

Saving God's Good Earth

TEXT:

Deuteronomy 11:11,12

June 14, 1992

You and I are destroying God's good earth that sustains us — biting the hand that feeds us. We are fighting

God's natural systems in our greed for convenience and our determination to keep increasing our gross national product. In order to be comfortable, make as much money as we can, have it as easy as possible, and enjoy more pleasures now, we are leaving our children's children a wilderness that will not sustain them. There is not one of us who is not desecrating God's creation every day in all kinds of thoughtless ways. "There is no one who is righteous, not even one ..." (Romans 3:10).

We were involved in the Cold War for so long that we gave little thought to how we were raping the earth and destroying the atmosphere. Today, the environmental crisis takes the number one position on the world stage. The environmental crisis is going to dominate the social, political and economic discourse for the next generations. In order to rescue this planet and keep it a livable place, we are going to have to

make profound changes very quickly. Our traditional mindset is going to have to be jarred. All we have done so far has been tinker with the system to try to lessen the impact.

While the media alarm us repeatedly with crises, we adapt to crises. We can't live in fear and tension endlessly, so we adjust to the most awful things. **Crises get our attention, but only love for God and his earth will hold our attention and move us to saving action.**

Christians, especially the more fundamentalist ones, have thought of redemption and salvation offered in Jesus Christ as having to do only with the salvation of the soul and the soul's deliverance from sin. We need to resist the tendency, in this Christian tradition, to spiritualize the meaning of redemption in a way that denigrates the significance of life in the world. Jesus Christ came to bring a much broader salvation. Would God be concerned with saving a soul, only to have that reborn person live in an impoverished and unhealthy environment? Salvation is a word that means

"wholeness." Christ claimed that he came so that everyone might have life more abundantly. (See John 10:10.) **Christ's salvation includes the wholeness of the creature and the creation.** He said, "Behold I make all things brand new." The abundant life requires a larger landscape than the tract of property that accommodates one's home.

Folks who take every word of Scripture literally cause more trouble than good. In Genesis 1:27,28 we read, "God created humankind in his own image ... male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it ... have dominion over every thing that moves upon the earth.'" This was never intended to be a license to engage in greedy or violent exploitation or over-population. "Dominion" meant responsibility for respectful, careful stewardship in a world that God valued as "very good."

Many ecological thinkers believe this man-centered bias and charge to "subdue" the earth has been largely responsible for the environmental

perils facing the world. Evangelical theology is still crippled by an unbiblical wall of separation between the spiritual and the material. People can criticize the mainline churches for being liberal, but they are the ones calling attention to “the birds of the air” and the “lilies of the field” — God’s whole creation.

Secular environmentalists have grounds to blame the Christian forces for the idea of life that will be so good after death that they have ignored the consequences of people’s irresponsibility with earth. The president of World Vision claims that the tendency of Christians — especially evangelical Christians — is to focus on the future of the kingdom that is to come. Robert Seiple says, “In the light of what is happening to this planet, that is lousy theology.”

Senator Al Gore, chairman of our delegation to the Earth Summit, sees the ozone crisis, global warming, and the poisoning of the ocean as real world problems — but symptoms of a much deeper spiritual crisis that has afflicted contemporary society and is threatening the life of future generations.

Until we Christians see that the Gospel’s good news of redemption applies to the earth, as well as the earthling, we will proliferate the sin of raping God’s good earth. God’s work of redemption in Jesus Christ encompasses the whole of creation and provides the grounds for restoring the brokenness in the relationship of

humankind to creation, and the relationship of both to God.

Concern for saving the earth is bringing world religions together in a common mission. Even secular environmental groups, such as World Wildlife Fund and the United Nations Environmental Program, have appealed earnestly to the world’s major religions for help in addressing spiritually the environmental crisis. The World Council of Churches’ global conference on mission and evangelism in San Antonio challenged all churches to rethink their understanding and programs of mission in the light of the biblical affirmation, “The earth is the Lord’s.” The growing belief among religious leaders that saving the environment is the central moral issue of the post-Cold War world is being reflected in the Earth Summit these past few days in Rio. Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Christian and tribal religious leaders are meeting with 270 governmental delegates. **Religion may be personal, each with his or her own creed, but environment is public domain.**

Religionists are the first to recognize that science alone cannot inspire people to make the costly and inconvenient changes which are necessary to keep the biosphere alive and sustain our lives. After all, the problem is not chlorofluorocarbons or carbon dioxide levels, but human shortsightedness, greed, denial and lack of courage — sometimes called “sin.” There

is a new dialogue arising between science and spirituality. Theologians and “geologists” are getting it together. For too long, organized religion has ignored the spiritual dimensions of the cosmos. Scientists, mathematicians and astronauts seem to have a deeper appreciation of the universe than pious religionists.

