ideas back to you. I'm also in touch with Earth Ministry, a faith-based ecological non-profit here in Seattle, to find out more about their program, “Greening Congregations.” I hope to have more to tell you about both very soon.

All of these things, of course, are relatively easy to do in the Seattle area. We are blessed to live in a place where the majority of people take the environment seriously. We are quite likely to get brownie points from our neighbors both at home and here on our campus for implementing any or all of these steps. But even if they were difficult, even if we faced ridicule or persecution for tending our garden, we should do it anyway. We are to be good stewards and to practice hospitality, as Peter writes, “so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.” “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,” wrote the Psalmist, and it is well for us to remember that although God has gifted us with the bounty of the Earth, it is still our responsibility to tend and to keep the garden, not for ourselves, but for God and in service to all of God's creation. For it is in service to others that we will truly find the freedom from destructive human desires and bring glory to God through Christ Jesus. “To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”