

## “Stewards of the Earth”

Leviticus 25:1-7  
Richard C. Allen  
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I am glad for soil scientists and ecologists; for foresters and conservationists, for agronomists and geologists, for farmers and ranchers and gardeners. All of these people help us understand the nature of the earth, the fragility of the eco-systems, and the relationship of the earth to the inhabitants of the earth. I hold these scientists and practitioners in the highest regard. We need to listen to their wisdom, heed their advice, and honor their experience of the land.

It is also well for us to be in touch with our own spiritual heritage regarding the land and with God’s vision for humankind’s stewardship of the land. Our Scriptures speak boldly and with clarity. Though most of us no longer farm the land, we still have a sacred relationship with the land. Though most of us have moved off the farms and live in town, we still are accountable for our relationship with the land. Though many of us step from a concrete sidewalk to an asphalt driveway to a paved street to a cement parking garage on our way to work and back home again, never actually touching the soil; nevertheless, we have a long-standing covenant with God’s earth.

There are three Biblical texts deserving our attention this morning. The first is Psalm 24.

**‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.’**

The psalmist is speaking here of ultimate ownership. The earth is like a piece of pottery made by a gifted potter.

Though a customer may purchase that fine piece of pottery and place it upon his mantel, the artist never lets go of considering it as her own. Indeed, the one who has bought the pottery still refers to it by its creator's name. In our house, we have a number of paintings and prints by the artist Mark Ahlstrand. When I have a visitor, I like to point to a painting and say, "this is an Ahlstrand," as if it doesn't totally belong to me. Though I paid the asking price and though it hangs on my wall, I know it is not of my making and therefore, in an ultimate sense, it can never be truly mine.

The psalmist says, "**The earth is the Lord's.**" You and I may have a deed to a property; we may have an option to buy; we may have first refusal rights. We may lease or rent. The acreage may have been in our family for seven generations or more. But in the broadest sense, theologically speaking, the earth belongs to its Maker, to its Potter. The earth belongs to God.

I remember preaching on this text one Sunday as a guest preacher in the little, rural town of Potosi, Wisconsin. "**The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.**"

I was afraid I might get some negative feedback from farmers who might dispute who owns the land. After all, they pay a lot of taxes on their land. They put fences around it to protect it. It is watered by their sweat and christened in their blood. I wasn't too sure how hard I should push the Biblical teaching "**The earth is the Lord's.**" But when the service was over, and the congregation greeted me at the door, it was the farmers who really hugged me and thanked me for stating what they had known in their souls since the first time they milked a cow or picked a tomato or dug a hill of potatoes. If there were one thing they all knew well, it was to whom the land belongs.

The second text is that portion of the Creation Story where God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps.”

All of that is one sentence, one complete thought. One must not separate one’s thinking about ‘having dominion,’ from thinking about being created ‘in the image of God.’ They go together hand in hand. One could argue that the destruction of the earth’s resources over the last hundred years is a direct result of separating those two actions of God (creating in the divine image and giving dominion) and treating them as if they had no connection with each other.

To be made in God’s image is to be made like God. We are made for loving! We are made for nurturing. We are made for creating. We are made for caring. This is the very nature of God and we are made in that same image. When God gives us dominion over all that God has created, God assumes we will handle the earth as we have been handled; that is, with love, with nurture, and with the greatest of care. They go together. They’re in the same sentence: created in the image of God, given dominion over the earth.

As a boy, I used to enjoy watching my mother roll out the dough for an apple pie. I can picture her sprinkling flour over the kitchen counter and a little flour on the rolling pin. She would roll it and roll it and then ever so gently she would scoop up that flat, even dough in her hands and lay it into the bottom of the pie pan. Then, she would slice apples and pile them on top of the dough until there was a mountain of apple slices. And she would fuss with them, ordering them just so.

Then, she would repeat that whole process with rolling pin, rolling out more dough, and using the same care as I watched her use to diaper my younger siblings, she would pat the dough with her fingertips and pinch it together all around the perimeter. And if by chance there were still some dough remaining, she would make little cinnamon twists until every ounce of the dough had been cared for. None of it wasted, not one speck.

