

Cornel Barnett, John Girton and Tani Girton
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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4th Sunday of Easter

Genesis 1:24-31; Matthew 6:25-34; Proverbs 6:6-8
“Reflections of a Preacher and Green Investor”

Cornel:

The Earth Day sermon today will combine scripture read by Tani Girton and conversation between John Girton and myself. As liturgist for the day, Tani will read the scripture, and John and I will respond to the texts and John will introduce us to green investing. Jesus spoke a lot about money so John is excused if he speaks about money today. Jesus also theologized on everything he said and so will John and I in this time of good news which we call preaching.

One can argue that all of scripture is about God’s beautiful creation and how God calls us to responsible stewardship in our care of the earth. Scripture is equally clear about the damage to the environment and aligns human salvation with salvation of the earth.

The Bible begins however with God’s “good” creation. Tani will read the first scripture, Genesis 1:24-31.

Tani:

²⁴And God said, “Let the earth bring forth creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” ²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

²⁹God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Cornel:

On the final day of creation God said it was “very good.” One sees in this passage God’s provision of a beautiful earth and calls humankind into a relationship with the earth and all its creatures. But the statement, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth,” has troubled interpreters through the ages.

Some see this as justification for submitting the earth to human will and humanity’s domination of the earth and thus gives a free hand to anyone to do whatever they want to the earth without considering consequences: to extract willy-nilly, to over-graze, over-fish, remove mountain tops, pile up plastics, fumble with fossil fuels, etc. I don’t see it this way as I shall make clear later. At least, at this juncture we see how humankind can justify abuse of the earth.

I would imagine John that you are doing what you are doing because you’ve seen the plight of the earth and you want to do something about it and you are doing something very positive in your vocation for a more sustainable earth. But before we go there, what are the problems in the earth as you see it? What about “subdue” and “dominion,” could the writer of this portion of Genesis chosen better words?

John:

Well, Cornel, I think that better words than subdue or dominion, are shepherd or caretaker of the earth. I believe that Jesus would think in these terms. The earth needs shepherding because there are so many people, so few resources, and when we use the resources such as oil and coal so quickly, or not sustainably, there is pollution and waste.

There are so many ways to go green these days. Even doing nothing! I saw a magazine article that said that doing nothing was green because then you are not buying, or consuming things, and buying and consuming things is a way not to be green. In this, I remember visiting a Franciscan monastery in Utah when I was a child. All they did there was pray, garden, and make bread. But it was the best bread ever! And they had a zero carbon footprint.

But it is hard for many, if not most Americans, to be green by not consuming, because we are such a consuming culture. For example, I admit that I buy things quite often. Even in my work, what I do is specialize in buying things. And I analyze companies that make things that people buy (as well as services that people use of course). One thing my brother taught me was, when I am in a mood to buy something, buy something small instead. For example, this is exaggerating, but he said something like, if you want to buy a new car, why not buy a book, or a cup of coffee instead!

To continue, one company I have been spending a LOT of time studying recently is Tesla Motors. This is the green electric car company founded by Elon Musk, who is also a founder of SpaceX, the space station delivery company. Tesla makes cars that produce no exhaust or Carbon Dioxide or pollution of any kind on the road, since they are completely run on batteries, like an electric golf cart. However, their model S is a large BMW style sedan that can seat up to 7 people (two of them in a jump seat), that goes from Zero to 60 miles per hour in under four seconds. The fact that it is a zero pollution vehicle is very positive for people and the planet. But like all things, it has some drawbacks. It takes carbon to make the vehicle, for example, since it incorporates steel and plastic and many batteries, and it takes carbon to make the electricity that

runs the car. However, someday, it will take less carbon as we get more of our energy from solar and wind energy. And it is companies like these that are working to save energy and eliminate pollution from our skies. The air that we breathe and water that we drink are all part of the commons, and should be kept clean.

Cornel, what are some recent issues that you have been interested in?

Cornel:

As a surfer I'm interested in anything do with the ocean. So I'm concerned about the vast circles of plastics called gyres, factory run-off that spills into the sea, the mass slaughter of sharks merely for their fins used for shark-fin soup, and as I said previously over-fishing. All environmental issues interest me.

Jesus gives us another sense of "dominion" and to be honest his interpretation began a lot earlier in the Hebrew Bible. In his famous sermon on the mount he says:

Tani:

Matthew 6:25-34

²⁵"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?
²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Cornel:

This is an idyllic view of life. It's a perfectly healthy and sustainable creation where birds are fed and fields clothed in beauty. That's the earth intended by God. But we know that the earth is not healthy and entirely sustainable and much of its decline has to do with humanity's abuse of God's lovely creation. We live in a time when the earth and all that lives on it can be destroyed or healthily sustained. Our modern mind can ruin or maintain the earth. It's a choice and that's why Jesus implores us to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness." The realm of God is a world of righteousness, which is another word for justice.

John, as a green investor, what does this mean to you and how do you strive for the realm of God and his righteousness in what you do?

