

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 2, April 19, 2009, dedicated to the Sacred Earth Committee of First Church and always to the glory of God!

“It’s Not Easy Being Green . . . Just Ask God”

Genesis 9: 8-17; John 1:1-5

Note: A few months ago, I received a package in the mail from my mother. Inside was a Bible. It was no ordinary Bible. It is a Green Bible. There are over 1,000 passages in this Bible that appear in green type, a take-off on the red-letter editions of the Bible highlighting Jesus’ words. However, the green highlights appear in reference to care of the earth, nature and the planet. The Bible opens with 10 essays, of which I will drawing from one today. It closes with a guided Bible study, and great ideas for “Where to Go from Here.” I have included 74 ideas in the bulletin. I will refer to them later in the sermon. I recommend each one of us get the Green Bible. If you call my mom, she may send one to you, too!

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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.

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Sitting by ocean on a small island off the coast of Florida in February 2000, Dr. J. Matthew Sleeth, an emergency room physician from New England was enjoying a quiet warm winter evening with his wife, Nancy. Their children, Clark and Emma, were asleep having worn themselves out in the surf, building sand castles and catching chameleons. They were sound asleep. It was quiet as they watched

the sunset and the stars rise. With no cars on this island and few street lights, the Sleeths truly felt as though they were in paradise.

With the nebula in Orion's constellation shining clearly and the palm trees murmuring in the wind, Nancy asked Matthew a question that would change his life forever.

"What is the biggest problem facing the world?" she said.

With war, terrorism, poverty, disease, starvation, and the root of everything, selfishness, all vying for top spot in Matthew's mind, his head was spinning. Finally, he answered, "***The world is dying.***"

As Matthew Sleeth continues in his essay in *The Green Bible*, entitled *The Power of a Green God*:

"My answer did not come from abstract sources. Many changes had already taken place in my life and now readily apparent to anyone with eyes to see. The last majestic chestnut trees near my childhood home are now extinct. There are no chestnuts on Chestnut Lane, no elms on Elm St., no caribou in Caribou, Maine, and no buffalo in Buffalo, New York. Multiple states have had to change their official tree, animal or flower because of extinction.

"I grew up in the mid-Atlantic area. In just a single generation the fields that had supported three hundred years of inhabitants had been replanted with houses. The flocks of birds that migrated for hours over our back yard in spring and fall are gone . . .

"These changes in the health of the planet are mirrored in humans. A few months before vacation, I had admitted three women to the hospital. All three were in their thirties, all three had breast cancer, all three died. It is not easy to tell a man with one child on his hip and another in hand that he is on his own. There is only one response: to hug and cry with him.

"Later, I wondered about the lifetime risk of breast cancer, so I

went and looked it up. When I started in medicine, one in nineteen women in America got breast cancer. When I saw the three women (in the winter of 1999), the same updated medical text said it was one in nine. Now (2008) it is one in seven. There is currently a pandemic of cancers and the most dramatic increases are in young people. Similarly, there have been increases in asthma, autoimmune diseases, autism and other maladies, which many believe have environmental links. No one can suppose that those trends in nature and in us can continue unchanged and everything will turn out all right.” (J. Matthew Sleeth, *The Power of Green, The Green Bible*, Harper One, San Francisco, 2008, pp. I18-I19)

Isn't it telling that in only a month this city will have its greatest race ever in which more than 40,000 people are expected to run in “A Race for the Cure” of breast cancer? While this is a beautiful and powerful statement on behalf of all of you and all of our loved ones who have battled breast cancer, Dr. Sleeth's haunting words in the essay I have shared compel us to race for a cure for what ails a dying earth. Perhaps that is exactly what we need. Perhaps we need to plan a race for the cure of environmental destruction and ecological death, which is more and more clearly connected to all the diseases and conditions that Dr. Sleeth has named above.

That night in Florida, Nancy continued her line of questioning. (I wonder if Matthew was questioning getting started on this topic?). Dr. Sleeth admitted that he did not have an answer to the next question his wife asked: “Matthew, what are you going to do about it?”

But over the next few years, Dr. Sleeth started seeking through environmental texts and the world's sacred texts to find answers. He discovered many truths in the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Ramayana. One day during a slow moment on the job, while sitting in the waiting room of his hospital, he picked up the Bible and started reading the gospel of Matthew. It changed his life. He found answers.

Matthew 7:1ff struck him particularly hard. “Do not judge so

that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”

Dr. Sleeth writes of Matthew, “How often, in all walks of life, do we judge others by standards different from the one we use to measure our own shortcomings?” When Matthew applied these words to himself and his family in relation to population, he became aware that they were leaving a major ecologic footprint on this planet. They lived in a large home with too much space using too much energy. So his family made decisions to downsize, moving into a house the size of his garage. As he says, “Don’t feel sorry for us. It was a doctor-sized garage.”

This scientist and healer discovered the power of the Bible is to change lives. While you may know this already, and I am daily reawakened to this reality and power, Dr. Sleeth, found answers to the environmental problems of our day in the Bible.

