

“Get On Your Boots”

Psalm 8

John 21:1-17

April 26, 2009

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First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

The 3rd Sunday in Easter

When I chose the sermon title for this morning, “Get On Your Boots” it was not rain boots I had intended to convey but that seems to be our situation today.

This past week, on Wednesday, April 22, if you were paying attention to the media or if you have children in school who were probably engaged in lessons about this topic, we celebrated Earth day. According to the all knowing and infallible online recourse, Wikipedia, Earth Day is celebrated in the US on April 22 as a day designed to inspire awareness and appreciation for the Earth’s environment. It was founded, by U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson as an environmental teach-in in 1970, almost 40 years ago, and is now celebrated in many countries every year. The date was chosen to correspond with the spring equinox in the northern hemisphere and the autumnal equinox in the southern hemisphere. The United Nations also encourages and celebrates this day each year.

Now, I am aware that even as I say these words some of you are squirming in your seats with nervousness and discomfort. Issues of environmentalism are ones that raise strong opinions from different corners of society. At times, it seems, some of these issues seem to provoke competing interests: ideologies versus economics; pro-environmentalism versus pro-business.

So, as we begin this morning, I want to be very clear about what we are NOT talking about today. What we’re not talking about today is the potential science and the solutions to macro-issues of global warming and climate change, if there even is such a thing according to some of our colleagues; because, indeed there are very different opinions about these important issues. Although we are not addressing them directly I do think they are critical and I do hope and pray that people much, much smarter than me can lay aside any partisan or economic differences and make sure first and foremost that we do find a way, on this planet, to make sure that we live in ways that are sustainable.

Sustainability is a bit of a buzz word these days, so I want to be clear and concise about what it means. To be sustainable is simply this: to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. That sounds pretty straight forward. After all, if the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and the natural resources of the earth that provide shelter and

power; transportation and communication for us are not available for our children's generation and for their children's and beyond, then it certainly will be difficult to claim that we are following Christ's command, "Feed my sheep." For how can the sheep be cared for, physically, emotionally, mentally or even spiritually if the natural resources they need for their basic survival are not available. As members of this community of faith, citizens in the Kingdom of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, the call on our lives to preserve the earth for future generations is not primarily a political, social or personal issue. No, it is instead, a deeply rooted theological and spiritual issue.

The Bible, the story of God and God's people passed on to us, is rooted and grounded in the natural world. We know from the beginning that God created not just us and called us good, but all creation alongside us. Now, I'm not trying to suggest that when Jesus told Peter, "Feed my sheep" he was trying to slip in a subliminal environmental message. No, I think he really did mean simply to care for fellow human beings. But, the fact that Jesus and indeed all of scripture, so frequently and freely uses the natural world as a way to encourage us to praise God and to help us better understand the ways that we should live, is not coincidental. The prophets tell us the justice will flow down like a living stream of water; Jesus tells us that our faith is to be like a grain of a mustard seed and that a God who notices the life and death of every bird on earth surely knows and cares about our lives as well.

Even more substantially, the fact that our journey of faith is ushered in through water (in baptism) and that we are fed at the table through the juice of grapes and the grains of wheat in simple bread, all remind us that God has placed us in within the natural world: not simply for our use, but calling us to be good stewards of it as well.

So, what does this mean for our daily lives? How can we live out our faith, or should we worry, as people of faith, about living in a sustainable way? Some of you will be relieved to know that I am not going to suggest that you join Greenpeace and chain yourself to the front of whaling ship in the North Sea. Not that there's anything wrong with that. I happen to like whales, a lot. But, there might be more practical examples for us today, both as a global church of Jesus Christ as well in our community that we might follow.

First, a little further afield. For several years our congregation provided some support for a mission volunteer named Jacob Goad: a young man who went on behalf of our denomination to serve in Peru helping to host mission groups that were coming down from The United States to study and work with the church in Peru, the Evangelical Presbyterian and Reformed Church, our sister body in that country.

When he arrived several years ago, he found himself almost immediately caught up in a rather spectacular human rights campaign. For a couple of generations, in a little village in Peru called La Oroya; a village of about 35,000 people, nearly all of the children were getting sick. Studies that were conducted over the last twenty years concluded that 95% of the children had elevated levels of lead in their body which caused, among other things, mental retardation, kidney problems and stunted growth. As they began to study the tragedy in La Oroya, Peru they discovered that the source of the lead poisoning for all of their children was coming from one of the largest smelters in the southern hemisphere, run by an American company called Doe Run, that was dumping over two million pounds of toxic emissions every day into the city of La Oroya.

Local members of churches in La Oroya, alongside members of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. began to strategize in partnership together about how they might try to clean up their environment, and save their children. They discovered that the Doe Run company headquarters was based in St. Louis, Missouri. So Presbyterians in St. Louis, in the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy joined in the effort and began to lobby for cleaner emissions from the company. After four years of faith-based community organizing they were finally able to levy a fine and decertify the environmental code of the Doe Run company and force them into an operation that would be cleaner and safer for their children. For sisters and brothers in Christ in Peru, taking the command to “Feed my sheep” meant cleaning up the environment in order that the sheep could live a better, fuller life.

