

Today is our last sermon in a series called “Songs of Community.” Both words are important. The word *songs*. And the word *community*. Let’s look at each word briefly. Peter Block, in his recent ground breaking book titled *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, says that many, if not most, of our communities are fragmented and at odds within themselves. (1) He assures us that community is essentially about the experience of belonging, of feeling at home with others. Over the last few weeks we’ve looked at several forms of community: the family, the neighborhood and nation, the church, and the global community of nations. Today we’ll be looking at creation as community...a community to which we humans belong.

Not only do we belong to communities, we sing songs in community. In fact, we’re known as “the singing Methodists.” Songs capture the essence of communities. Esteemed Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann has this to say about the importance of songs in an article on the Psalms. (2) He says: “Israel sings, and we never know what holy power is unleashed by such singing. Israel sings, and we never know what human imagination is authorized by such singing... Both the Church and Israel sing! This singing is our vocation, our duty, and our delight. We name the staggering name of Jesus—and the world becomes open again, especially for those on whom it has closed in such deathly ways—the prisoner, the blind, the sojourner, the widow, the orphan. (Through songs) the world is sung open...and even death cannot close the world into injustice again.”

Psalm 148 is a song about creation...all of creation. Creation is a form of community. And Psalm 148 is a song about all of creation singing praise to God the creator. Psalm 148 portrays creation as a special form of community...a choir...a choir whose purpose is to sing praise to God the creator.

If you look carefully, you’ll see that today’s Psalm is structured into two parts. Verses 1-6 focus on praise sung from the “heavens.” Verses 7-14 focus on praise sung from the “earth.” In other words, the choir that is the community of creation is made up of two sections: the heavens and the earth. Psalm 148 is radically inclusive because all of creation is part of the cosmic choir. Indeed, all beings (in heaven and on earth) are invited to praise God, as well as all things, (both animate and inanimate)! And so the angels and God’s host, along with the sun, moon and stars sing praise to God from the heavens above. The earthly choir below includes all rulers, peoples, young men and women, old and young together! It includes both wild and domesticated animals, flying birds and creeping things, fruit trees and wild trees, mountains and hills!

In short, all of creation is a community...a choir, whose purpose is to sing praise to God the creator! All this reminds us of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. And like Genesis 1, the

community of creation culminates in whom? Humanity! (vv. 11-12) We humans are not separate from, but part and parcel of, the community of creation. And this has profound implications for us!

In his commentary on Psalm 148, J. Clinton McCann, Jr. clarifies these implications. (3) He says that “Psalm 148 takes inclusivity to the limit... (And) this inclusive invitation to praise God has profound implications that demonstrate the inseparability of theology and ecology. We human beings are partners in praising God with a multitude of other living beings and inanimate things as well. For this reason, Psalm 148 recalls not only Genesis 1 & 2, but also Genesis 9. In Genesis 9 the covenant after the flood is established not just with Noah and his descendants, but also with ‘every living creature’, indeed, with the ‘earth. This covenant, along with the all-inclusive invitation to praise God in Psalm 148, suggests that the human vocation involves not just stewardship *of* creation, but a partnership *with* creation. Francis of Assisi had it right when, on the basis of Psalm 148, he composed his *Canticle of the Sun*, in which he addresses the sun, wind and fire as brother, and the moon, waters and earth as sister...In short, we human beings are called to exercise our stewardship and care for the earth in the same way that God exercises power: Not as tyrant, not as one who dominates, but as a servant!”

Christian theology, biblical studies and the church in general, were late arrivals to the modern environmental movement...a movement that arose in the 19th century in Europe, and the early 20th century here in the United States. It wasn't until the 1960's and 1970's that the church started getting on board the environmental train as we finally woke up to the fact that we humans were failing to exercise proper stewardship and care for the earth. That we humans were failing to exercise our power in the same manner as God the creator...as servants of creation. In our efforts to dominate creation, we've been destroying it!

As a kid from Akron, Ohio, I remember seeing news reports on TV announcing in horror that the Cuyahoga River was on fire. The pictures proved it! The Cuyahoga River flowed through Akron, the Rubber Capital of the world, on down through Cleveland and on out to Lake Erie. In Akron, the rubber giants—Good Year, Goodrich, Firestone, Seiberling and others dumped their chemical wastes into the Cuyahoga River. A few miles downstream, Cleveland dumped its toxic wastes from steel mills and other manufacturing plants into the river. Why were we surprised to see Fire Departments struggling to put out the fire that raged as the river itself was consumed with flames?