There are skeptics, who may be more realistic than we like to think. They say it doesn’t matter whether they are scientists or religionists in their private lives; these folks are governed by powerful forces because of the market-economy to which we have become enslaved.

When we get down to the heart of the matter, the whole cause of saving God’s good earth is stewardship. God has entrusted his creation to us — to take care of it for him. Rather than subduing the earth, we are to “tend the garden” (Genesis 2:15). Our task is to care for the earth as God cares for it. As stewards, we hold God’s earth in trust. “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1). Today we need to convert from earth-degraders to earth-keepers. People who understand themselves to be God’s people cannot treat God’s world, in which God delights, carelessly or destructively.

Though much of our degradation of the environment is due to greed, there is much well-intentioned activity that is killing the earth. People cut desperately needed firewood in Nepal. As a

result, people in Bangladesh are killed by floods brought on by soil erosion, due to the deforestation upstream in Nepal. Development experts introduce new breeds of cattle into one nomadic economy, and resulting overgrazing causes the waste and barren desert to expand. "What is good for the fox is not good for the lamb." Either we save every part of the earth or we lose the whole earth.

Two bushels of topsoil are lost for every bushel of corn produced. Pesticides and herbicides, by transforming Army chemistry after World War II to "peaceful" uses, made it possible to plant corn, or any crop, on the same land year after year. Crop rotation — from corn to soybeans to alfalfa hay to pastures — was abandoned. Soil life becomes devastated in our desire to yield the most profitable crop every year. Earthworms no longer inhabit farmland, the microscopic life of the soil is severely altered, and birds no longer occupy fences and hedgerows. The land never gets the "Sabbath" rest; it becomes exhausted, and the creatures are driven off.

We must reclaim a sense of reverence for the earth and a recognition of our essential relatedness to the earth. In traditional American Indian spirituality, the relationship among living things and the land is central.

Ours is referred to as a "throw-away society" and a "flow-through economy." We remove

parts of the natural environment, making products and byproducts and producing discard and waste we don't know what to do with. It is said that the first law of garbage is, "Everybody wants us picked up, and nobody wants us to put it down." A large volume of our garbage, that is burying us alive, is the natural consequence of our demand for convenience and disposable products. Our economy taps earth's wealth at one point and discards its transformations at another.

We Americans must learn that we live in a small world. Global toxification is now experienced by all creatures, great and small, and all people, rich and poor. It is a small world, where even one person on the other side of the globe can hurt or help us. What we do as individuals here affects people all over the world. For example, energy consumption in the U. S. is so high that 250 million Americans consume as much as all four billion people in developing nations. Because of the critical impact of energy on food production, the economy and the environment, any reduction of the American consumption of energy and other resources will have a multiplied effect throughout the ecosystem of earth. The way we Americans overconsume nonreplenishable resources keeps other people poor and hungry, so that they must rape what is left of earth to survive from one day to the next. This, in turn, destroys our quality of life here in time.

If only we would hear God's

word of old. Through Ezekiel, God said, "Is it not enough for you to feed on good pasture? Must you trample the rest with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with our feet?" (See Ezekiel 34:18.)

Serving as God's mouthpiece, Jeremiah said, "I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable" (Jeremiah 2:7).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, God speaks: "The land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for, the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Deuteronomy 11:11,12).

Today's sermon is not to remind us of all the things every woman, child and man can be doing to save God's good earth. We are being reminded of these things every day on grocery bags, from Mr. Rogers, newspapers and TV reports. Today's sermon is to call the Christian community — you and me — to a dimension of stewardship we may never have considered before. It is to keep us from adjusting to the crisis and to shake us out of our traditional mindset. **Only love for God and God's good earth will keep our attention and move us to commitment.** Nature is

rising up to judge us. Nature is striking back to call us to repentance.

What on earth are we doing? We cannot know what we are doing on earth until we will recognize what we are undoing! We must change our American mindset, from our President to the citizenry. We have come to an unsustainable standard of living. God was careful how he created the earth, and we must be careful about how we take care of it. **We are caretakers of God's earth and we must practice both spiritual and environmental integrity.**

In wasting our earth, we are wasting ourselves. In killing the earth, we are killing ourselves. Consider what God has said to us, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to God's word, and hold fast to God" (Deuteronomy 30:19,20).

Healing and saving the creation is God's work, and he calls faithful persons to be co-creators with him.

In our greedy economy and personal desires for more than we need, a Presbyterian professor of philosophy asks, "What does it profit us to gain the world, only to lose it — to gain it economically, fence it in, pave it over, harvest it, only to lose it scientifically, aesthetically, recreationally, religiously, as a

wonderland of natural history, as a realm of integral wildness that transcends and supports us — and perhaps even to lose some of our soul in the tradeoff?"

**This sermon delivered by
Robert H. Meneilly at
The Village Church
6641 Mission Road
Prairie Village, KS 66208**