

“Cloud” GPPC 4-22-18
Psalm 8, Romans 8:18-25, Hebrews 12:1-2

This Sunday, as the saying goes, we’re nurturing two birds with one birdfeeder. First, we’re celebrating Earth Day as we focus on God’s creation and our care for it. Second, we’re celebrating Then and Now, the last bit of remembrance of the 70-year anniversary of Guilford Park Presbyterian Church’s founding.

Start with Earth Day. A biblical scholar says, “Once I heard astronomer Karel Vanderlugt suggest this model: Imagine that the sun, which is a star, is the size of a grapefruit. Then the earth would be the size of a grain of sand, about thirty-five feet away. The moon would be a tiny speck of sand about an inch from the earth. Venus would be twenty-five feet distant, Mars fifty-three feet. On this scale, the next grapefruit-star would be two thousand miles away, about the distance from Minneapolis to Los Angeles. To model our home galaxy, the Milky Way, we would need some 10 billion of those grapefruit-stars, each sixteen hundred miles apart. And our universe is made up of billions of

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such galaxies, all moving away from one another.” (James Limburg, *Psalms*, 25.)

And the Psalmist asks, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

We join the Psalmist and the scientist as we struggle to take in the immensity of creation and how minute each one of us is in comparison. How can God the creator of all that is, seen and unseen, care about little old you and me? How can it be that with stars, planets, moons, asteroids, black holes, and galaxies to manage, God would spend even a moment concerned with each one of us? Yet God does.

In fact the Psalmist says God has made each of us just a little lower than the angels, just a little lower than God, God’s very self. God has crowned us with glory and honor, thus declaring us to be royalty. (Try to remember that on a day when everything you attempt seems to fail and all that you touch seems to turn to dust. Try to remember that you and I are still God’s royalty and we are actually made of stardust. Try to remember.)

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And because we are royalty, God has also given us dominion over the works of God's hands—from the amoeba to the whale, from the mountains to the plains to the seas, the creatures and critters, birds and fish, all of it placed under our dominion.

Yet dominion does not mean assault or abuse. Instead, dominion means caretaking. It means creation does not belong to us; it belongs to God. And we are to care for creation as stewards who will one day return what has been placed into our care for a time. And there will be an accounting by God for how we have cared for what belongs to God. “The earth is the Lord's” sings the Psalmist in the 24th Psalm.

And writing to the Roman church, the Apostle Paul even speaks of a broken creation waiting to be set free from its bondage to decay, yearning to be reborn. In his most hopeful writing Paul believes not merely in the redemption of us saintly/sinful Christians (as impressive as that is) but in the redemption of the universe through Christ. Everyone and all things freed and made new. It boggles the mind, doesn't it?

So Guilford Park has recently received recognition from our national denomination with certification as an Earth Care Congregation.

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We are the first Presbyterian church in our presbytery (about 100 churches spread over several counties) to have received this certification. Not only is this an honor but more importantly it is a promise that we see ourselves as blessed by God's creation *and* we see ourselves as *responsible* for God's creation. We see ourselves as trying, imperfectly, to begin living into the redemption of the creation that Paul says God will finally bring about.

So as a church we're doing those practical (but not sexy) things such as replacing all the church building lights with lights that use less electricity, trying to recycle more, looking for ways to save on heat and cooling, teaching classes on care of creation, and addressing the environment in preaching and worship.

We're also people who're becoming more informed about the environment and government policy. We know that it's important for businesses to be able to make a profit and to function without unnecessary government regulations. Yet that also needs to be balanced with long-term protection of the environment.

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We do not all agree, but we're studying climate change and how humanity's pollution is contributing to that problem. We're asking our elected representatives not just to protect our drinking water, the air we breathe, the wetlands, the forests, and the national parks but to work together with other nations to lessen climate change, because now it is too late to stop it completely. But scientists believe we can make it less awful by a concerted, multinational effort. And this is important not just for us but especially for people who are poor and who tend to be unable to respond to rising tides and temperatures and stronger storms as well as we can. And, of course, efforts now will make a difference even more for our children and grandchildren and their children. History and our posterity will judge us and so will God.