My mother had dominion over the dough. She was clearly in charge. She was the authority. And she handled that dough as if she were handling manna from heaven, as if the well-being of her family were at stake. That is what God has in mind when God surrenders dominion of the earth to humankind. We are to treat it with gentle hands, as if we were making an apple pie, as if it were manna from heaven, as if our lives depended upon it.

The third text to heed is the passage from Leviticus where we read of a sabbatical for the land. Imagine that! A sabbatical for the land! A sabbatical is a season for renewal, for regeneration. A church grants a sabbatical to a minister to encourage a long and fruitful ministry. A farmer grants a sabbatical to a field to encourage a long and fruitful productivity. A farmer is a good steward of the land when he or she allows for a fallow season, a season of renewal. If the land had a voice, it might be heard to say, “Every six or seven years, give me a rest, a true rest, and I, in return, will feed your children and your grandchildren and your great grandchildren. Take good care of me, and I will take good care of you.”

I have been trying to translate that concept of sabbatical for the land for a congregation that includes precious few farmers. Not many of us spend time contemplating a crop rotation scheme. We are not into leaving fields unplowed or meadows unmown or pastures ungrazed.

Yet, there is something sacred about this sabbatical for the earth, something sacred that calls for full participation. Somehow, the productivity of the earth is at stake, and we are all accountable for providing Sabbath rest for the land.

I don't have a blueprint for this. I do intend to visit the Environmental Fair in the social hall to get a few ideas. I do believe this is something for a church community to kick around, to talk about, to reflect upon. I might just toss out a few outrageous suggestions to get us thinking about a sabbatical for the Earth.

Here's one. How about we agree to carpool to church, not because we have a parking space problem, but because the atmosphere can only absorb a finite amount of exhaust before children start showing the symptoms of asthma. Sounds foolish, I know, but it would be a Sabbath for the air we breathe. It would be a reprieve for the poisoning of the atmosphere, an attempt to provide fresh air for future generations.

One of my most colorful memories from the 1950's is watching Marian Standish walk from her home at 275 Main Street all the way down Still Hill to attend church here on High Street. She had to leave a little earlier than we did in our Ford station wagon, but she made it every Sunday. I figure if Miss Standish could walk that one and one quarter mile, the rest of us can surely carpool. It would require a monumental organizational genius, but it would be in keeping with our spiritual heritage.

Here's another. How about we agree to one seventh of what we currently spend on lawn fertilizers and pesticides and herbicides. One seventh. Instead, we put up with pale green grass and a few dandelions and we let the fertilizer be the late snow fall of April and the morning dew and the loamy black compost from our compost piles.

Sounds foolish, I know, but it would be a sabbatical for the land and also for the creeping crawling creatures that tunnel under the land and enrich the land with their droppings. Neighbors would drive by, see the uneven shades of green, the raised earth where moles have tunneled, and conclude, “Oh, that family must be from South Church! They’re the ones observing a sabbatical to the land. God bless them!”

If you think those two suggestions are foolish and outrageous, if you’ve “been there, done that, and got the tee shirt, you should hear the ones I edited out of this sermon! A sabbatical for the earth! The early Hebrews knew exactly what God meant by that 5000 years ago. What could God mean by that today? It is something to ponder, something to act upon.

I called my son, Tim, who is a forester to ask him if he had any ideas for off-the-farm folk who feel a desire to observe a Sabbath for the land. He said, “Have an Amish Day!” He meant a day without electricity! Coal and oil from deep within the earth are mined to generate electricity for our consumption. A sabbatical for the land would be a day without electrical power. Can you imagine that?

We have a rich spiritual heritage when it comes to our relating to the land. In our tradition, it is God who owns the land. It is our responsibility to nurture the land. It is our charge to grant to the earth a season of Sabbath rest. Whether we wear rubber boots or wingtips, whether we wear cowboy boots or high heels; we are accountable for our relationship with the land. The respected conservationist, Aldo Leopold, got it right, “When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

These reflections upon the sacredness of the earth, I offer to you all in the greatest of hope. Amen.

