

## *Holy Ground, Good Soil*

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Exodus 3:1-12; Mark 4:1-9  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
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Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Christian spirituality has a relentlessly material quality to it. Some religious perspectives may teach that spirit doesn't have anything to do with matter – that spirit is better than matter – but not Christian spirituality. For the Christian faith, spirit and matter go together. At the very heart of Christian faith is the claim that in Jesus Christ, the Word of God *became flesh*. Our incarnational faith teaches us that heaven and earth join together in Jesus; that then leads us to see that the ordinary bread and ordinary wine of communion, in some way, convey the body and blood of Christ; and that leads us to see that all of creation bears witness to the grace and glory of God, as Romans 1 teaches us. God is known through creation, not apart from it. We meet God in our experience, not apart from it. The Apostles' Creed proclaims that God is the maker of heaven *and earth*, proclaims that Jesus was raised from the dead, not as a spirit alone, but in the resurrection of *the body*. The Christian faith is not some other-worldly spirituality that has scorn and disdain for bodies and animals and trees and water and soil. The Christian faith walks upon the earth in the knowledge that our Lord and Savior Jesus himself walked upon the earth, enjoyed the earth, taught from the earth, and every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we implore God to establish God's kingdom on *the earth*, just as it is in heaven.

This material spirituality is why Lewinsville and so many other congregations have become Earth Care congregations, as we seek to honor and cherish God's beloved world in our time.

And it is why many of us can feel a certain tension in our lives between wanting to honor and cherish the earth, and wanting to pursue a lifestyle of consumption that may be enjoyable in the short term, but that may well not be sustainable over the longer haul. We want to be good ancestors to our grandchildren's grandchildren, but we also enjoy the shiny products that, in many cases, are designed to become obsolete in a very short period of time.

There are parallels between caring for the earth and caring for our bodies. Some of you know that taking care of my own body is a challenge for me. I do not like to exercise very much, and I love to eat ice cream, drink soda, and eat sugar cereal. Just last week, I came home from a meeting at night, and mindlessly shoveled down 3 bowls of sugary cereal, one that is not on many lists of healthy, life-sustaining cereals. I would like to live in a fantasy world of *consequence-free consumption*, where my body will never have to pay the bill for eating that kind of stuff. After mindlessly eating that 3<sup>rd</sup> bowl, something woke me up – perhaps it was the Holy Spirit – and I realized what I

had been doing, and threw the rest of the box away. Changing that kind of habit is something I'm working at doing. There is a loss in this, because I like that sugary boost. But I'm realizing there are trade-offs.

Sustainability needs to become one of our most cherished words. We have spoken earlier this year here at Lewinsville about the need for us to be sustainable in our mission efforts. We want Lewinsville to be engaged in mission in this neighborhood and community for the long haul, which means that we want to pace ourselves, we want to serve and worship and learn and care in ways that are steady and patient and full of joy, ways that do not lead to burn out or sheer exhaustion. When Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly," he was saying that he does not want his disciples to be burned out.

In the same way, we want our agricultural practices and economic practices and political practices to be sustainable over the long haul. We may need to learn and support practices of *regenerative agriculture*, so that our farming habits nourish and replenish the life of the soil, rather than leading to desertification, where soil dries out and turns to dust.

As I have been thinking about the need for us as a society to pay greater attention to the health of soil, the quality of air and water, the well-being of forests, and habits and policies that can protect and nourish these things midst the challenges of climate change, my son Will's interest in agriculture has given this issue a personal dimension for me. Will loves being outdoors, in ways that his father might rather spend his time in a library or a living room. Will is most at home in a stream fishing, or hiking and hunting in the fields and forests, and is considering studying agriculture and forestry in college. His love for these things comes both from wondrous experiences he has had outdoors with friends and mentors, but is also impacted by his faith and his knowledge that God has created all of this beauty. Will loves the earth.

I am increasingly convinced that *we will not save that which we do not love*. And what is haunting for those of us who live in cities, and who spend way too much of our time indoors, is that *we cannot love that which we do not know*. If we do not know the earth, if we do not have a personal connection with the soil and the dirt and the waters, it will be harder for us to love them. And if we do not love them, then we will not have the necessary desire to work for their well-being.

In Exodus 3, Moses is out tending the sheep that belong to his father-in-law Jethro. While walking past a bush on Mt. Horeb, Moses is walking slowly and attentively enough to notice that the bush is on fire, but is not being consumed by the fire. Moses' attentiveness leads him, the text says, to turn aside to the bush.

His attentiveness is enough for the Lord to realize that Moses may well be capable of leadership in the effort to liberate the enslaved Israelites. Wherever people

are being hurt and oppressed and mistreated, the Lord is raising up men and women, boys and girls, to be a part of transforming the systems that are involved. But before the Lord dispatches Moses to engage in the work of liberation, God says, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." God's holiness, the sacredness of the ground, and the work of justice are all somehow tied together.

In her remarkable book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor offers 12 different practices by which we can practice attentiveness to the sacred, outside of a church building. Her book – along with the core of the Christian faith – insists that holiness is not somehow confined to churches and temples and official cathedrals. "God the Father Almighty is the maker of heaven and earth," and as such, the entire earth is marked with the holy touch of God. I read this book 11 years ago when it came out, and one chapter in particular has always stuck out to me, called "The Practice of *Walking on the Earth*." Now, the cynic in us may say, "Well, when aren't we walking on the earth?" But what is very clear is that, just as it is possible for me to mindlessly eat 3 bowls of sugar cereal before I woke up, it is entirely possible for us to walk mindlessly from one appointment to another, from one task to another, and never notice the miracle, the gift, the beauty of walking on the earth. And because this connection with the earth can become even more tenuous when we are wearing thick, cushiony sneakers, and walking upon layers of asphalt and sidewalk, Taylor suggests that we city-folk find opportunities to take our shoes off and walk in the grass or the dirt. "Take off your shoes and feel the earth under your feet," she writes, "as if the ground on which you are standing really is holy ground. Let it please you. Let it hurt you a little. Feel how the world really feels when you do not strap little tanks on your feet to shield you from the way things really are."<sup>1</sup>

As we grow in our love for the earth, we will also grow in our capacity to feel the pain that the earth feels when it is mistreated, and the pain that the poor and vulnerable experience from environmental disruptions and natural disasters, for these things always land most forcefully on the lives of the poor. We need not shield ourselves from this discomforting awareness, and we dare not ignore it, for in ignoring the discomfort, we are ignoring the people who are feeling it the most.

And as we grow in our desire to live in sustainable ways, so that our grandchildren's grandchildren will be able to enjoy the streams and forests just as we do, may we find that the good soil that Jesus speaks of in Mark 4 is increasing in the world, rather than being dried up. We can partner with other people, with animals, and with the earth itself to be life-giving and life-sustaining. The material spirituality, the incarnational spirituality, of our Christian faith invites us to this work. To God and to God alone be all the glory, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009) 67.