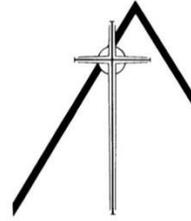


“Green Faith”
Revelation 22:1-5, Genesis 2:4-10, 15
Rev. Jacqueline Decker Vanderpol
April 28, 2019



“I have an eleven-year-old friend who grew up on computers. At three, he knew how to work the remote key to my car,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor. “By the time he was six, he was so quick on the trigger of his video games that no adult could best him. He was so quick, in fact, that it became difficult for him to focus on anything for more than a few seconds before he was off to something else. When his parents brought him to my [farm], he came equipped with his DVD player, his Game Boy, and various electrical toys used for hand-to-hand combat. I played one with him that involved pressing buttons on a remote control so that my plastic boxer flailed his arms and feet with the object of knocking his plastic boxer down. By the time I figured out how the buttons worked, my plastic boxer was lying face up on the ground with his fists punching air. My young friend crowed with victory. He had won again.

“I do not remember how we ended up digging potatoes. I think I refused to play anything else that required batteries and he sullenly followed me to the barn.... Like many his age, he had never made the connection between what he ate and where it came from. If you had told him that grapefruits grow on trees, he would not have believed you. But once he learned [to stick his hands in the dirt and start feeling around, breaking up the clumps of dirt and waiting to stumble on something that felt like a potato], he dug with perfect focus, visibly pleased with his ability to produce real food. I am not sure that he had ever felt genuinely useful before. The next time he came to see me, he still brought all his electrical stuff but he left it in the car. ‘Can we dig potatoes?’ he asked

“There is no substitute for earthiness. From dust we came and to dust we shall return. The good news is that most of us get some good years in between, during which we may sink our hands in the dirt. This is as good a way as any to recover our connection to the ground of all being. Digging down is as good a way to God as rising up, if only because you can feel it in your shoulders.” Given her years of getting her hands dirty on her farm, it makes sense that when Taylor started learning biblical Hebrew, she had trouble getting past the second chapter of Genesis. “Having grown up on the King James Version of the Bible,” she says, “I was greatly affected by the knowledge that God did not make ‘man’ in the second chapter of Genesis. God made *adam* – an earthling – from *adamah* – the earth. God made a mud-baby, a dirt-person, a dust-creature. Then God breathed into its nostrils, giving divine CPR, and behold! A living being arose from the ground. The next thing God did was to plant a garden in that same ground. Then God made trees grow out of the ground that were pleasant to look at and good for food. Finally, God put the earthling on that patch of earth to till and keep it.”¹

We are so quick to forget that we aren’t *above* the earth and its other inhabitants; we are *of* the earth. Made of the same material; cut from the same cloth. We also forget that our very first job given from God – and this is before everything gets all mucked up with the apple and the snake and the tree – was to care for the earth; to dig into it and get our hands dirty.

It’s amazing how we mud-creatures can turn even what sounds like such a simple task into a divisive issue. Just look at our Presbytery – the group of churches in our area. Our

¹ “Carrying Water,” *An Altar in the World*, by Barbara Brown Taylor.

Presbytery extends from Boulder to Ft. Collins, out onto the plains of Colorado and up into the panhandle of Nebraska. There have been requests at a couple of recent Presbytery meetings to have education about how churches can be better environmental stewards. It amazes me given where we live, but St. Andrew is the only Earth Care congregation in this Presbytery, so there's a lot of room for education and growth. But, it has yet to happen because every time we get close, people get scared. *The politics of the panhandle of Nebraska and the politics of Boulder aren't the same*, they say. *The economic interests of the foothills and those of Weld County aren't the same*, they say. And because we're so worried about the differences in our trees, we forget that we all live in the same forest. We forget that, in the words of the newly published book *The Absent Hand*, astronauts realized quickly in space that "from the point of view of the moon, the distinction between city or country of any kind, or even city and 'wilderness' was meaningless: it is all our environment."²

We make these distinctions at our own peril, but not just the distinctions in geography. "Our siloed interests have thwarted collective progress [in caring for the earth]," an Earth Day reflection reminded readers this week. "Crumbling infrastructure [in cities] and runaway housing prices are ultimately inseparable from sprawl and pollution [which impact climate change]; climate change accelerates rural desertification and contributes to flooding, wreaking havoc on billions of lives, causing unrest and fueling the refugee crisis. We separate such issues [- we address them individually -] at our peril."³

And peril is where we are. But we are not without hope. As John receives the revelation he later writes down in what becomes the last book of the Bible, as John receives the vision about what a redeemed world will look like, he sees a city. It's a city characterized by the peace and well-being of *shalom*, a city situated along a river, a river flowing straight from the throne of God, and next to the river is a tree. *And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations*. I'm struck that people can create cities – bad ones, good ones, great ones – but only God can create a tree.

The earth needs healing from our modern lifestyle, and so do we. And I'm not just talking about kids like the eleven-year-old who visited Taylor on her farm, the kid who was an expert in anything with a screen but had never had an experience of being truly useful until he helped her dig for potatoes. Mud-creatures of every age are in need of healing. One of the leading experts of our day in healing is the relatively-recently deceased Oliver Sacks. Sacks was a neurologist and author but is probably best known for being the doctor Robin Williams portrayed in the movie *Awakenings*. Some of Sacks' writings have been published posthumously, including an essay in which Sacks writes: "In 40 years of medical -practice, I have found only two types of non-pharmaceutical 'therapy' to be vitally important for patients with chronic neurological diseases: music and gardens. In many cases, gardens and nature are more powerful than any medication."

For instance, writes Sacks, "my friend Lowell has moderately severe Tourette's syndrome. In his usual busy, city environment, he has hundreds of tics and verbal ejaculations each day – grunting, jumping, touching things compulsively. I was therefore amazed one day when we were hiking in a desert to realize that his tics had completely disappeared. The remoteness and uncrowdedness of the scene, combined with some ineffable calming effect of nature, served to defuse his ticking, to 'normalize' his neurological state, at least for a time."

² From *The Absent Hand: Reimagining our American Landscape* by Suzannah Lessard.

³ "A Meditation on Our Relationship to the Landscapes We Inhabit," by Michael Kimmelman, *The New York Times*, April 18, 2019.

And, continues Sacks, “I have a number of patients with very advanced dementia or Alzheimer’s disease, who may have very little sense of orientation to their surroundings. They have forgotten, or cannot access, how to tie their shoes or handle cooking implements. But put them in front of a flower bed with some seedings, and they will know exactly what to do – I have never seen such a patient plant something upside down.”

“Clearly,” he concludes, “nature calls to something very deep in us.”⁴ Perhaps because it calls us to remember who we are and how we were made. Perhaps because we mud-creatures were made of the very same stuff. Perhaps because it calls on the primal awareness of that very first job we were given: to till God’s earth and keep it. Amen.

⁴ “Oliver Sacks: The Healing Power of Gardens,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2019.