However, convincing other Christians of such discoveries and how they impact the earth was different. As he brought his concerns to church, people didn’t listen to his words. One man in his Bible study said, “You’re just turning into a ‘tree hugging’ liberal.”

It was not meant as a compliment, but Matthew reframed the statement into more study. He discovered that in the opening words and the closing words of scripture, the Tree of Life is at the center of God’s creative plan. God puts down roots, as it were, and establishes the tree as the center of the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the center of the city of the New Jerusalem in Revelation. Throughout scripture “the tree” matters. So being a “tree hugging” Christian is a good thing in Matthew’s theology.

In scripture, *the* driving force of God is to create life, to sustain life and nurture life. From the opening words of the Book of Genesis, God is creating life and God says, “It is good!” We have this story of creation surrounding us in our sanctuary stained-glass. You will note that we have eight windows symbolizing eight days of creation – on the

8th day, the first day of the second week of creation, God gave the care of God's earth to us. This beautiful depiction of the days of creation tells a story of good. It is God's story of abundant life.

In our text from Genesis 9:8-17, God has reached the point – in only nine chapters of creation's story and nature's interaction with humanity – that God has cleansed the earth through a flood and washed the destructive power of humanity from the planet to give nature, and (in St. Francis' words) “all creatures of our God and king,” a chance to survive and thrive. God saves the animals two-by-two (even the mosquitos) to ensure the salvation of the earth. If Noah and his family were loading the ark today, at least one-third of those early animal travelers would be missing through extinction. Probably more.

Six times in nine verses, God declares that God is saving the earth for humanity “and all living things” or “all flesh.” Listen to what God says to Noah as he and his family are ready to step off the ark and begin again – a second chance! God says (and I paraphrase): “I am making a covenant with you and every living thing that is with you and for all future generations. Never again will I send a flood.”

No more is God speaking of dominion by humanity over the earth. This is a joint venture. This is a shared covenant. God's covenant, seen in the sign of a rainbow, is between humanity AND ALL living creatures. Therefore, the destruction of this covenant which we as humanity have wrought, is of our own doing. Humanity has done this. God is brokenhearted.

Again, the Gospel of John – as does Genesis – opens “In the beginning.” Echoing the first words of Genesis, John points to Christ being there at the creation of the universe as a partner with God. The New Testament points to a Savior who is constantly and consistently invested and involved in trying to live out his father's plan for caring for all humanity and all living creatures. As God “with skin on,” Jesus is present in and through creation, connected with God from the beginning. The motivation of the creator and the creator's beloved son is for life and for the wholeness and healing of humanity and the

earth.

It is not easy being green! Just ask God!

“All creation moans in travail,” says the Psalmist when lifting up the struggle of care for the earth. Creation weeps. Creation aches. Creation wonders why it is dying. Creation is in travail. But, how do we move from travail to hope? What steps can we take to care for the earth and all living things?

In his essay, Dr. Sleeth finishes with a reflection on the parable of the Good Samaritan. He points out in this all too familiar story from Luke 10, that the driving question from the Pharisees to Jesus is: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The answer sums-up all of scripture: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.” Then the questioner asks, “Who is my neighbor?” It turns out that the neighbor in this story is a man mugged on the road. A Samaritan finds him, pays his bill and leaves money for his continuing care. We call this care-giver “The Good Samaritan.”

Dr. Sleeth writes, “As an ER doctor, I saw a total of some thirty thousand patients in my career. Only once did someone come in and pay for the hospital bill for a stranger.” The Good Samaritan is the person who moves from asking, “What will happen to me if I stop to care and show compassion?” to a person who asks, “What has happened to this man and what does he need?”

From this parable, we can learn how to approach environmental problems today. Dr. Sleeth says there are eight lessons learned:

- 1. To have any lasting effect, our hearts must be moved to compassion.**
- 2. We may find it dangerous.**
- 3. We may have to use our own resources.**

- 4. It may be inconvenient.**
- 5. It may be expensive.**
- 6. We may be ridiculed.**
- 7. We have to take ongoing responsibility.**
- 8. Everyone is our neighbor, including people across the globe and future generations.**

These are great insights, all of them applicable to daily life and compassion and care of the earth.

In closing, I would like you to look with me at the goldenrod insert I prepared for today's service. There are 74 notations on where you and I can go from here. They are broken down into three categories: action ideas for churches; 50 practical tips to get started; how to be a "Deep Green Family." All of these are found in the back section of *The Green Bible*.

(You can find these references and much more at www.creationcare.org and www.servegodsavetheplanet.org. You can also find them in the information rack at our church. We also have a recording of this service if you wish to hear me speak about this list – worth hearing because of our guest musicians, the 30-piece Capital Winds brass and winds ensemble! Rather than name the 10 I circled and addressed with the congregation, just go the Web sites.)

There are many practical, simple and significant steps we can take as a congregation, as households and families and as individuals. Please take them all to heart and make a commitment to do one or more as soon as possible.

As we go forth today, let us carry the love for the earth and life itself as our hope and our call to serve God. It is not easy being green. But, it is God's plan and it is our call as Christ's disciples. So, let's do it. Amen.