

“In the Garden”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

Sunday, February 24, 2019

Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

Traditional Word

⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. —Genesis 2:8-9

Contemporary Word

“Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There’s something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies. (from “Loving Your Enemies”)” — Martin Luther King Jr.

“In the Garden”

IN THE GARDEN—Interpretation Matters

So, trigger warning—if you are NOT a theological nerd, you’re not going to enjoy the next few minutes very much—I apologize. If you are, however, excited by new research and discoveries in the theological realm, then hold on to your hats! I received a remarkable gift recently from a couple of UCC members. They bought

me the new translation of the Hebrew Bible completed by Robert Alter, a professor of Jewish and comparative literature at Berkeley. It was written over the course of two decades and this translation is considered unique because it is a one-man translation of the entire Hebrew Bible. Moreover, while most translations aimed to preserve theological accuracy, Alter's translation aims to convey the literary style of the original Hebrew text in English, recreating as much as possible its poetic rhythms and metaphors. It is one man's incredible attempt to arrive at a translation of ancient documents that most closely resembles what was written—not what people have wanted the documents to say. Interpretation matters! Most translations we have of the Hebrew Bible come at the expense of being Christocentric instead of theocentric—what I mean is that because the early Christ-following Jews has reason to “market” their new religion as a palatable alternative or version of traditional Judaism, they had to create a history that “foretold” of their messiah. So, ancient prophetic writings from Isaiah that centered on a passionate preacher pointing to a pregnant woman in the crowd to serve as a living example of Emmanuel— “God with us! We can have hope, because this woman carries within her new life—new hope-our people and our tribe will go on”—“Emanuel” But instead, this ancient story was easy to twist into a sort of fortune telling device and it becomes what we are very familiar with—a foretelling of Jesus as opposed to a preaching metaphor. Preachers are NEVER misunderstood, are we? Early translators of the Hebrew Bible were able to manipulate certain stories to fit a messianic narrative. This was important to some of the early Christian communities because they then had

documentary evidence that what was indeed foretold in Isaiah came true with the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth.

But what happens when someone approaches their translation with an eye for authenticity? This is what Robert Alter has attempted to do in his new translation. He attempted to return to the original language—the metaphors, the poetry and prose, the important words that have guided a people for millennia. What he ended up with is a set of documents that serve a specific people very well as reminders of their covenant with God. A covenant that we did not make nor do we have to keep. We have our own covenant with God—and it does not require us to keep the laws of Moses. When we approach the stories of creation using this new translation, let's see what happens:

“When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep, and God's breath hovering over the waters, God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness [God] called night. And it was evening and it was morning, first day.” Beautiful poetry, I think....let's skip a bit further into Genesis chapter 2 to our pertinent passage for this morning: “On the day the Lord God made earth and heavens”...okay, let's stop here for just a moment. This is the second account of creation found in Genesis 2:5 and I want to point out an important distinction here. In this version of the creation story we have the Lord God, not just God, so that tells us that this Creation story is from a different source—the Yahwist version. In the first

creation story, Genesis 1, we had simply: God, or the generic Hebrew word for God, Elohim. God saw it was good—no Lord God. In this second version we have God called YHWH, or Yahweh—Lord God. It seems a small difference, but what a difference it makes. In our garden of words that we call the bible, there are some seeds that grow into different plants-different species of theology. And it's the heart of the gardener, the one who tends to this garden of words that determines the theological output—the harvest, if you will. Is it a living, giving interpretation of the garden, or is it a death-dealing, dogma-ridden weed that sucks the joy out of life? Unfortunately, our own congregational ancestors were great at this! There's a reason they were called the puritans—and it isn't because they were known as a joyful people.

OK—Back to this interpretation of the second creation story: “On the day the Lord God made earth and heavens, no shrub of the field being yet on earth and no plant of the field yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not caused the rain to fall on the earth and there was no human to till the soil, and wetness would well from the earth to water all the surface of the soil, then the Lord God fashioned the human, hummus from the soil, and blew into [their] nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature. “ I love that we can't have the garden yet because humans aren't yet created to tend to that garden. The entirety of the world is a co-creation, a co-creative act with God. God needs humans and humans need God. That is our covenant. We co-create with God every single day-and we need to be careful of what we create and what we tend to...because in our co-creative capacities we

transform ourselves into new beings—into new ways of thinking and into new ways of being in relationship with each other.

So, while I'm not a gardener, I've seen enough of you in action to know that there is a certain destructive process in gardening that must take place before the planting can occur: Weeds pulled, soil turned, tasks not unlike the destructive process that translators must undertake when they offer us something new, like Robert Alter's new translation. He had to destroy his own old embedded beliefs and theologies and old teachings to see if he could cultivate something new from the rich soil.

What is the point of destruction, of the tearing down of ancient meanings and traditional rites and rituals and old theologies if you don't replace them with someone useful and just as meaningful? Destruction for destruction's sake is cynical and death-dealing, obviously it seems to me—but the re-creation of our stories using new metaphors and breathing new life into them makes them vital and useful for our lives today. Let's look at another time in history when new words and ideas threatened to upset the accepted social order.

Charles Darwin was an English naturalist, Biologist and Geologist and he is, of course, best known for his book *On the origin of Species*, in which he observed that life on our planet evolves according to a complex set of conditions and processes. While he was loathe to publish his work because of its groundbreaking consequences for theology and natural law, he knew it was going to cause great consternation for fundamentalist theology, once he published, the result has been staggering. In 1831, he and his crew on the HMS Beagle journeyed into the garden of

the Galapagos Islands and there he used his intellect and reason to determine his theory of evolution, which is now considered a foundational cornerstone for all biological sciences.