Closer to home, what is it that we can do in our community, indeed even in our church? You’ll be glad to know that the staff of this church has taken this call seriously. Over the last year, we have changed as many light bulbs as we can to CFLs to use less electricity, admittedly both an economic concern as well as an environmental one. You’ll notice in luncheons and meals in the church in the coming months, we’ll increasingly be using china and silver ware to cut down on the waste of paper and Styrofoam products. Recycling bins have been placed around the church and in each of the Sunday school classrooms to encourage all of us, including our children to learn about recycling.

In fact, the children’s ministry, under the leadership of our Associate Pastor for Children’s Faith Formation, Amy Pagliarella, this last fall adopted a turtle pond. That might have seemed like an unusual activity for a church group, but a strong symbol of what it means to nurture and care for the environment. This year they’ve also begun to

recycle crayons, knowing that crayons cannot biodegrade in a dump, but they can be melted down and made into new crayons for children.

In fact, Amy's taken a bit of a lead on this. You can always tell when you're in a meeting with Amy because she prints all of her agendas on recycled paper. You're never quite sure if the children's song or poem on the back of the page or the agenda on the front of the page is what you're supposed to be looking at. It's a little confusing, but we get it. She's doing what she can.

But, in one of the most profound ways that we as a church have addressed the protection of our environment, we have for nearly 60 years been engaged in a ministry of rummage. A rather famous ministry as it turns out. When I got this job, a couple of years ago to come and serve as your Associate Pastor for Mission, I called a friend of mine in Austin, Texas to let him know that I had been hired here and he said, "Lake Forest? Isn't that the church with the big rummage sale?" Even in Texas our reputation precedes us.

In addition to the dollars that are raised every year through this ministry, which support so many amazing non-profits and agencies in Lake County and Chicago; and the opportunity for people in need to buy good quality items at a discount, this ministry also saves tens of thousands of pounds, perhaps millions over the years, of items that would have otherwise ended up in landfills. The living room scene I created on our chancel steps this morning is made up of items that will be for sale this year in the rummage sale, a reminder to us of little things we can do to help the environment.

The idea of rummage ministry is not unique to us. For several years, our congregation has supported a ministry in Cairo, Egypt called Hands Across the Nile Development Services, or HANDS. This is a group that began as a Presbyterian non-profit and has expanded to work with a variety of groups throughout Egypt. One of the projects that they run on our behalf is called the Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE). It is a literacy and job training center for women in Cairo, dedicated to preserving the environment while improving the lives of those who live and work amidst the city's waste. In poor areas of Cairo, entire families live in the trash dumps, earning their livelihood by collecting and sorting the city's garbage at their homes. These areas are often called "Garbage Cities". APE offers an opportunity for these girls and women from the families to receive education and training, and to engage in income-generating activities. Perhaps most creatively, in addition to their literacy classes, they've been learning how to use recycled materials from the garbage dumps to create rugs and quilts, cards and stationary, key chains and pot holders. Some of which

we will have for sale in a month when we celebrate some of our global mission partnerships here at the church. These girls who are taught to weave and quilt and recycle are receiving income from the items they generate. Rummage ministry is making a difference both here and around the world.

So, what can we do; in our family and personal lives, as well as in our business lives? I don't have to tell you that there is a laundry list of small things that we can choose to do, some of which are not easy or convenient but all of which can make a difference: carpooling, riding a bike, walking, taking public transport, just using less electricity, less fuel, unplugging appliances that you don't need, changing your light bulbs, using reusable shopping bags...the list goes on and on and on.

In particular this week, I want to encourage you to join us for this ministry of Rummage. Doesn't look very nice outside at the moment, but in a few moments, we are going to gather at noon, after the service and begin to unload these semi-trailers outside that are filled with boxes of clothing and shoes, sporting goods and toys and books, all things that will be sold this next weekend. After the service, although I see a few of you took me up on my word and dressed appropriately for work this morning, for the rest of you, I encourage you to go home, grab an apple, put on your jeans and come back and join us. It will be a long afternoon and many hands make light work. It's an important ministry to prepare this church and all it's facility for an incredible sale on Saturday. Yes, there are some heavy boxes for the stronger backs among us, and there are little bags for those who don't have strong backs as well; there is plenty of work for everyone to do. For anyone who is not working at the sale, we encourage you to come back on Saturday afternoon at 4-o'clock on May 2, after the sale because we have to turn this whole building around in a matter of a few hours and clean up from the rummage sale to prepare for worship next Sunday morning, and again, many hands make light work. We look forward to seeing you again next week.

Put on your jeans, get on your boots because there is much for us to accomplish. As the Psalmist reminds us this morning in Psalm 8, that we heard a few moments ago, God has indeed given us dominion over these things of the earth for we were created but a little lower than the angels. God has put all things under our feet and in our care, yes indeed the sheep, but also the oxen, the beasts of the field the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the earth. These are our responsibility, it is our job as people of faith to care for them, to care for God's creation, that God has indeed, called good.

Amen.