So we're pushing for renewable energy, such as solar and wind power, to be increased instead of drilling for oil off the North Carolina coast. In fact, scientists tell us that even the process of searching for oil off the coast is destructive to the sea creatures. Off-shore drilling itself always results in some spillage that harms the eco-system. And a major oil spill causes damage that lasts for decades. I do not want to have to

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wear booties on my feet when I step onto the beach, and I'm sure you don't either.

So we are paying attention to rhetoric used around energy production. For example, we hear elected representatives talk of "saving" the coal industry. Yet coal is already being phased out by cheaper natural gas, and natural gas will be phased out by even less expensive and cleaner renewable energies such as solar and wind.

And again, we care for the environment not because we are "nice people." No. We care for the environment, we're concerned about plastic in the oceans and sustainable farming, because we are Christians, followers of Christ, and we believe this world does not belong to us. It belongs to God. We are merely stewards of creation, and God expects us to enjoy creation and to care for it and to leave it in better condition for the next generation.

Of course, we not only will *leave* a legacy but we have been *left* a great legacy, not only the creation we enjoy but especially this congregation we cherish. 70 years ago this congregation was established. The first members of this church worshiped not in an ornate cathedral or

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even in this lovely building but under the oak tree that still stands beside the parking lot across the street. So our church logo is a tree and there is a tree bookshelf in the gathering area. The roots of that oak tree must have been strong and deep to weather storm and drought. And the roots of another tree are also strong and deep.

You see we are not connected just to a beautiful old oak tree that will eventually die but we're connected to the roots of this congregation's saints who've gone before us in faith and who live eternally.

One of this church's former pastors (now retired), David Sutton, sent me an email recently. He gave me permission to share it with you. He wrote, "I've enjoyed the historical tidbits y'all are putting in the weekly news. The two women in today's news, Mary Keating and Carolyn Stokes, were quite something. I only met Carolyn shortly before her death, but I recall she was still a feisty person. If I am remembering correctly she—perhaps with Irving Birdseye the pastor then—invited black college students to GPPC for some occasion...maybe they were traveling, or demonstrating, or doing some work toward integration? The

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story was that there was opposition among some members but Carolyn would hear none of it and persisted.”

A feisty woman at Guilford Park working for racial justice, and she persisted. I’m shocked to hear such a thing. Aren’t you?

David continues by talking about the other woman. He writes, “Mary had the reputation for being abrasive (I think that came from people unaccustomed to assertive women), speaking her views insistently and clearly (which she did). I found her delightful, and willing to engage in frank dialogue, and with a compassionate heart beneath her serious demeanor.” David says Mary chaired the Fiftieth Anniversary celebration for GPPC. Also he says he remembers how she was well-versed in Presbyterian worship. And when Easter lilies or Christmas poinsettias “got stacked so high that the Lord’s Table was totally obscured, Mary would take a picture, point out to preachers and worship committee elders that that was NOT good Presbyterian worship practice. Harold Shelton, who tended those plants often, learned to plan carefully so Mary wouldn’t make him rearrange them.”

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David ends by saying, “I realize, of course, that telling stories about people listed in historical remembrances makes me an oldster now! But I’m grateful for the saints!”

And we are grateful for the saints too, for their feistiness about things that mattered, for their faithfulness, for their willingness to take risks for God’s justice and mercy, for their love of this church family and their loyalty to it, we are grateful.

Can you recall some of the saints in your own life, people who’ve helped you on your journey? Do you remember some of the saints of this church? Can you see and hear them in your mind right now? They were not perfect people, were they? But they were faithful to Christ and faithful to this congregation, and God used them as instruments of God’s justice, mercy, and love. Can you call to mind some of those people now with all their strengths, sins, and quirks?

So what will people say about us in a few decades? What will they say about our faithfulness to Christ and our faithfulness to this church, this family of faith, this part of the Body of Christ? What will they say about our unity amidst our diversity? What will they say about the ways

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we loved each other and loved the world? What will they say about our courage to say and do what was right? What will they say? And what will God say?

As the writer of Hebrews says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...”

We have many challenges ahead of us, challenges to care for God’s broken creation, challenges to care for God’s beautiful, but always messy church. But we also have been left a rich legacy. And we have this cloud of witnesses who’ve gone before us in faith. Can you see them in your mind’s eye? Can you see them? They are praying for us. They are rooting us on. They are waiting for us at the finish line. And now they shout. Run! Run, the race that is set before you! Amen. ©Jeff Paschal