

JUNE 13, 2021

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”



Sermon: This Is My Father's World, Psalm 104:34-35, Psalm 96:11-12, Isaiah 42:5, Psalm 33:5, Matthew 25:14-30

Our hymn for this week is This Is My Father's World. This hymn has the interesting trait of likely never being intended to be a hymn, or perhaps even read widely by the world. It was written by Maltbie Babcock, a Presbyterian minister who lived from 1858-1901. The words weren't published until after his death, which suggests to me that he might not have intended anything more than writing something for his own edification.

Maltbie was a man of imposing figure. As a young man he was a star athlete, and carried that physique with him throughout his lifetime. He was also an accomplished musician on the organ, piano, and violin. Known to enjoy horsing around as much as anyone, he also had a no-nonsense side and boundaries it was unwise to cross. On one occasion he came a cross a confrontation between two men. The older was bullying the younger and, as the story goes, "indulging in unsavory language." As Maltbie shouted his warning to cease he grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck and seat of the pants and threw him over a fence.

He was also a lover of nature. When pastoring in New York, there was a hill in town that he would walk regularly in the mornings, the top of which held a spectacular view of Lake Ontario. These walks became connected with his response when asked where he was off to. "I'm going to observe my Father's world" he would say.

So inspired by these walks, a 16 verse poem was composed. Each stanza began with "This is my Father's world." These 16 verses were distilled down to the three we sing today.

The hymn is a phenomenal work of praise for the majesty of the Creator, the glory of creation itself, and a sense that we have a purpose in it.

My hope is that all of us have some place in the world where we are awed, humbled, and inspired by the work of the one who created it. The peacefulness of a small stream. The smallness of standing at the foot of a great mountain. The view from the top of that mountain. The vastness of the ocean and the crashing of the waves. The depth and breadth of a great canyon. The beauty of the leaves turning in autumn.

What have we done to deserve this great gift? Nothing. All of this exists simply because God made it so. We have the privilege of being part of it. In fact, we have glorious aspects of who we are that we've similarly done nothing to deserve. None of us decided to be born into this world. Our lives are a free gift. None of us did anything to deserve the innate giftedness we possess. They are a gift.

Even the furious events in nature we might call "disasters" inspire awe and wonder. They are fascinating to us in their might. We realize that we are powerless before them. When the tornado, the tsunami, or the hurricane comes, we can't fight it. We get out of the way. When an earthquake happens, we hope we aren't there when it does. There is nothing we can do against it.

Yet we are powerless before nature, we often forget that nature is likewise powerless against us. Nature has no power to stop deforestation, overfishing, overusing, or pollution. Nature simply has to take what we throw at it.

In this relationship, we are reminded that there is an inevitable interdependence and connection between all of creation.

The natural world depends on us to regard it for the sake of its health. We depend on the natural world for the air we breathe, food, and water. We depend on one another for support, for knowledge, to live together in peace and respect.

None of us are where we are without help from somewhere. Part of the beauty of creation is that is put together in a way the functions at its best and most productive when all parts of it are in harmony with one another.

This is our Father's world. The Father created, and the Father has given it to us for use.

This sentiment is often reflected in the idea that God "owns it all" and therefore everything is "on loan" to us. If ownership

is a permanent state, then none of us truly own anything, not even our lives. We are all temporary in this world, and so everything we have will either pass away or pass on to someone else. Yes, it's all on loan to us.

But do we really believe it?

The question is one for self-reflection. Saying "God owns it all and we just have it on loan" is a good, spiritual sounding line. Do our lives bear it out? Often this is most simply demonstrated by how we use what we have. Though if we are honest, it's not the easiest thing to pull apart and unpack. Why? Because we are human. We like to possess things. We like to have things that are our "own" because we can treat them as we so choose. We can give or keep as we see fit. We can pass on as we decide. There is a very real sense, to some degree, of "no one can tell me what to do with it if it's mine." How this shakes out is what becomes of consequence in our faithful use of what has been given to us and what we have accumulated.

This same notion has dual meaning. "No one can tell me what to do with it." On one hand, I may say this with a "so I'll indulge it as much as I want regardless of the consequence." On the other hand, I may have a different attitude. "I want to make sure I use this for the glory of God, and so I want to have control over its use." Same beginning thought. Two very different attitudes about it.

The parable today of the talents is all about this very idea. A man leaves on a long trip and gives three servants each a purse of money to care for in his absence. Each one gets to the measure of trust the man has in them. Upon return, two of them have doubled the money, the third has earned nothing because he simply chucked it in a hole in the ground. The two who multiplied it were rewarded, the one who did not punished. In fact the language is quite harsh towards that particular servant.

This parable is about far more than simply coinage. It is about stewardship. What do we do with what has been given us? How do we use it and for what purpose? In the parable the intent was not lost on any of the three managers. All of them knew that he expected to get a return. What did they do about it?

In broader terms, as we look at our Father's world, we are taken back to the Garden of Eden. Adam is given the charge to take dominion over the earth and subdue it. How we read this has everything to do with how we understand our role as caretakers over creation. "Dominate" and "subdue" are not violent nor aggressive terms. They are not synonymous with "exploit", "waste", or "take for granted". They are terms of harmony and care. The intent is for humanity to work with creation and cause the world to more productive.

We cultivate the land so it will produce both health for us and us for it. We cultivate relationships so that they will produce peace, love, grace, and kindness. We are caretakers with a grand and holy purpose to make the most and best of this amazing gift of nature and life that God has given to us.

Many of us through childhood have heard, and now passed on, the statement to "leave it better than you found it." This is the call we all have to stewardship over one another and all of creation.

This interconnectedness and interdependence is unavoidable.

There are three terms that can help us dial in even more on how this occurs. The first question in determining where you fit in the three is this: do you believe that God is everywhere? If the answer is "yes", you are not what is called a "theist". A theist holds essentially that God and creation exist in two different locations. God is not necessarily everywhere. In my experience, particularly in consideration of the Holy Spirit, most Christians would not be considered "theists."

If you answered yes, then the next question is: do you believe that God is IN all things? In other words, do you believe that a piece of God is literally infused within every creature, every blade of grass, every cloud, every rock? If so, you would fit in with what is called a "pantheist." God is in everything.

If you answered yes, but do not believe God is IN all things the question is: do you believe that God surrounds all things? God may not be in the sidewalk, but as we walk on it the Spirit of God is all around us. If this is you, the label is "panentheist."

The pantheist and panentheist have shades of disagreement. For some part of their core theology depends on the hair splitting between the two, and to no surprise some may even argue it heatedly. To argue heatedly runs the danger of missing the larger point that is encompassed by both of these viewpoints. Whether God is in or simply around all things, the same holds true that the Spirit of God CONNECTS all things.

What a comforting reality! This means we are never left alone. We are never abandoned. Whether all of creation is encompassed by God or is infused with God, there is never a place where God does not exist. At all times and in all places God is there to guide, heal, forgive, and love us. This truth is what assures us that there is no where we can go to escape the love of God. No ocean too deep, nor mountain too high, nothing can separate us from God's love.

This interconnectedness is created by, and held together by the Spirit of God. In every moment and every choice we honor or dishonor God by how we steward the great gift of God's creation.

This is our Father's world. May we leave it better than we found it, make it wildly productive, and embrace and enhance it's beauty in thanksgiving to the One who has gifted it to us. Not because we deserve it. Not because we've earned it. Simply because we are loved.