

**“The Great Outdoors”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Clint McCann, Guest Preacher**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**October 26, 2014**

“O, Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is Your name in all the earth”. Such is the eloquent exclamation that opens and closes Psalm 8. You just heard the opening, but it closes Psalm 8 as well, as a kind of wonderful envelope around the whole Psalm. What elicited these wonderful and eloquent and, I hope, familiar words? Apparently it was the Psalmist’s searching gaze through a night sky. As the Psalmist puts it, “when I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established”, notice that the Psalmist had to have been outdoors, and this, in and of itself, may be a clue to a first basic step in appreciating and celebrating God’s good creation. That is to say, get outdoors.

Do you know the current statistic on the average percentage of time that the typical, average North American adult spends indoors? Does anybody know or have you seen this recently? Want to guess? We try to make the Palmer Lectures not just lectures but interactive, and I’m not sure if you are used to sermons being interactive. Does anybody know the statistic? How much time do we adults (we are all more or less adults) spend inside—75%, 80%, 95%? It is higher yet. It is 98% on average that we adults spend inside buildings—houses, office buildings, workplaces, schools and, I hope, church as we are doing this morning, but 98% of our time is spent indoors.

It is hard to appreciate and to celebrate the creation of God if you don’t see it, hear it and feel it, and somehow experience it. Why is so much time spent indoors? I don’t know, but the experts say there are two primary culprits—television (and now maybe games, Internet and all sorts of screens, so T. V. and screens) and secondly is air conditioning. Now, there may be other factors for some of us, as well, but whatever the case may be, I encourage you on biblical grounds to find opportunities to get outdoors—day or night, maybe day and night—as at least a small basic first step in appreciating and celebrating God’s good creation. See for yourself what the Psalmist saw and you, too, may be led to exclaim “O, Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is Your name in all the earth”.

As we said just a moment ago, this is how Psalm 8 begins, and this is how it ends, but in between there is a question and an answer to the question that the Psalmist raises. The Psalmist’s gaze into the heavens, not only put him or her in touch with God’s majesty, but it also raised the question of human identity. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them, but after being struck, it seems, by smallness and seeming insignificance in relation to the vast universe, the Psalmist makes an astounding affirmation of human identity. “Yet you have made them (that is us, human beings) a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands. You have put all things under their feet”—all sheep, oxen, the birds of the air, the fish in the sea and so on. It is the Psalmist’s poetic version that some of you will recognize of Genesis, Chapter 1, where human things are created in the image of God, and, as in Psalm 8, are given dominion. It is a different Hebrew word actually, but it means the same thing. Dominion is a good translation in both cases. It is an amazing affirmation of human identity and human significance, human vocation, but frankly it has proven quite problematic because it has been subject to major misunderstanding throughout the years.

It’s been almost 50 years since Lynn White, Jr. suggested in Science magazine in the 1960s that the emerging ecological crisis was “largely the fault of the Judeo-Christian tradition,

especially texts like Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 and this whole concept of dominion". In other words, Lynn White concluded that we Christians with our Jewish brothers and sisters have forgotten the little lower than God part of Psalm 8, so we have understood dominion as something like license to dominate rather than responsibility to serve. Unfortunately, at least, Lynn White is at least partly correct.

We have been inclined to practice dominion as domination of the earth and of its resources and of the other creatures, but properly understood, dominion is not about domination. Rather, as some of us discussed the other evening, in particular, dominion is about stewardship.

By definition, a steward is someone who ministers and cares for something that belongs to somebody else. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, all that is in it" (says the Psalmist—as Psalm 24 opens). Whatever dominion means, it must begin with the understanding that the earth and all that is in it, all its resources, everything belongs first and foremost to God and not to us. That is the biblical view. While the New Testament does not talk much directly about creation, there is that chapter we heard from Colossians, those few verses from Chapter 1, which affirm that the ultimate human imaging of God on earth is in Jesus Christ who came to reconcile to God's own self all things, the world. All things belong to God and not to us.

