

**“The Goodness of Creation” Sermon**  
**9/3/20 – SELC – Pastor Mark Perry**

This is the first of 5 teaching sermons on “Creation theology.” I know there could be an impression that’s a long time to talk about environmental issues. But it’s much, much more than that. I ask you to listen carefully and be patient and I believe very strongly that blessings and greater understanding of the vast expanse of God’s grace and redemptive power will come from it.

It’s really about good theology versus poor theology. Last Sunday, I described how poor theology led me to believe as a boy that I could and should literally work to become perfect. And then how freeing it was to learn about healthier theology about grace and forgiveness.

Another area I had to learn healthier theology was an apparent dichotomy between the physical world and spiritual reality. Again, I had picked up from other churches’ teachings in which I was involved as a youth that, to be a good Christian means to separate ourselves from material world. That world was fallen and so broken that need to separate self from it as work towards goal of greater unity with God. Yet, we were a family who did a lot outdoors (like the camping trip I referenced last week). So, knew how wonderful and good it was to enjoy the beauty and wonder of this natural world. It wasn’t really until I was in seminary that I came across a creation theology that affirmed both experiences. We can be “in” this world, (as in the physicality of the universe, not the sinful systems and powers that are aligned against God) AND actually grow closer to God and His people as live fully in it.

This is not just about my personal spiritual “woke” moment. It is one to which the institutional church- mainline as well as so-called evangelical – in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century is also waking up. And, even more than how it made such a difference to me personally, it makes a difference to our whole world, now indeed so threatened by the actions and decisions of industrialized society throughout at least the last 500 years.

1 Timothy 4 shows this has been a theological debate since the beginning of the Church and addresses what’s at stake.

The biblical author is condemning a group involved with gnostic asceticism with poor theology because they believed and taught that humans should only focus on being “spiritual.” The belief system they had taught that the material world was evil, a demonic realm from which we should strive to separate ourselves. That’s why in these verses it talks about forgoing marriage and eating food that might give pleasure. 1 Timothy condemns that dualistic attitude about the natural world when it clearly states, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by God’s word and prayer.”

Everything created by God is good. Here, near the end of the bible in the New Testament is an affirmation and attestation of what is found at the beginning of the bible, in Genesis, and, indeed throughout the bible. Six times, after each stage in the process of creating the world, it says, "God saw that it was good." Then, only after humans are brought into existence, God says, "it was VERY good." This material world isn't some accidental afterthought of a capricious God. This isn't a neutral stage upon which the primary story of human existence and redemption is played out. This isn't simply "stuff" that we need to live and survive but otherwise is without much value. No, all of this was made in a primal cosmic explosion and expression of love and divine intention in which GOD CALLED IT ALL GOOD! And if GOD calls it that, so should we. And, so, we should help others acknowledge and experience it's goodness in all its fullness. A goodness that is AND, still inherent in the world around us, as all the readings today affirm and is affirmed in many other passages as well.

That "goodness" is still even in that image in which we were created. Just because rebellion, brokenness and sin has marred and warped that divine image- sometimes beyond recognition- it is still true about us. How different our world would be if everyone believed and lived into that!

Through the centuries, that poor theology separated the divine image and goodness from the divine command to "multiply, subdue, and have dominion." It has been interpreted and applied powerful nations who called themselves Christian to mean we can do with this natural world whatever we want with it. That's the power God gave to us. But it's critical to remember that that FIRST we're made in God's image. Which means we are to *represent and reflect* Who God is. And, as the scriptures again and again relate, and which we'll look at in the weeks ahead, God deeply and completely CARES for this world, this universe, God has made. God has a *loving relationship* with this universe. So, when it says, "have dominion," we are to treat the world *as God would* care for it. Which includes enjoying, cherishing and sharing it's wonderful goodness.

Psalms 104 is a joyous celebration of that enjoying and cherishing. One of several psalms like it. Listen again: vss. 14-15... What a celebration of the goodness and pleasures of life! What an exuberant display of praise for what God has given, wonderfully fulfilling 1 Timothy's admonition to let it all be "sanctified by God's word and prayer."