In 1996, Larry Rasmussen, Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary wrote his ground-breaking book, *Earth Community – Earth Ethics*. (4) It provides us with a total approach to issues of social community and ecological concern, synthesizing insights from religion, ethics, and environmental science in a single vision for creating a sustainable earth community. The book is still used in seminary courses on eco-theology and ethics. Well-known educator and avowed Quaker, Parker Palmer, puts it plainly for us in a recent book. (5)

“As I learn more about the seed of true self that was planted when I was born, I also learn more about the ecosystem in which I was planted—the network of communal relations in which I am called to live responsively, accountably, and joyfully with beings of every sort. Only when I know both seed and system, self and community, can I embody the great commandment to love both my neighbor and myself.”

Do you know that we have a Green Team right here at UMCG? They call themselves the Creation Care Team. They started a successful Styrofoam recycling program and have written articles in our monthly *Messenger* with practical ways to be good earth stewards. (See their article in the August *Messenger*.) They have shown some wonderful educational films and documentaries on conservation and environmentalism followed by dialogue. (Val Erikson, Debbie Karr, Carolyn Burnham, Robin and Rolland Lang are some of our eco-theologian/activists.)

So how do we bring this down to earth? How do we more effectively join the earthly choir and the rest of creation in singing praise to God our creator? For one thing, we can take time to educate ourselves! Two very practical books I highly recommend are Rebekah Simon-Peter’s *Green Church: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rejoice!*, and Rebecca Barnes-Davies *50 Ways to Help Save the Earth: How You and Your Church Can Make a Difference*. (6) Rebecca Barnes-Davies book, for example, includes seven chapters with practical, every day things we can do to be better stewards of creation in the areas of energy, food and agriculture, transportation, water, people, other species and the wilderness and land. The chapter on water encourages us to reduce personal consumption of water. I’ve taken their advice in one simple way by getting into the habit of turning off the tap while doing dishes, brushing my teeth, showering and shaving!

Another way we can foster earth care is by being good examples for our children and youth and by explicitly teaching them about earth care. A wonderful example of that was a recent youth mission project in early April when our Youth Director, Denise Clementz, took the Islamic Center of Kane County up on their offer to have our youth group join their youth group in a Saturday beach clean-up involving hundreds of youth from the greater Chicago-land area. Our youth groups spent the day together cleaning up the beach at Montrose Harbor, learned about the importance of caring for our Great Lakes and got to know each other and built a bridge between our two faiths all at the same time!

So, I’d like to invite our Youth Director, Denise Clementz, and one of our youth, Evan Heckman-Trathan, who participated in this inter-faith earth-keeping mission, to come up to the pulpit and share with us about their experience.

(Here are the questions I asked Denise and Evan. If you would like to hear their enlightening answers, please go to the United Methodist Church of Geneva website and listen to the live podcast of this sermon.)

Questions About Lake Michigan Cleanup with the Islamic Center of Kane County

Denise: One of your responsibilities as Director of Youth Ministries at UMCG is to lead our youth in mission service outreach. One of those outreach efforts this past year in early April was a joint mission project with youth and youth group leaders from the Islamic Center of Kane County in St. Charles. What was that all about? Who went from UMCG, where did you go, and what exactly did you do?

Evan: So you're one of our youth who participated in this outreach effort. How did your expectations of what might happen in this beach cleanup match up with what really happened? Were you pleased (or not) and if so why?

Evan: How do you think we are being the church when we engage in this kind of activity? And what was it like to engage in beach cleanup with Muslim youth?

Denise & Evan: Why is it important that we be actively involved in caring for the earth?

Denise & Evan: Do you have any other "take-aways" from this inter-faith mission project that you'd like to share with us?

Thank you! And amen!

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1. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. San Francisco, BK Publishers, 2009, p. xii.
2. Walter Brueggemann, "Psalm 146: Psalm for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost," *No Other Foundation* 8/1 (Summer 1987), p. 29.
3. J. Clinton McCann, Jr. "The Book of Psalms" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, pp. 1270-1273.
4. Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: The Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2000, p. 17.
5. Rebekah Simon-Peter, *Green Church: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rejoice!* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010.
6. Rebecca Barnes-Davies, *50 Ways to help Save the Earth: How You and Your Church Can Make a Difference*. Louisville: Westminster Press, 2009.