John:

Well, as I mentioned before, I do spend a lot of time thinking about what to buy, not only personally, but about what other people think about, and what that means for businesses and

investing. But what you have mentioned is more about the spiritual world, and the interpersonal world. Because once you have bought the last thing you will ever need, and there is no more to buy, and you no longer care about buying anything, then it is all about doing (or sometimes NOT doing in the case of the monks). Once you have the violin, you have to play it! You have to act, and you have to act meritoriously. Earth Day is about all the animals including the humans. Earth Justice is also Social Justice. We are just part of the great ecosystem called earth, and even if we have nothing material, we can just enjoy the planet for what it is.

I know that Cornel loves the movies, and I looked at the trailer for the movie called "Oblivion," before we decided to see the movie "42" last night. Tom Cruise sits in a field in the sunshine on the planet earth, and you can tell he just enjoys being there! Then he has to move on and save the planet from something, but that moment was his for enjoyment. To enjoy God's earth and all that we have here is a miracle. Instead of the film "Oblivion," we went to see the film "42," which is a beautiful movie in its own right, about the trials and tribulations of the first black baseball player in the big league team of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Being Green is also about being kind to our fellow human beings, and respecting every member of the human race, regardless of race, creed, or sexual orientation. And the film "42" brings across that message that humans can change, and they have to be courageous to change.

Cornel, you spent much time in South Africa working on social justice issues and racism. Have you heard of the movie "42" about Jackie Robinson and what kind of parallels do you see in your experience in South Africa?

Cornel:

I don't recall the movie. I'd like to see it. I know something of Jackie Robinson's story and how he broke the race ceiling in the US. The Black in experience in South Africa is similar to the larger African experience which is one of extreme poverty. Poverty is a result of racial injustice and in Africa nowadays it also comes about by climate change. We are seeing an increase in climate refugees who have to move because their land is no longer habitable. Their land is drying up. In South Africa, areas of poverty were often polluted because there were no systems to keep the areas clean like garbage pick-up, private electric and water systems, and the like. It's amazing how many homes and immediate environments were kept up and clean. It's difficult to feel good about your natural environment when you are dehumanized and deprived by racial injustice.

Finally, we shall now hear a lovely little proverb that speaks of a world without domination or dominion.

Tani:

Proverbs 6:6-8

⁶Go to the ant, you lazybones;
consider its ways, and be wise.

⁷Without having any chief
or officer or ruler,

⁸it prepares its food in summer,
and gathers its sustenance in harvest.

Cornel:

We know that nothing comes free. We have to work for it. This lovely proverb states that we can be wise by considering the ant: It has no chief, officer or ruler to lord over it while doing what it is made to do, that is, to find its food in summer and fall and gather up enough for the winter. The ant will not starve. The ant simply knows what to do without being told. The ant is industrious and ensures a future. Since we are a believing community and do have God's free gift of grace which we accept by faith; and our faith and work is the best combination for success.

John, in what way does this proverb speak to you in what you are doing? How can we be like the ant and ensure we have enough to eat now and in the future? What should we be doing? What is the role of faith in our stewardship of God's creation?

John:

I write quarterly stock letters on many issues, of both earth and social justice, including clean energy such as solar and wind power, clean water, as well as social issues such as the best companies to work for and women leadership in business. My latest Growth Letter is called "Organic Food Stocks Benefit from Non-GMO trend." This was inspired by the recent announcement that Whole Foods has decided to label all non-GMO foods that are on their shelves over the next five years, or by 2018. In writing the letter, I found that non-GMO foods are usually organic foods, as organic foods cannot carry any GMO ingredients. GMO refers to genetically modified organisms, such as BT Toxin which is now found in 90% of all US planted soybeans, and 65% of all US planted corn. When insects eat the soybeans or corn plants that contain the BT toxin, they die. So in effect the pesticide has been incorporated into the plants. While there have been no short term effects on humans, the long term effects have not been studied in any great detail.

When I talked about this with some of my green acquaintances, one pointed out that the BT toxin has gotten into the food system for the monarch butterfly and there's been a large depletion of the monarch population over the past year. Another person pointed out that bees have been dying in great numbers. This may be due to BT toxin or other factors such as other pesticides or bee mites. There have been reports that organic beekeepers which keep their bees far away from pesticides are not having the problems that larger commercial beekeepers are having in nonorganic fields. In any event it is important that we protect our bees as they are critical for flowering plants and crops including apples, oranges and other trees.

In the book *Eco Barons*, by Edward Humes, there is a woman, Carole Allen, who was nicknamed the Turtle Lady, who tries to save the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle in the Gulf of Mexico. She found that she had to approach the commercial shrimp fleet in order to save the turtles. "There really was no choice," Allen said. "The commercial shrimp fleet was, despite the denials, driving the turtles into extinction. I knew it would be hard. But not as hard as watching a creature that has been on this earth for 100 million years get wiped out in one generation."

If we take care of our bees (and ants and turtles) and our biological diversity and eat organic foods and take care of each other and the planet, then I think we are doing what God wanted us to do.

Cornel:

Yes, indeed. Thank you, John, and thank you for what you are doing in your vocation for God's beautiful world. Amen.