

Behold the Birds of the Air! **The Educational Importance of Environmental Awareness**

I am a teacher in Madison, Wisconsin, and have been a student of God's creation for all of my life. My family and I attend Geneva Campus Church on the campus of the University of Wisconsin. It was here several years ago that Rev. Vander Hoven came into town for three months to fill a vacancy in Geneva's ministry. I saw him often during my student coffee hours at Memorial Union, where he frequently engaged students at neighboring tables. Noting what books they were reading and what courses they were taking, he would compassionately tailor the Good News to their situation. Some days, I would move over to his table where, when not conversing with students, he wrote tracts for *Our Daily Bread*. And as we conversed there about my love for God and God's Creation he time and again he insisted that I take him on a field trip. I agreed to do so.

Bill and I selected a day and we lived that day fully from before sunrise and well into the night, trekking through the wonders of southern Wisconsin and the Baraboo Hills. He told me that he discovered Creation that day, although he already had lived more than 65 years, and he praised God verbally for this in my presence in Parfrey's Glen. Later I learned that, following our time together,²²² he took a full year off from his "retirement" to study Creation. His reason? So that he would not be embarrassed, as he put it, to be asked in the Final Judgement what he thought of God's Creation and be able to say he had but been on a single field trip.

You and I are teachers. We teach from Christian motivation. We honor God in our lives and our teaching and often sing "Praise God all Creatures here below" as we worship in school and church. Following our great teacher and mentor, Jesus Christ, we may even lead our students along city sidewalks, across the school lawn and through fields and woodlands teaching as Jesus did, on field trips! Follow right behind me here; behold this lily! Stand by my side here; behold the birds!

Jesus almost always taught on field trips. And this for good reason. For, as we learn from Colossians 1:15-20, he created all these marvelous things, and in him they all are held together. Teaching in the field was for him a "natural" thing to do! So too with our teaching in Creation: bringing ourselves and our students to experience Creation's remarkable testimony through seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching is also a "natural" thing to do. As it is inconceivable that we would come to admire the great artist Rembrandt and not know his paintings or care for his masterpieces, so it is inconceivable that we should love the Creator but not seek to know his creative works or care for his Creation. We too teach on field trips, observing, reflecting, listening, talking, recording, drawing, expressing, praying, praising.

Our teaching in the field has a great deal to do with our knowledge of God and God's love for the world. One of the creeds explains how we know God this way:

"We know him by two means: First, by the Creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see

clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says (Romans 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince people and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by his Holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.¹

On that field trip together Bill and I were refreshed in our knowledge that the heavens tell the glory of God, that the creatures testify to God's eternal power and divine majesty! Creation praises God for God's manifest love for the world (Psalm 148). We, with the psalmist, learn from Creation that God's provisions for life and breath are everywhere evident (Psalm 104). They are so numerous and abundant, so interwoven with each other, that we cannot give them their proper due. God's bountiful care is simply inexpressible in words; God's love breathes in the air, it shines in the light, it distills sweetly in the dew and rain. If we step out of our made-worlds of enclosed spaces, images, and virtual reality to experience Creation anew, we experience God's love for the world, we see clearly God's everlasting power and divinity. God's provisions for Creation are magnificent, deserving our undivided attention and calling forth our praise.

One thing a field trip can bring to us and our students is awareness. But awareness of Creation and God's sustaining action in the world is but the beginning of understanding. Awareness leads to appreciation of God and Creation. And appreciation can lead to stewardship—stewardship of Creation, of all the materials and energy that come from Creation, and God's provisions for the myriad of wonderful creatures that inhabit the earth (including ourselves!). Here is how this can be expressed:

- (1) Awareness: seeing, identifying, naming, locating
- (2) Appreciation: tolerating, respecting, valuing, esteeming, cherishing
- (3) Stewardship: conserving, restoring, serving, keeping, entrusting

Awareness means taking off our “blindness,” getting out of our offices and living rooms, leaving our virtual “worlds,” and wanting to know and to name the creatures we see, providing ourselves and our students with peace and reflective time, and entering the natural world intentionally to discover God's marvelous work. *Appreciation* means tolerating such things as worms and hyenas and respecting creatures like bears and whales, but goes beyond this to value and cherish God's creatures and creation in such a way that we echo God's declaration, “It is good!” *Stewardship* means appropriate and caring use and conservation of Creation, but goes beyond this to make sure that by our's and others' actions Creation is not degraded, that damage we do to it is repaired, that we pursue right living and work to spread right living in the world. *Stewardship* means serving, which includes: serving before we act adversely on Creation (pre-serving); serving reciprocally so that service to us by God and Creation is returned with service of our own (con-serving); bringing back to fulness and fruitfulness what has been damaged and smeared (re-storing, reconciling); helping our students and community to hold in trust what we and others have learned, preserved, conserved and restored (en-trusting); and serving God responsibly and worthily by tending, caring for, and keeping God's word and world (worth-ship, worship).

Creation has an immense amount to teach us as one of the two great books! The other great book, of course, is the one by which God makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us. And from this great book, the Bible, we come to understand that we are made to image and mirror God's love for Creation (including God's love for ourselves and other people)! From Scripture we learn that when human beings make a mess of things God responded and responds, first by cleansing the earth of unresponsive and irresponsible people with water while saving the lineages of God's creatures (Genesis 6-9), next by taking on flesh and matter in Jesus Christ (Luke 2:1-22), by giving everlasting life to those who join with Jesus Christ in holding together and reconciling the world (John 3:16; Colossians 1:15-20), and by dwelling in us as the Holy Spirit (Psalm 51:11; Luke 11:13), and ultimately by cleansing the earth with a refiner's fire that destroys those who destroy the earth (Revelation 11:18), renewing all things (Revelation 21:5).

