

Growing God's Garden: 1) The Gardening Crew

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

October 2, 2005

When David Needham was a boy, his family often went camping in the High Sierras. Traveling along the eastern slopes of those 10- to 14-thousand foot peaks involved several steep grades and dry, desert-like heat. Steaming radiators and canvas water bags slung over car bumpers were standard equipment. He will never forget one mountain grade. It had a funny name: the “O” grade.

“Why?” he asked his father, “why is it called that? Is the next grade after it the ‘P’ grade?” His parents simply smiled and said, “Just wait. You’ll see.”

Up and up they would climb on the twisting switchback road through scrub pine and sage. And then—when it seemed they would never get to the top of the ridge—they did! Spontaneously David cried out, “Oh!” There in front of them, beyond a diamond-studded lake and framed with quaking aspen, was the jagged, snowy Sierra Crest...higher, more massive, more beautiful, more alive with color than he had ever dreamed.

The family laughed together at their now-shared secret of the “O” grade!¹

Upon such a sight of majestic beauty, the psalmist sang an “O” song: “O Lord how manifold are your words! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.” Psalm 104:24

The beauty of the natural world stirred Gerard Manley Hopkins to pen a poem:

*Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings....*

The garden which God planted on earth awakens us to awe and arouses us to praise. We join God in declaring, “It is good.” The creation God has made is beautiful, pleasing to the senses, satisfying to the soul. The Hebrew word translated good is *tov*, indicating intense delight.

God is the Master Gardener; we humans are the pinnacle of God’s creative work, made in the image of God to participate in God’s creative process. We are granted the responsibility to care for and nurture the created order. That’s the meaning of the command to have dominion over the earth. Subduing the earth literally means cultivating the land.

Dominion means stewardship and nurture. God chooses to pass on to humans God's own vocation of loving stewardship of this delightful world.

Caring for the world is the way we bring forth its fullest flowering potential. Our God-ordained purpose in life is to continue the creative work of God. Fashioned in the very image of God, we are mandated to preserve the life-giving order begun by God. In the second creation story, the vocation given to humans is "to till and keep" the land. A better translation would be to "serve and preserve."² Friends, we are God's gardening crew, called to cultivate and nurture, to serve and preserve all the gifts of God's creation.

Too frequently we humans have used the gifts of creation to serve ourselves. We have taken nature for granted. We have selfishly assumed that the land, its vegetation, and its creatures were here to serve us, not vice versa. We have abused the land and exploited the creatures which give God such delight and pleasure. We are not to be the consumers of creation; we are its servants, called to care for creation.

A Jewish legend says, "Before the world was created, the Holy One kept creating worlds and destroying them. Finally God created this one, and was satisfied. God said to Adam: This is the last world I shall make. I place it in your hands: hold it in trust."³

Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson used the word "generativity" to describe the stage in our psychosocial development when we feel a need to guide younger people. In our middle adult years, we may come to realize, "I am what survives me." The opposite of generativity is self-absorption.

The biblical tale of creation finds wide resonance with other primal origin stories found among indigenous peoples around the world. Typically human beings emerge from the earth; we are one with the land, the dirt upon which we walk, the soil which we are called to cultivate, the ground which too frequently we pave over. All beings are relatives in one family. St. Francis calls the moon our brother and the sun our sister. Chief Seattle says "the perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers." We all belong to the same family.

Stewardship means thinking ahead seven generations. In caring for the earth, we must be more mindful of our great-great-great grandchildren than we are of ourselves and our own wants and desires. What we do today impacts generations far into the future. The earth is God's garden meant to bring delight and sustenance to all creatures past, present, and those yet to be born.

A Japanese farmer had a little plot of land he tended with his family near the center of Tokyo. With real estate values extremely high, the farmer was offered great sums of money for his land, but he wouldn't sell. When asked why he wouldn't sell the land, he replied that the land was his father's before it was his, and his grandfather's before that, and his great-grandfather's even before that. And further, the land would be his son's after him, and his grandson's after that. The plot of land he tended was the land of his ancestors and his descendants. How could he sell what was not his?

Meaning is found in our relationships with the land that gives us birth, the creatures who inhabit the land with us, and the relatives who preceded us, live with us, and who will follow us. Life is full of meaning when we look beyond ourselves to care and nurture others.

One of the fascinating factors of our human vocation is that God shares responsibility and power. The first divine words spoken to humans are these: "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" (Genesis 1:28). Although God is all-powerful, God chooses to share power with us. Notice God **shares** power. God doesn't relinquish all control. God is still the Master Gardener from whom we are to take our cues.

The temptation is to become power-hungry and seize control for ourselves, leaving God's plan in the dust. The power God shares is to be cherished humbly and exercised wisely. God doesn't have to do this, but God freely chooses to share power with us. God trusts us to use it wisely.

God's willingness to share power is a model for us in relating to one another, not to be possessive, especially about territory that really doesn't even belong to us. The land belongs to God, the church belongs to God; every human being belongs to God. They are not ours to control or possess; our role is to care for and nurture, to serve and preserve. God shares power to create with us a relationship of integrity and trust. God wants us to experience the joy of the creative ability.

Farmer, author, and poet Wendell Berry tells of a cold December day when his five-year-old granddaughter, Katie, spent the day with him while he hauled a wagon load of dirt for the barn floor, unloaded it, smoothed it over and wetted it down. For the first time, Katie drove the team and was proud of herself, and Berry says that he was proud of her and told her so. "By the time we started back up the creek road the sun had gone over the hill and the air had turned bitter. Katie sat close to me in the wagon, and we

did not say anything for a long time. I did not say anything because I was afraid that Katie was not saying anything because she was cold and tired and miserable and perhaps homesick; it was impossible to hurry much, and I was unsure how I would comfort her.

“But then, after a while, she said, ‘Wendell, isn’t it fun?’”⁴

My friends, consider the plot of land, the creatures and talents that God has given unto your care and nurture. Remember that God looks upon all that God has made and God sees that it is good. Humbly receive the power God shares with us that we might care for and nurture, serve and preserve all the gifts of God entrusted to us. May we be faithful gardeners of all God’s good gifts.

¹ David C. Needham, *Close to His Majesty: An Invitation to Walk with God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1987), pp. 153-154. Quoted on Homiletics Online. Retrieved September 28, 2005.

² Ched Myers, "To Serve and Preserve," *Sojourners*, March 2004, p. 38.

³ Stacey Elizabeth Simpson, *Christian Century*, Sept. 13-20, 2000, p. 903.

⁴ Quoted by Kyle Childress, "Good work," *Christian Century*, March 8, 2005.

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