Now, let me press the pause button here. Some who are listening may be saying to themselves (and to me!), "Now, all that is nice pastor. Yes, there's a lot in our world that we can enjoy and in which we can take pleasure. But isn't it rather naïve to be calling the natural world "good"? What about all the bad things that humans suffer from "Mother Nature"? "Natural disasters?" What about the hurricanes and fires lately? And how can we lift up all this supposed "goodness" in the middle of a pandemic? Isn't COVID-19 part of the created order? I wouldn't call THAT good."

And that is a perfectly understandable question. There is much that happens in our world that would be hard to call “good.” Let me point out one important point: While Genesis 1 says “it was very good” it *doesn’t* say it’s perfect! That is, it comes with some “down sides.” We could take a whole other series of sermons to address the place of innocent suffering. Why God allows there to be suffering and death and disease to “built into” this world. But, two points to make here: First, keep in mind the bigger picture here: While we can’t deny that darker side of life, OVERALL there is still so much that is good and awesome and beautiful all around us. Second, the world God created provides everything we need to live rich, full satisfying lives IF we treat it the way “images of God” were intended to treat it. And there’s the rub. For example, I have read several articles like this one (“Mankind’s impact on earth is the real virus scandal,” F. Zakaria, AZ Star, 5/12/20, A4) which tie the beginning of the pandemic to the *misuse* of nature. As it says here, “As human civilization expands, we are also destroying the natural habitat of wild animals, bringing them closer and closer to us. Some scientists believe this is making the transmission of diseases to humans far more likely,” including the bats from which many scientists believe this disease first originated. Bats are the chief culprit in the transmission of ebola as well. So, this suggests- at least in part- that some of the suffering we’re undergoing right now in part is due to humans not living up to God’s original intention of what “having dominion” means.

That brings us to John 2 and water miraculously being turned into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. The fact that Jesus, his mother Mary, and the disciples took the time to even attend this wedding says something. It says that such joyful celebrations of the goodness of life and love and relationship were (and are) something that Our Lord took part in as any one of us might but also that he affirms that kind of celebration. It is as if the gospel is joining the psalmist in singing, “wine to gladden the human heart.” Going even further, the story also affirms that “the party must go on” as Jesus makes sure there is more than enough wine to keep the days of the wedding celebration going. (I for one am glad we have this story also to affirm the Blessing of the Vines at Sonoita Vineyards that Father Greg has led with many pastors through the years!)

In the gospel of John, this story also serves another purpose beyond even the affirmation of enjoying the goodness of creation. It also points to the HOPE that Jesus also and ultimately points to the New Creation. It serves as a “sign” as John calls it of the fulfillment of the Messianic expectations in Jesus. Many of the prophetic descriptions of that age use feasting and drinking wine as part of that New Creation to come. We’ll spend more time looking at this in the last sermon in the series, “The Goal of Creation.” But it highlights the important theological point that, as wonderful as this world is, God ain’t finished yet!

In fact, we are part of an continually *ongoing* creative process. Psalm 104 and other passages use the present not past tense when it talks about God's provision for all creatures: "You *make* springs gush forth in the valleys... You *cause* the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to use..." The story of Genesis 1 isn't about a "one and done" God who started all of it out and then stepped back. God continues to create, provide and sustain us and all living things.

This is a foundational belief in our Lutheran Christian theology. In Martin Luther's "Explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed," from the Large Catechism, (written for adults), he teaches:

"I hold and believe that I am a creature of God; that is, that He has given me and **constantly sustains** my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all the faculties of my mind, my reason and understanding, and so forth; my food and drink, clothing, means of support, wife and child, servants, house and home, etc..."

"All this He does out of pure love and goodness, without our merit, as a kind father who cares for us..."

"Hence, since everything we possess, and everything in heaven and on earth besides, is **daily given and sustained by God**, it inevitably follows that we are in duty bound to **love, praise and thank Him without ceasing**, and, in short, to **devote all these things in his service...**"

And that's a great summary of what this sermon is about:

- Affirming that this universe is a great gift from a loving God
- We are intended to enjoy it as fully as possible, savoring its pleasures and cherishing it's wonders
- Made in God's image, we treat it as God would
- Its goodness and provision prompt us to praise and thanksgiving
- And to the sharing of its abundance so that all can know it's goodness.

Which next week we'll see even includes God's revealing of the divine Self through creation.

Amen.