

## **HELP WANTED: COMMUNITY GARDNERS**

**First Congregational Church of Norwood, UCC**  
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**Norwood, MA**  
**Text: Gen. 2:4b-17 June 28, 2009**

This morning I'd like to talk to you about the condition of God's creation and about what our faith calls us to do about it. The main threat to God's creation today is global warming. We can call this climate change or we can call it sustainability and these are also good terms, but I'm going to call it global warming because I think that's the term that gets to the heart of the matter in plain English. And that's what I'm going to try to do this morning. Get to the heart of the matter in plain English.

I've chosen for this morning's passage the first part of the story of the Garden of Eden. The part in which God creates man, better interpreted as "human-kind". God creates human-kind, Adam, which is from the Hebrew word "Adamah". Strictly interpreted "Ad amah" meant "arable land. God creates human-kind with the intimate act of breathing the "breath of life" into the land.

Next God plants a garden in Eden. Note that God is the gardener.  
Moving ahead a bit to Gen 2:15:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

We may then summarize the creation story in this way:

God created humanity by breathing life into the land. God then planted a garden and put humanity in the garden to till it and to keep it. So the heart of the matter in plain English is that God is the gardener and God put us here to till and keep the garden, not to use and abuse it.

It has been my pleasure to speak with you this morning. I hope that you will invite me again. (Take a few steps away from lectern as if to leave).

You know, I see I have some more time left. And I'm wondering if some of you are saying to yourselves... "That's not the whole story. What about the creation story in Genesis one that talks about humanity subduing the earth and having dominion over the animals. And what about the rest of the story? With the snake, and Eve, and eating the fruit, and the fig leaves and getting kicked out of the Garden. Well that's true. This part of the Creation story should not be read separately from the story before it, or from the rest of it. Let's try to put things in context.

First consider that the Garden of Eden story is believed to have originated with the “J” or Yahwist tradition and that it predates the narrative in Genesis one. That story is believed to come from the later “P” or Priestly tradition. Yet the authors of Genesis placed the older Garden of Eden story second. They probably did this because Genesis one focuses on the relationship between God and Creation. In that narrative God declares creation to be good before humanity is created. God’s creation is inherently good. The story of the Garden of Eden is mainly concerned with the relationship between humanity and God, and also with the relationship between humanity and creation.

The authors of Genesis wove different narratives together to form a narrative that expressed the theology of ancient Israel. When stories conflict, the scriptural tradition attempts to harmonize them. That is usually done by using later parts of the narrative to interpret or explain the parts that come before. So Genesis one, should be understood and interpreted in light of the Garden narrative in which humanity is created from, and is a part of the earth.

In the United Church of Christ we like to say that “God is still Speaking”. God is still speaking and we are still interpreting the Word we have been given. Professor and UCC biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman proposes an interpretation of the Garden of Eden story that differs from the traditional view that it is about the origin of evil, and the fall.

Here is what Brueggeman has to say. He says that the Old Testament is not interested in abstract questions like how evil came into the world and that it does not assume “a fall”. Genesis is not an answer book about questions of sin, death, evil and fall. Rather it is about God’s call for us to be his creatures, and to live in the world on God’s terms.

The Garden of Eden story is best understood as part of the pre-historical narrative that captures Israel’s theological understanding of the relationship between God and Creation. Brueggeman proposes that the main question presented in the pre-historical narrative is “Will God bring creation to the unity God intends?”<sup>1</sup>

The story of the Garden may be seen as a drama in four scenes. Scene one is the placement of humanity in the garden. Scene two is the formation of a helper. Scene three is the disruption of the garden and scene four: judgment and expulsion.<sup>2</sup> The garden exists for community. The garden is disrupted by human unwillingness to accept that it is creature and not creator. Humanity seeks to have knowledge equal to God. In short it is envious of God. When the community is violated the garden is lost

Viewed this way the story is a story of vocation, permission and prohibition. “The vocation is to care for and tend the garden”<sup>3</sup> The permission is to do pretty much everything necessary in order to fulfill God’s promise of sustenance. The nature of the prohibition is unimportant. It represents God’s authority and expectation for obedience.

The narrative leads us to the realization that striving for autonomous freedom leads to alienation. Human-kind’s preoccupation with being like God-- with autonomous control

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-- leads to preoccupation with self. In the face of such preoccupation, the vocation, "to till and keep the earth" becomes neglected. When God asks man "where were you" he answers. "I heard...you...I was afraid...and I hid" Gen 3:10.

The creation stories of Genesis teach us that God's creation is good in and of itself. The vocation of humankind is to cultivate and care for creation as the context for community. When envy leads humans to seek security by grasping for the autonomous control that only God has, all of creation suffers and humanity becomes alienated from God.

We say that "God is still speaking". What is God saying to us in this time in history? Thomas Aquinas said that revelation comes in two volumes, the Bible and nature. If we asked nature what kind of job humanity is doing tilling and keeping the garden how would nature answer?

