

“THE ENDANGERED IWEEUS”

Integrity of Creation Sunday

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Becky: On this Stewardship of Creation Sunday, Jeff and I come to you as scientists, as Christians, and as fellow members of the web of creation. We want to speak to you this morning about our earth, our faith, and our mission. It all seems a bit daunting, doesn't it? There's so much about our planet that doesn't seem to be going well. We have acid rain, holes in the ozone layer, species on the brink of extinction, polluted water and air—but, perhaps most troubling of all, disagreement and ambivalence about what is to be done next. This may be the worst part of our environmental crisis: the feeling of helplessness that it breeds. We are assaulted every day with stories about the state of our planet. There are stories about the greed of corporations and cultures. There are stories of callousness, of sacrifice, and even of atonement. Jeff and I thought we would tell you a few of our stories. We don't pretend to have any answers, or even to necessarily provide comfort. What we do hope that we can do today is open up a dialogue that each of you can continue to engage in within your family groups, within your neighborhoods, at your places of work, and even here at church.

Jeff: As most of you know, Becky and I were married last September. My life has been filled with heartfelt moments, but our marriage exceeded all others. Being with Becky has shown me many things. I have learned a great deal about the “give and take” in a relationship, and that some words change their meaning. For example, the words “I” and “we.” When Becky says “I'd like to visit with friends this weekend,” it really means “we should visit with friends this weekend.” I would like you to hold that thought for a second: “I” is to “We”. Well, the “I” and “we” has inspired an idea. A fictional animal called the “Iweeus.” The “I” and the “we” become “us,” inseparably joined into something that is tied within a web of interrelationships. The “Iweeus” is actually very common, it's part of our daily life, and we see them when we're at church, when we're shopping, when we're involved in activities like softball or choir-when we seek to find community and interrelationships while recognizing each other within a collective environment. A place of transformation occurs in the space among individuals. In that space we find the elusive “Iweeus.” As you all know, we don't just have relationships with other people. We are in a constant relationship with the Lord through the work of his hands; our responsibility is to recognize it and be aware of that connection every day—our responsibility to tend to the needs of our planet.

Becky: I grew up in a logging town in Southern Oregon. My parents moved there when I was seven. My dad and my granddad both logged in the woods for considerable portions of their careers. Even my half-brother cut down trees for a living; but, unlike my father, he believed the company story that the logging economy had been killed by environmentalists who loved owls more than they loved small communities, more than they loved the people like him who worked in the woods, earned their daily bread with their hands, and prayed devoutly in church every Sunday. I remember the conversations that we had about his love of nature and deep sense of connection with the Earth even as

he rode out every day in the company truck to cut down another forest. The greatest irony for me was his sincerity. He loved the Earth, was a deeply spiritual man and yet could not seem to see the forest for the trees. He could not see how his daily labor was destroying that which he loved so dearly, that which fed him and inspired him and gave him life. He chose to disbelieve his own senses to justify his place in the world.

I can identify with my half-brother's need to feel close to God and Nature and yet live in a way that contributes to the destruction of Creation. In small ways and sometimes in big ones, I find myself making choices that harm the Earth. We live in a consumptive society. It takes a lot of effort to live an environmentally sensitive life, day after day. And there's always this lurking guilt that I could be doing something differently. I could be doing more, or consuming less. Last week a friend of mine confided to me in hushed tones that she had just bought a 4-wheel drive SUV so that she could do her summer field work in Colorado. She was quick to tell me that she was planning on selling the vehicle as soon as she could and get back to using her little Honda Civic. She was excited about this wonderful new vehicle that would help her do her work to protect goshawks; and yet, she was afraid of my reaction to her choice. She was afraid I would condemn her. When I didn't, she told me that many of her friends had given her a hard time for purchasing the vehicle she had. And I wondered how many of them lived in glass houses.

I think that navigating the line between consumption and environmental ethics is a deeply personal one. I just hope that we can all keep in mind something that Jeff was talking about, that we are always in relationship with Creation. And maybe if we pay attention and listen to our conscience and our senses, we may find in this relationship our very selves.

Jeff: A famous biologist by the name of Aldo Leopold once wrote that we scientists, biologists, ecologists, live in "a world of wounds." What he means is that as scientists, we are trained to see things that most people don't see. We see what the doctor sees in a wound or disease and can diagnose when a Band Aid will not be enough to help the body heal. All too frequently we carry with us the idea that nature can be "fixed" by our collective hand and nurtured to health once we have injured it. In some simple cases, our assistance will help nature heal itself. What we seem to lose track of is that we are not healing anything. Rather, we are providing an avenue for healing. We like to think we have control of the world's mechanisms, when we don't. So how do we guide ourselves through these times and take the knowledge that we have to make a healthier world?

Aldo Leopold reminded us that societies have modes of conduct and cooperation, ethics that ensure our mutual cooperation and existence. We have documents that support our ethics-such as the Ten Commandments, and documents that define our conduct like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Leopold stated that these sorts of documents define connections among individuals within a society but that there is a third ethical dimension that needs recognition-one that we had not thought was important to our survival until now: the recognition of an ethic that includes the ecological world. He defined "the Ecological Conscience" by saying that "a thing is right only when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the living community, and the living

community includes the soil, waters, fauna, and flora, and people. A thing is wrong when it tends otherwise.” We have the means to preserve Creation simply by ensuring that all the parts and pieces of our world are intact. It is our responsibility and can be our joy. It is a responsibility we must not trivialize.

Becky: We are now faced with the cumulative effects of decades of misuse. Decades of the same arguments. Decades of the same lack of resolution. I study fish and was amazed recently to discover that some of the first laws on the books in Oregon to protect salmon runs in the Columbia were written in 1929. They were enacted by the Oregon legislature on the advice of the Fish Commission to force the Bureau of Reclamation to screen the irrigation diversions on the Columbia that effectively diverted not just water, but tens of millions of migrating juvenile salmon out of the river and onto farmer’s fields. One biologist in 1917 estimated that with each watering of the fields during the salmon migration season, 4.5 million juvenile fish were diverted onto farmer’s fields in the Yakima Basin alone. The amazing part of this little piece of history is that it’s not history. As late as 1996 only 1,000 of the 55,000 water diversions in Oregon were screened. It seems like an easy fix doesn’t it? Just to screen the diversions? But there’s expense. . . and time. . . and maintenance. . . and that sense that this is someone else’s responsibility, isn’t it?

I struggle with issues like this one. Issues that seem so far beyond what I can possibly influence or manage. I have to come back to the day-to-day ways that I can make a difference in my local environment. I can be careful about the seafood I choose to purchase. I always ask where the fish came from before I order at a restaurant to make sure it’s from a renewable fishery. It’s impossible to keep track of everything, but I figure that if I pay attention a bit and other people pay attention, that we’ll have a better chance to make a difference. I think that’s one of the main reasons I come to church. There’s something transformative about a group of people. We go from being individuals in search of God, of connection, to a group of seekers sharing a very personal journey. There’s strength and inspiration in that.

Jeff: All of these stories are examples of what we think we all agree on. We have a significant and important relationship with God, with creation, and with one another. We have responsibilities to protect, to preserve, and to nurture each of these. We all have something to contribute. It might be as simple as learning to recognize that all these relationships exist for each of us. Then it’s up to us to figure out what we want to do or not do about that. We are not separate from the system in which we live but part of it. We have a responsibility to ourselves and the world around us to acknowledge it and to understand its implications, so that we understand the “US” means us and the components of the natural world. The Bible gives us an indication of the responsibility that we have to maintain and steward Creation. It is our job and our responsibility. What a job. . .