

**Creation Sunday  
October 10, 2010**

In the name of the God who takes sides, always standing with the most vulnerable. Amen.

**It was another day in paradise. A gentle breeze from the ocean currents, warm sun on our backs. A great day for a hike. Jean and I strapped on our packs and headed down the trail through a dense forest of lush green and dazzling wildflowers. Our spirits were high, but as each step took us closer to our destination, we spoke less and less. When the sight first came into view, we felt like we were on hallowed ground, and we both turned to silent meditation.**

**When we arrived at the buildings, we noted their distinctive clinical feel and the fact that they now appeared deserted. 60 years earlier, there were thousands here. Now there were...40. We were standing in the midst of a leper colony. It sits on a distant peninsula on the far side of the island of Molokai, still accessible only by boat or foot. During the late 1800's up through the 1940's, when sulfone drugs were discovered, 8000 people were placed here, torn away from their families and banished to this isolated location. All of them were cast**

**out of society and left here to die a horrible, painful death. So that ship personnel could avoid contact with the diseased, patients were often forced to jump overboard and swim to the island, some dying before they ever got to the colony. Those 40 people who remain will tell you what it was like to hear the church bell toll every day for years, for those who died. Paradise became hell. As Jean and I stood at the site of that forlorn church and the place where those people swam for their lives, it was impossible to do anything but weep. As we hiked back up the hill, I remember us stopping every 500 feet, not to catch our breath, but to wipe the tears from our eyes.**

**It is not much of a stretch to imagine what it must have been like for the ten lepers in today's Gospel. Though the malady they contracted was probably not Hansen's disease, the one those on the island of Molokai had, the stigma was virtually the same. The regulations for what should happen to someone with "leprosy" are clear in the Book of Numbers. "Lepers" it says, should be, "put out of the camp." The Book of Leviticus repeats this law and adds these extras. "Lepers should wear torn clothes, let the hair of the head hang**

**loose,” and...just like in the Monty Python movies, the leper must cry “Unclean, unclean”, whenever approached. Leviticus 14:2 requires that an alleged healed leper show herself to the priest, go through a series of washings and observe a seven day period of probation before she could be certified to return to the camp. Hence Jesus’s proposition in today’s Gospel that the ten lepers first go and show themselves to the priests. What was all important in the first century was not whether you were actually cured, but if the priest said you were cured.**

**The problem in antiquity is that because of societal and religious mores, the least of a leper’s problems was the physical disease or even the fact that it separated you from your family. That’s because in the ancient Mediterranean, one’s state of cultural being was even more important than the ability to physically function. Disease was one thing, but illness was so much more desperate. Illness was understood as a state of being where your social connections had been severed. Without these connections, your life became**

**impossible. Nothing devalued a human being more in the first century world than the illness known as leprosy.**

**What Jesus does today when he heals the ten lepers is not just cure them of a disease. He gives them back their life, he restores their honor.**

**That is a lesson that each of us can take from today's Gospel. Perhaps we cannot cure someone of a disease, but more importantly, we can heal them of their illness. It is our job to restore value to those from whom it has been taken away.**

**Very often, I believe that we, as the church, have lost our way in this process. Instead of following Jesus's example and giving back dignity to those who have had it taken away, we too fall into the sin of devaluing others. We do this every time we segregate those who are different from us, thereby lessening someone who is a gift of God.**

**However, when we get it right, when the church has lived into the message of Jesus, we have brought value to so many, just as Jesus does with the lepers. We have identified those who have been devalued by society and attempted to restore that value. That is what**

**the movement spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi was all about as he took on the caste system in India. It was what our own Desmond Tutu did taking on apartheid in South Africa. It was what Sojourner Truth and so many others did to bring value back to women in America. And of course, it was the impetus for Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. When we follow Jesus's example, this is what we do, and each time we do it, we come that much closer to bringing about that perfect vision of the realm of God as articulated by Jesus.**

**So who are our lepers today? Who are the ones that have become the most defenseless in our world? Unfortunately, there are still many possible choices. But for me, there is no one we devalue more in our culture than God's creation. Certainly it is the most vulnerable, because like the lepers of the first century, it has no way to defend itself from whatever we perpetrate upon it. We have taken what God continuously refers to as very good in the Genesis story, and devalued it, turning it from God's living, breathing organism into an object for our personal use. Just as we segregated ourselves from other human beings causing their dehumanization, we have**

**disconnected ourselves from the rest of the planet. It has become so unimportant for itself, in fact, that we refer to the magnificence of the gift of God's oceans, lakes, rivers, mountains, trees, deserts, and animals as...natural *resources*. We actually call forests or rivers commodities, things to buy and sell in the futures market to turn into cash. For us, Creation is not something to be admired, respected, and to be in partnership with, but something that we *use* to fill our own wants. And because we have taken away its inherent value, we have no respect for it. We treat it all as inanimate, to be disposed of in any way we see fit. All of us know exactly what this segregation from creation has created. We are on the verge of not only destroying each entity within God's creation, but we are now beginning to realize that this is also threatening our own existence.**

**Now I would dearly love to tell you that it is the big, bad secular world that has done this. We can all rage against the machine for the oil catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico and every other environmental disaster that has occurred because of greed and exploitation. But the truth of the matter is that it is the church that has moved away from**