Believing on Jesus, sent because of God's love for the world, is but the beginning of understanding and wisdom, much as awareness of God's Creation is but a beginning. Our believing what Jesus tells us, our responding to the Holy Spirit, and our imaging God's love for the world necessarily lead to deep appreciation. And deep appreciation necessarily leads to responsive and responsible stewardship of God's gifts: God's Word and God's Creation.² Here is how this sequence can be visualized:

- (1) Belief in God: Awareness: experiencing, praying, asking, telling
- (2) Worship and Praise: singing, listening, esteeming, cherishing
- (3) Stewardship of God's gifts: doing, serving, reconciling, restoring

During their time in Madison we invited Bill and his wife our house for dinner for Easter, along with others who had not left town. On Easter morning he preached a wonderful sermon at Geneva. It was a sermon and service that were filled with joy, celebration, and testimony. The Holy Spirit moved us there to stand in awe of Christ's affirmation of matter in his incarnation and resurrection. We were moved by God's affirmation of the Creation in all of this, recalling that on Christ's coming in Bethlehem that heaven and nature sang, that rocks, fields, and hills repeated the sounding joy. "He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found!" We came better to love our Lord and again were amazed to hear that Mary had mistaken him for the garden keeper! Gardener Jesus, King of Creation! We responded: "Truly I'd love you, truly I'd serve you!"

Later, I was at home slicing the turkey and ham Ruth had prepared, but the Vander Hovens had not arrived. It had been two hours since the service and the many present were becoming concerned. It was time to sit down for dinner and as we were doing so, they came in through the front door. Welcoming them I said to Bill, "Did something happen to delay you; are you alright?" "Oh," he said, "We went to Bethel Lutheran! Wouldn't miss High Church on Easter!"

Well, one Christmas Eve, Ruth, I, and Gary participated in High Church Bethel Lutheran, savoring the knowledge that this too is part of God's Creation. I thought of Bill and the wholeness he was working to develop in his life. His was a full spectrum: God and Creation, his own expository sermons and High Church. But there is more. If you would have followed his route on Sundays, you often would not only end up in a church, but also in a barn. He is a stone_cutter, Bill. He works with his hands, loves to care for things, create things, all under the

eye of his Lord. And so... on Sundays he often would find people of his kind by visiting a local barn, not doing chores, but worshipping there with his dear friends in Christ. These were his Amish neighbors with whom he affirmed the material world in tangible ways, as the Carpenter he followed had two thousand years before him!

Lutheran Liturgy, Evangelical Spirit, and Amish Earthiness. All three support and sustain Christian life and worship! Some Christians start with liturgy and remain in the liturgical beauty and comfort of High Church. Some start with the Spirit and remain in the Spirit-filled church. Some start in the barn and sink their roots into the soil. And still other worshipers, while not abandoning their beginnings, embrace the whole of worship, as my friend Bill does. All honor God as the Maker of Heaven and Earth and seek to be good stewards of God's Creation.

In our day, the first step toward Creation stewardship is often called environmental awareness. The Bible, however, moves beyond awareness to *beholding*. It tells of people inspired and told by their teachers to behold! *Behold* the Lamb of God...(John 1:29); *Behold* the fowls of the air (Matt 6:26). Theologian Joseph Sittler tells us that the word "behold" is directed toward God's creatures with a kind of tenderness which suggests that things in themselves have their own wondrous authenticity and integrity... " 'To behold' means to stand among things with a kind of reverence for life which does not walk through the world of the nonself with one's arrogant hat on... it is... a rhetorical acknowledgment of a fundamental ecological understanding of man whose father is God but whose sibling is the whole Creation..."³The author is Professor of Environmental Studies and a Fellow of the Teaching Academy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He also is Director of Au Sable Institute which serves 56 Christian College and Universities with courses and programs in environmental education and K-12 Schools in northern Michigan and western Washington.

Embracing God and the whole of God's Creation—people included—enhances the opportunity to infect all of life with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Liturgical services remind us to remember all the elements of worship and to worship God in the splendor of holiness. Spiritual services make sure that we commune with God with heart-felt words that come from within and express praise and petitions that go beyond the words of liturgy. Earthy services make sure that we remember that God became material flesh in a material world—incarnate in Jesus Christ—and that he has come to be present with us in his own Creation which he so loves. And all three, liturgical, spiritual, and earthy, brings us to know that we should so behave on earth that heaven will not be a shock to us (as another pastor friend of mine puts it!).

We must in all of this, remember our Creator (Ecclesiastes 12:1) and follow our master teacher Jesus into the field. Whether we take a sidewalk safari to study the remarkable plants of sidewalk cracks, or walk through woodlands, prairies, and marshes to observe them and their inhabitants, we and our students should not only become aware, but should also *behold* what we see. And our beholding should lead us all to appreciation and to stewardship of the great heritage of God's world and God's word that is entrusted to our love and care. But first, *behold* the plants of the sidewalk, lawn and field; *behold* the birds of the air!

¹ Belgic Confession, Article II [1561]. Philip Schaff, 1931, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker.

² For stewardship of Creation, see C. B. DeWitt. 1994. *Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues*. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications. ISBN 1-56212-057-3 (TBA)

³ Sittler, Joseph. 1970. Ecological commitment as theological responsibility. In: Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken. 2000. *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 76-86.