From this biblical perspective, the opening and concluding affirmation of Psalm 8 "O Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is Your name in all the earth", amounts to a humble profession of gratitude. Gratitude, of course, as we talked a little bit about earlier in the weekend, is in fairly short supply these days. We North Americans are much more inclined to feel entitled than we are to feel thankful, and humility is pretty rare these days as well, but when it comes to appreciating and celebrating God's good creation, humility and gratitude are of the essence.

In fact, a well known environmentalist and ecological writer, Bill McKibben, says that the most important thing we can do when it comes to celebrating creation and caring for the creation is to foster and practice humility.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, PhD, a botanist of Native American background, commends gratitude as the essential posture for honoring creation. In her book (and by the way, her book and other books are up here on the table if you want to look at them on your way out) entitled "Braiding Sweetgrass", indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and teachings of plants, she has a wonderful essay entitled "Allegiance to Gratitude". She has in mind the "Pledge of Allegiance" to the flag, and her Native American schools, and so on, use the "Pledge of Allegiance" to the flag when they start the school day, but she points out and commends another practice of the Onondaga native nation.

Not only do they say the "Pledge of Allegiance" to the flag, but every morning at school, at a tribal meeting, or whatever kind of meeting, every time the tribe gathers for whatever type of occasion, they also repeat what is called the "Thanksgiving Address". It is a kind of pledge of allegiance to gratitude, and according to the "Thanksgiving Address", the great Creator, Spirit, is thanked for all the gifts of creation, but not only is the Spirit thanked. Thanksgiving is also expressed to all the gifts of creation—the water, the fish and the fruit-bearing plants, and the vegetables that we saw up here as well, the trees, the animals, the birds, the wind, the sun, the moon and the stars. It is a long address by the time it is done. Its very length communicates the message that there is so much to be thankful for. At the end of every section of the "Thanksgiving Address", there is this refrain: "Now our minds are one". I hope you notice that there is a real coherence between the Onondaga nation's "Thanksgiving Address" and those biblical texts that we read from Psalms and Colossians—a remarkable coherence in that: "O Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is Your name and all the earth. The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it", and through Him, through Jesus, God was pleased to reconcile to God's own self

all things. Do you hear the repetition? All...all...all... everything belongs to God. If that is the case (and, biblically speaking, there is no question that is the case), the question that arises for us is “So, what do we do?”

Now, I've talked long enough for the sermon to be over perhaps by now, so I'm not going to go into all that we can do. I'm going to leave that question with you for the most part. What can you do and what can we do together? Now, I do have some quick questions, but I'm not going to elaborate on them so it won't take long. There are actually 15 of them, but this is not a 15-point sermon so don't worry.

There are things like this: As I leave with you the question of what you can do or what we can do together, to be informed would be a good start. Reduce, reuse, recycle—which is partly the title of one of these books, and you have seen that around before. Reduce, reuse, recycle, or we might say, live simply and be content with enough. Turn down your thermostat in winter and up in summer. Go solar, as I know at least one of you has done. Support renewable energy policies in our country and throughout the world. Walk more. Ride your bike more. Drive a more efficient car. Support mass transit and use it if you have an opportunity. Plant a garden, even if the rabbits eat it up. Beyond planting a garden, support community gardening and urban gardening in this area and beyond. Buy local. You don't have to ship things. Support farmers' markets. Subscribe to a CSA (a community supported agricultural organization) and they will bring you the vegetables. You don't even have to work for them although you do have to pay a bit. Use LED light bulbs. Vote for “green” candidates. Join the Sierra Club, Nature Conservancy or the Wildlife Federation. Eat more carefully. Especially, eat less meat which is taxing to the environment to raise, and there are tons and tons more. In fact, one of the little books up here, one of my favorite titles (if you see it and want more) is entitled “How Many Light Bulbs Does It Take to Change a Christian?” It is full of suggestions, but that is enough of that.

I am going to leave the question with you. What do we do? What can you do? Think about it. Pray about it. Talk about it. Wrestle with it. As you do, be thankful, humble and, of course, get yourself outdoors. O, Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is Your name in all the earth”. Thanks be to God. Amen.