**Jesus's message of restoring value to all. This has apparently occurred because we are afraid that if we apply Jesus's message of protecting the vulnerable to creation, that we will all become tree hugging dirt worshipers. And I am not pointing the finger at some other church out there. I'm talking about us. Here, I am embarrassed to say, are two of the prayers written specifically for creation in our own prayer book. Page 388, Form IV of Prayers of the People. "Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may USE its RESOURCES rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory." And then again in Form VI, "For the just and proper USE of your creation." Beloved, as long as we teach that nature is something for us to USE, we are devaluing it, we are doing the same thing to it that the people of Jesus's time and the folk of the late 1800's did to the lepers.**

**Recently, there has been a rallying cry within environmental circles, saying that if we don't change our ways soon, we are going to destroy ourselves. That is a true statement, but from a Christian perspective, it is not the issue. We have a moral obligation to protect**

**God's creation because, as our sacred text tells us, it is inherently good. Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel and throughout the Synoptic Gospels that it is our responsibility to make sure that nothing within God's creation is ever devalued. We must honor it and respect it because that's what Jesus taught us to do, because that's what Jesus taught us brings about the realm of God.**

**Now I know that for centuries the church has suggested that Jesus's lesson today about never devaluing does not apply to creation. Certainly that is what I heard growing up in the church. But what I have come to learn is that such an interpretation is an accident of history. Ancient Judaism always taught our connection to, and our need to value all of God's creation. A few weeks ago at our Thursday M3M service, the discussion was around the preponderance of transcendent images of God in our sacred text. But as someone that evening noted, the Hebrew Bible is also scattered with references to God as imminent, as within creation. "The whole earth," cries Isaiah, is FULL of God's glory. Psalm 29 describes a God who is over the waters, in the thunder, breaking the cedars, in the wilderness. Psalm**

**139 is even more explicit, where the author points out that God is everywhere, not just in heaven and Sheol, but in the farthest limits of the sea. Then again in Psalm 24, “The earth is God’s and all that is in it...for God has founded it on the seas and established it IN the rivers.”**

**In the Christian scripture, this insistence that we value all of the earth because it is part of God is even more explicit. In Colossians, we read of the cosmic Christ, the power that was before creation and the unifying force in all creation. Christ is not only the one who brings healing and reconciliation between humans and God, but between ALL creation and God. In Acts, we learn that it is “IN GOD that we live and move and have our being,” reminding us that creation is part of God. And again in Colossians we learn that there is only one Christ. “He is everything and he is IN everything.” Good heavens, the whole basis of our faith is an imminent God, the one we call Emmanuel, God with us.**

**It was only when Christianity first confronted the nature cults, like the Celts and the Druids in the fifth century, that this Christian duty to value all of nature was set aside. Pantheism, the view that nature is God, was seen as such a threat to Christianity, that all of**

**those references to God's presence in creation were suppressed in favor of the references to God's transcendence.**

**Beloved, the threat of pantheism is long past. If we are to live into our Baptismal covenant, we must recapture the God of all creation. We need to embrace a panentheistic God, the God who is simultaneously with us and beyond us. We must once again see the Christ who permeates the Gospel of John, the one who was there at the beginning, the one in whom, as the prologue to the Gospel of John tells us, is ALL life.**

**This will require a major shift in thinking. The message that Christ is in all creation is very evident in our sacred text. But it has been buried for 1500 years. The time to recover it is now. The time has come to heal the world of its illness. The time has come to restore value to the mountain lion and the coyote. The time has come to think about what it will do to God's earth before we cut down another rain forest. The time has come to find new sources of energy that will not pump more carbon dioxide into God's atmosphere, not just because if we don't we will kill ourselves, but because Jesus taught us**

**to protect the most vulnerable members of God's creation. The time has come to realize that the earth is not a resource for humans, it is part of the body of God, and as part of God it is sacred and must be treated thusly.**

**This revival of ancient Christian tradition cannot be accomplished through political or cultural means. It can only happen here. Changes of this magnitude have only occurred in the world through religious beliefs.**

**Just as Jesus broke through the laws of Judaism so that all members of society would once again be valued, we too must break through our own religious traditions to return to the message of Jesus. And just as Jesus was killed for attempting to bring justice and dignity to all, we too must know that we will be in danger and threatened for valuing all of God's creation.**

**As Gandhi was accused of destroying Hinduism, we will be accused of destroying Christianity. Like Martin Luther King, Jr. was accused of breaking the tenets of Christianity, we too will be accused of abandoning the Bible. But just like it was for them, it is for us. We**

**are not abandoning our roots, we are reinstating them. We are capturing the central message of Jesus and placing value on the thing that society has devalued.**

**Beloved, this is the evangelism of our time. It is the Civil Rights issue of our time. The lepers of our age are the oceans, the mountains, the forests, the animals and the rocks. Let us save the earth and save each other by connecting ourselves once again to our historical roots. Let us restore value not just to all of humanity, but to all of God's sacred creation, just as Jesus taught us. Let us take up the most critical social justice cause of our time, perhaps of all time. Let us together heal the earth and in so doing heal each other. Amen.**