

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 13, August 30, 2009, dedicated to Bob Kutschbach, our Ohio Conference moderator, to Cheryl Hoskinson, who cares deeply for the earth upon which we are planted, to the memory of Debra Gene Wall, and always to the glory of God!

“Prayers for Mother Earth”

James 1:17-27; Matthew 6:5-15

**(Part II of III in the sermon series
“Earth Prayers”)**

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

Years ago, I lived alone in a third floor apartment in noisy section of north Philadelphia, not far from the train station in Wayne Junction. The sounds of the city were alive most days and nights. Quiet and the blessings of nature were hard to find in this concrete web of life I called home. I loved my neighborhood and the people all around me on the streets of Philadelphia. But I missed gardens, grass and trees.

Then one summer day, I struck up a relationship with a tree in our park nearby. I had decided that one tree was all I needed to feel close to nature in the heat and heart of the city. So, when I ran or walked in the park, I would take time to be with that tree. She was a maple and reminded me of the maple tree on our family’s property back home.

Her broad leaves provided shade in the spring and summer, and in the fall, my maple was the most beautiful in all of Philadelphia – bar none. In the winter, my maple held firm on the hillside as snow, wind and ice blew against her. Season by season, she would remain and demonstrate to the concrete world around her that green was good and she was beautiful. I think of her now and wonder if she is still holding firm to the hillside in that north Philadelphia park.

In the city, we can lose touch with nature. Our eyes are naturally drawn to skyscrapers, state capitol buildings, football and baseball stadiums and, of course, beautiful cathedrals of grace. So often, the grass, flowers and trees planted far below all our human creations fail to be seen in the grandeur and sweep of the sights and sounds of the city.

However, the importance of the trees are not lost on everyone. In a conversation with an urban designer a few years ago, I was delighted to discover that trees on streets are important because they “calm traffic and drivers.” That’s right, the shadows and beauty created by tree-lined streets actually slow traffic and invite fewer accidents. Perhaps our highest accident intersections in Columbus could calm down and improve by simply planting a tree on each corner.

Scripture gifts us with ways to remember and cherish Mother Earth. Today, in Matthew 6:5ff, as Jesus is teaching the disciples to pray he says, “*Your Kingdom come, your will be done ON earth . . . as it is in heaven.*” Hiding in plain sight, Jesus calls us to be agents of God’s kingdom and God’s will on the earth. We are to allow God’s care and God’s will to set the world right as above, so below!

James says it another way. He tells Christians that every desirable and good gift comes from heaven. In God, there is nothing deceitful, nothing two-faced and nothing fickle. God has brought us into existence so that we would reflect the best and brightest of all creation (James 6:16-18). We are called to walk the earth gently and care for her with all the gifts we have at our disposal. The place to

begin is with the piece of the earth God has given you.

At the risk of embarrassing her, I would like to name someone who cares deeply and gently for the part of the earth on which our church sits. She is here each week from spring through autumn, planting, weeding, watering, beautifying the earth on which First Church is planted. Cheryl Hoskinson is our gardener. She gives herself in love to our gardens and grounds with no fanfare. She sees to it that we bloom in the heart of the city where we are planted. Cheryl does this with deep love and compassion.

Our First Church gardens are beautiful because Cheryl cares for them. As she does this, she cares for us. She brings beauty to our lives and she does so with humility and perseverance. Cheryl, I thank God for you and the heart and hands you bring in your care for the earth on which we are planted.

How we live upon the earth will make all the difference in generations to come. If we walk the earth gently, treat her with loving care, and set policies and procedures in place to ensure others do the same, we will save not only the earth, but also ourselves and the generations of earth stewards yet unborn.

Today, I want you to think and pray about your personal connection to Mother Earth. I can't imagine one person in this sanctuary for whom this connection is not deeply meaningful.

In Ann Rowthorn's book *Earth and All the Stars*, she shares a meditation on the "Quiet Garden of Keats, Kansas." I invite you to relax, close your eyes if you like. But, mostly, I want you to breathe, to be rooted in this moment. Listen, receive, reflect, let your mind and heart go this place on the prairie, this garden of delight or a place in which you experience the sacred in relation to the earth. Perhaps it is a special place on a lake somewhere, a place by the ocean, or perhaps a place in the mountains, a special place for fishing or simply being.

Let me take you to that quiet garden. As the evening shadows

fall across the prairie grassland and the hush of the day recedes, the tall grasses are highlighted against the golden sunset – far and long. When you visit the quiet garden in this rural refuge, you are invited to be still and appreciate God’s creation.

A visitor to the garden is given a meditation that reads: “A Meditation of about Two Hours for Anyone, Anytime, Any Place”

You are invited to find a quiet place by yourself, a place where you can focus on your surrounding environment. Reflect upon the following:

- How many different aspects of God’s creation can observe from this one place?
- Use your senses: look, listen, smell, touch.
- Write down everything you observe. Don’t be concerned about not knowing the names of things.
- Find one particular living thing (plant, insect, bird) that you can closely observe. Write a detailed description of everything you observe. Include its relationship with its environment. Be as detailed as possible.
- Meditate on the scriptural truth that you are God’s appointed caregiver of the living thing you have just described.
- How has your time in the quiet garden affected how you think about your responsibility as a care-giver toward a small piece of God’s creation?

Read Psalm 148.

Take time to pray, thanking and praising God for the creation surrounding you. (Found in Anne Rowthorn’s *Earth and All the Stars*, Resource Publications, Eugene, Oregon, 2003, pp. 57-58).

This week, may the trees calm you on the streets and highways you travel. And may your connection to Mother Earth nurture and care for you in body, mind and spirit. Amen.