Consider the historical lesson told in the wonderful book, The Worst Hard Times, by Timothy Egan. It's the story of the American dustbowl and I recommend it highly. The story told is this. In an effort to finance the construction of a city in Texas, speculators sold farmland to poor people with promises of great profits even though the land was in a part of the country that historically didn't have enough rain to support agriculture. Waves of settlers and immigrants bought the land at a time when rainfalls were higher than typical. They grew wheat and prospered during years when the price of wheat was high on international markets. Then the international markets collapsed causing farmers to grow more and more wheat to sustain themselves. The period of high rainfall ended. The destruction of native grasslands caused by over-cultivation, combined with inadequate rainfall, caused years of erosion that took the form of clouds of black dust that permeated homes and bodies causing terrible loss of lives. Many died and many left the land.

Some stayed however. Eventually agriculture was restored by drilling deeper wells to draw upon the rich source of water in the Ogallala aquifer. Today farming continues. Today 20 times the volume of water is drawn from the Ogallala than the rain restores to it. This is not sustainable agriculture.

When we step back from the day to day demands of life and try to honestly ask what is God saying to us through nature what do we hear, what do we see? We are tilling, but we aren't really keeping God's Creation. We are consuming more fossil fuel than is available, putting more greenhouse gases in the air than the earth can absorb; and if we also look at the present financial situation, we may admit that our collective overconsumption has led us to spend more than we have in a system that has allowed excessive and risky borrowing.

Now these are big issues, and let's admit it, they're kind of scary. When faced with big scary issues, some of us deny the reality we are in. That's the easy, but not the wise path. We may also feel a sense of inadequacy, a feeling that because these problems are so big and we are so small things are hopeless. But we need not despair.

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Today the earth is in crisis, but the winds of change carry hope. Many inspiring developments are occurring that can give us hope. Dennis Union Church of the UCC was named one of the first Energy Star Congregations because of its success in reducing its consumption of electricity. St. James Church in Cambridge lowered its carbon footprint by 50% and saved \$20,000 per year in utility costs with the help of Mass. Interfaith Power and Light.

By asking “What Would Jesus Drive?” our evangelical brothers and sisters have helped us to realize that our transportation choices are ethical decisions. Last fall many UCC and other churches rang their bells 350 times to tell the world that CO2 levels need to be lowered to 350 ppm.

The State of California, has kept its electricity consumption levels flat, despite constantly increasing demand in the United States. On Friday the US House of Representatives passed a landmark cap & trade bill that requires that emissions of greenhouse gases be reduced and that energy efficiency and renewable energy use is increased.

Whenever I speak about political and corporate change, both of which are of critical importance, I am reminded of a story told by a former Boston School Superintendent about the problems with education. A college admissions officer complained to a H.S. principal that the high schools weren't adequately preparing students. The H.S. principal complained that the elementary schools weren't doing a good job. The elementary school teachers complained about the awful problems that they saw in the families. And the mothers said, “He takes after his father's side of the family”. We laugh at this story. But if we are honest we know that the problem begins with us. We need to honestly examine our own lives and ask if our uses of electricity, heat, and air conditioning, or our transportation choices are overburdening God's creation.

The only effective response to global warming is a combination of conservation, efficiency and renewable energy. We need to examine our individual lives but we can't make the changes needed alone. Such change is best accomplished with the support of the community and with faith in God. Many of us recognize the need to act but don't know where to start. Why not start right here? We seek the kingdom of God. Christ taught us that the kingdom is here among us. We are here to care for the garden. This space is part of the garden. Why not start by caring for this sacred space? Is it as energy efficient as it could be? Do you need help making it more energy efficient? If so, let's talk!

The beginning of Genesis reminds us that we are here to work in and care for God's creation in order to sustain the community of life for the future. God's creation is a gift that sustains community. We now understand that animals, plants, the earth, the water and the air are all part of one interdependent web of community.

When faced with a big challenge like global warming, we want to know the answers; we want to know how the story ends. Scripture teaches us that “now we see in a mirror

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dimly” and that only then will we know fully even as we have been fully known. “And now three things abide, faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13). We can meet the challenges ahead, anchored by faith, buoyed by hope and guided by the love of Christ and the faithful here with us today and around the world.

We are here to care for the garden. The garden is here to sustain community. Are we caring for this sacred part of the garden in a way that sustains the larger interdependent web of creation? Will God bring Creation to the unity God intended? To do it God needs community gardeners.

When God asks us, as he asked the first person in the Garden of Eden, “Where were you?” will our answer be, “I heard you...I was afraid...I hid?”

We can't do it alone. But with faith, hope, love and each other, we can. We can do it. We can do it. We can do it. If not us who? If not now, when?

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, INTERPRETATION, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Atlanta: John Knox) 1982, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Id. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Id. 46.