

“For the Beauty of the Earth”

*Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for October 4, 2015 – Ordinary 27
World Communion Sunday – St. Francis Day
First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT*

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:4b-8, 15

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.”

^{4b}In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—⁷then the LORD God formed man



from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.... ¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

(Image credit: <http://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/apollo-8-earthrise>)

To borrow shamelessly from Garrison Keillor on *A Prairie Home Companion*, it's been a quiet week or two in Guilford, my home town. I've watched from afar as various media have chronicled the visit of Pope Francis to our country. I've pondered the many commentaries on his visit offered by pundits of various persuasions. And without ever having had a private audience with the pope (unlike a certain notorious person who shall remain anonymous), I've come to my own conclusions about the relevance of this charismatic Roman Catholic leader for progressive Protestant Christians like myself.

Maybe it's because I did some graduate work in Christian Social Ethics at Boston College—a university founded and run by Jesuits—but I wasn't surprised by the content of what Pope Francis said during his various public appearances. The content of his speeches was anchored solidly in the long tradition of Roman Catholic social teaching. What was surprising, and encouraging in many ways, was **where** the Pope said what he said, and **how** he said what he said. Pope Francis used the full authority of both his office and his personality to bring a desperately needed prophetic Christian message to the halls of power. When he spoke about such concerns as the common good, creation care, love of neighbor, care for the poor, hospitality for refugees and immigrants, he was speaking from within a “seamless garment” of Christian social teaching that has been around at least as long as the Bible. It's just that this Christian social teaching has recently been eclipsed and ostracized by the rise of a mean-spirited form of “Christian” political activism that has little to do with Jesus.

I also wasn't surprised that much of the media sought to make sense of this popular and prophetic “Bishop of Rome” by summarily dividing his teaching into the “pastoral” realm and the “political” realm. This is after all the framework that most Americans use in talking about religion and politics. (As we all know, religion and politics are two things we shouldn't talk about in polite company.) We view religion as the realm of personal spirituality and morality; we view politics as the partisan arena where anything goes. Especially in today's world, where presidential candidates like Carly Fiorina have no shame about repeating bald-faced lies about Planned Parenthood wherever she goes, politics has a pretty bad name.

However, public **policy**, which is distinct from political campaigns, is what Pope Francis has been addressing from his faith-based standpoint. Not only is his voice one of faith; it is also one of reason in today's polarized world. A hallmark of Roman Catholic social teaching is that it is addressed not only to Catholics, but also to “all people of good will,” which is a phrase commonly used in papal encyclicals. In order to speak persuasively to people who may not share your religious views, you have to use the language of reason, of science and moral philosophy and social ethics and what we call “common sense.”

Pope Francis, who interestingly enough is the first Pope in history to take his name from St. Francis of Assisi, has shown that he has a deep concern for creation care, and for the harm that human activity has done to our home on planet Earth. In his

teaching and his example, Pope Francis is calling all people of good will to environmental awareness and activism.

Fifty years ago, the notion of the Pope speaking to a joint session of the United States Congress would have been unthinkable. But surely the times they are a-changin'. Not long ago, Pope Francis published his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which takes its title from a canticle of St. Francis: "Praise be to you, my Lord." In this comprehensive and carefully argued encyclical, the Pope writes of his namesake:

"I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and [both] interior [and international] peace."

We Protestants, I am sure, would agree with Pope Francis that St. Francis is the "patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology." And because we are Protestants, who look for inspiration and guidance not only to St. Francis and Pope Francis, but also to the Bible, we need to take seriously the two different attitudes toward creation care found in this morning's scripture readings. We need to wrestle with these two contrasting perspectives on humanity's relation to the entirety of God's creation.

On the one hand, the Bible teaches us that we human beings, made as we are in the image and likeness of God, have a divine mandate to "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," in the well-known words of Genesis 1:28. This teaching is echoed in this morning's call to worship, which is drawn from Psalm 8: "You have given us dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under our feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas."

On the other hand, the Bible teaches us that we human beings, made as we are from the dust of the earth, have a divine mandate to "till the earth and keep it," in the perhaps less-well-known words of Genesis 2:15. (The original Hebrew of Genesis 2 has a play on words between *'adam*, which means "human being," and *'adamah*, which can refer to earth or ground or red clay—thus the English translations "dust of the earth." To be human, in this poetic text, is to be an earth creature: made of the same stuff that the earth is made of, and at the same time uniquely created by God, who forms us and animates us so that we become living beings, human beings. To be

human is to be humble: aware of our deep kinship with rocks and rivers, with spiders and sparrows, with deer and dolphins, in awe of the immensely creative and compassionate reality we call God.)

So in just a few words from the first two chapters of the Bible, two contrasting divine mandates: on the one hand, because we are made in the divine image, to “fill the earth and subdue it”; and on the other hand, because we are formed from the dust of the earth, to “till the earth and keep it.”

If there was a time in the past when it made sense, both spiritually and morally, for human beings to fill the earth and subdue it, that time no longer exists.. That divine mandate has, if you will, expired in the age of population growth and fossil fuels. The divine mandate that applies to the many environmental issues facing the human family in the 21st century is the second one: to till the earth and keep it. To treat our common home with the care and respect it deserves. To be caretakers and not conquerors of God's good earth.

If you were out and about last Sunday night, you got to watch the minor miracle of a supermoon lunar eclipse, which won't happen again until 2033. For Earth's shadow to completely cover the face of the full moon, the orbits of Earth and moon around the sun have to be precisely lined up. When this happens, Earth's atmosphere refracts the red end of the sunlight spectrum toward the moon, and refracts the blue end of the spectrum away from the moon—thus giving the “blood moon” its reddish glow.

The next time we have a clear night, which will probably be a chilly night now that fall has arrived (and could possibly be tonight!), put on a coat and go outdoors for a few minutes and look up at what the biblical authors called the “dome of the sky” or the “firmament.” Look up at the starry sky, and wonder with the Psalmist, who are we, that God is mindful of us?

Long ago, the Psalmist contemplated the firmament at night, and wondered about our place in the cosmos. Today, we contemplate stunning images from the Hubble telescope, which sees further into space and time than we ever thought possible, and wonder about our place in the cosmos. We contemplate the beauty of the blue jewel of Earth photographed from space, and wonder about our place and our purpose on this planet.

One simple biblical verse affirms who we are and why we are here: made as we are from both the dust of the earth and the breath of God, we have been put on Earth to till it and to keep it. To cultivate the garden. To preserve the wilderness. To seek the well-being of “the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth.” To treasure those moments of awe that wash over us from time to time, when we contemplate the beauty of the earth.