Has anyone here actually ever read Darwin? Has anyone taken the time to consume this text? Is so, then you know that he was a writer of great persuasion...while the tome is full of its necessary scientific explanations and paragraphs that are rife with information...Darwin, over time does something quite brilliant. He slowly builds his case for evolution. He methodically and quite beautifully argues his point and ultimately it is persuasive and conclusive. Biological life on this planet evolved and continues to evolve. A brilliant scientist observed the natural world and came away with an explanation for the diversity of species and the abundance of life. And this in no way should alter our faith in God other than to make room for this science. The Genesis story was one ancient people's attempt at looking at the natural world and trying to understand why we have this planet and its riches and resources, and Darwin's theory is just another attempt at explaining why we have the diversity of life on earth that we have. As consumers of the harvest from these gardens of words and idea, how we choose to interpret these stories is another matter altogether. It is important that we do not lose our trust in science nor our faith in God.

I'm using these two ideas to illustrate our responsibilities as inhabitants of the garden. From the Hebrew Bible we receive instruction that God requires us, humans, to assist with the care of the earth and yet from our sciences we get the message that we are failing in this regard—the earth is suffering from humanity's

over-use of natural resources. And we've all taken up sides and chosen where we fall in this regard...but the fact remains—we're co-creators and co-caretakers of the earth AND human-caused climate change has altered the earth drastically, perhaps even to the extent that we can't change things back. If we trust science, and I do, then we have either passed the tipping point, or we're right on the edge, of making the garden uninhabitable. If we trust science to get it right on medicine, clean water, the lights coming on when we hit the light switch, then we must trust science to get it right in regards to climate change and 97% of climate scientists agree that human-caused carbon usage has led to climate change.

As progressive Christians we are called to strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth. The garden is dying and some choose to deny the symptoms of its death. Those of us who choose the theological version of creation often say that we should rely on God to fix the problem—but if you recall, in the creation story I shared earlier, humans and God must work hand-in-hand to tend the earth.

So, as you know, this church has a relationship with the people of Chacraseca, Nicaragua--and that community's economy is based on two monsoon seasons and two harvest seasons. It's been this way for centuries—they depend on these two seasons to provide ample crops and then they have two harvests in which to benefit from them. From 2012 to 2017, global climate change so altered the conditions for the monsoons that only one occurred during each of those five years. Instead of two monsoon seasons, for five years they only had one. For five years the economy of Chacraseca, and indeed Nicaragua, was cut in half. I don't know about you, but I

wouldn't make it very long on one-half of my income. And this affected an entire nation of human beings!

Some of us have allowed ourselves to become blind to the human tragedy of climate change—as the garden dies, so too die the inhabitants of the garden. Let's look at it this way: If humans disappeared off the face of the earth tomorrow, the earth would probably recover—it will have lost a number of species that are impossible to save even with our most heroic efforts, but the biosphere—the plants and animals that share the planet with us, many would survive the disappearance of humans.

However, the converse is not true—if the biosphere were to vanish tomorrow, plants and animals and every other living thing on earth vanished--humans would not survive very long. We are dependent on the biosphere—it is not dependent upon us—except in as much as we can repair the damage already done. Until I saw first-hand the effects of climate change upon an entire country, I didn't really understand the enormity of the issue.

I've been trying to find the right words to encourage us all in this endeavor—Words that might bring us ALL together, instead of allowing a vocal few to distract us from the truth. It's still Black History Month for a few more days, so it's fitting to turn back to the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. for some wisdom on how we might come together in time to save our planet. King writes this: “Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, "Love your enemies." It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they

can't stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies."

As Darwin used his words to persuade the world to shift its focus towards science using a gradual building of persuasion, so King says to use love in incremental doses, doses that build up over time until all that's left is love. We must lovingly persuade those in our sphere that science is not our enemy, that we must reduce our carbon footprint today, not tomorrow. And for those of us with a faith in a loving God, it's clear that God co-creates the world and we must actively engage in this co-creation with God. In the garden, the garden that is your life—our lives together—in the act of creation—love is harvested when we till the soil with right relationships and good will. And then love might be seen as the active verb it is...to love. It's active and hopeful and good. While the news often seems bleak regarding the future of the garden, I'm reminded that it is not too late—we can still do simple things each day that reduce the damage to the earth. We can evolve our faith and evolve our behaviors into lives that co-create, with God, new ideas to slow down climate change and save our garden—this great gift we have—this earth. Simple ways to reduce our carbon footprint include buying locally sourced food and products—Wichita has farmers markets and lots of shops and kiosks that host local goods—not only is this good for the environment, it's good for our economy—the more local

dollars spent in Wichita remain in Wichita. Food waste is another major issue—I know this community is aware of these things, but we can always use a reminder. Ideally we want to move from an attitude of consumption to an attitude of recycle, renewal and reuse.

These are Darwin's final words from *On the Origin of Species*: "Whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved." Regardless of our beliefs, the reality is that the world turns, life evolves, and human-caused climate change is hurting the garden. Let us co-create with God, the great gardener, a new ethic towards the garden—one that is equitable, just and full of love—and maybe this time we won't be kicked out of the garden. It really is up to us. I hope we can join together in our trust of science and our faith in God. The Lord God created humans to co-create with God and to till the soil. Let's get to work—tend our garden—and ensure that there is a bountiful harvest for our children and our children's children. I'm grateful for this congregation that isn't afraid to get its hands dirty, to roll up its sleeves and to work in our garden—together—so that God might once again see our co-creation and call it GOOD.

Amen

Please rise as you are able and sing our closing song.