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Sermon 19 September 2021 Title: HHH 4 (Stewardship of Our Environment)

Good morning everyone! It's good to be with God's people and in His presence this morning. Thank you for your prayers for us this week as Pastor Steve and I traveled with our District Superintendent, Ruth Turner to Manchester for the Ministry Assessment Center at NTC. A few months ago, we were asked if we'd plan and manage the catering of the three-day event and we accepted the challenge with gusto! We arrived Sunday evening just in time for the grocery delivery and at first, I have to say, I was a little overwhelmed by the amount of food I'd purchased for the three days, HOWEVER when you're planning two full meals and three coffee and tea events a day for 25 to 30 people, it's bound to be a lot of food!

But I have to admit to you this morning – I was a little worried that I'd mis-calculated and I was concerned that there would be a huge amount of food waste and those of you who know us know that reducing food waste has been part of our mission for many years.

And in fact, this time of year always brings to memory one particular program that Pastor Steve and I started many many years ago at Icebox Farm – In the fall, especially around September and into October, in the little town where we lived (and I'm sure, in many small towns in rural parts of the US) churches and schools sell carving pumpkins as fundraisers. Now I'm not talking about a couple of boxes with pumpkins in them like you see at Morrisons – I'm talking about the entire front garden of their property or car park are covered in thousands of pumpkins – all sizes from wee tiny ones to giant ones. So what you do is you go and drink hot chocolate or hot apple cider and you wander through the parade of pumpkins till you find the perfect one or two to take home and carve into a jack-o-lantern for your front porch. This is a great fundraiser but

sometimes, the folks selling the pumpkins purchase too many – in fact, this happens a lot. And on the 1st of November, the day after Halloween, when the fundraiser ends, ALL OF THE PUMPKINS THAT DIDN'T SELL are thrown away - thrown into the landfill. All of them – and depending on how well the fundraiser goes, this can mean 30 pumpkins or several hundred – possibly even more than that.

Now, I love pumpkin pie, pumpkin soup and even roasted pumpkin as a side dish with little marshmallows on top - But do you know who really loves pumpkin? Chickens and pigs and ducks and rabbits. So in 2015, Pastor Steve and I began a simple program with a pretty big impact in our little community. In the days that followed Halloween, when the pumpkin sale was over, we and our volunteers took our trailers and trucks and collected those leftover pumpkins and distributed them to local farmers who then fed them to their livestock - hundreds of incredibly nutrient dense pumpkins that would have been tossed into the landfill to rot. Not only was this a boost of vitamins for the animals but it helped to lower the cost of feed, which helped our farmers out as well.

Needless to say, guarding against food waste is something we have been doing for many years and it's becoming even more important now. It was certainly a joy to cook in the NTC kitchen and everything went beautifully to plan. The food and especially the delicious treats from a couple of our LargsNaz bakers were a success. Food waste was minimal – even non-existent as we were able to fill the freezer of a few resident students there at NTC.

Today is the fourth sermon in our Hospitality, Health and Holiness series. Health has been broken into two sermons because it has two parts in our vision statement. Last week Pastor Steve preached on why good stewardship of ourselves is important – why it's important to be good stewards of ourselves, - physically, mentally and spiritually and today I'll be talking to you about why it's also important to be good stewards of our environment.

Health not only includes taking care of ourselves but it includes promoting good stewardship of our environment - care of the resources we are given. Being mindful and wise and frugal with what we've been entrusted with. But why do we talk about our environment in terms of health? We all have an idea of what a healthy environment is – it's clean air, fertile land, clean water, clean beaches. It's when all of creation works together in harmony. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, that harmony of creation is what we mean when we use the word Shalom, a word that's often translated as "peace" but Shalom doesn't just mean the absence of conflict, it means harmony, wholeness, completeness - everything working together as it should – a healthy environment – not toxic, or barren, an environment that is fertile, a place for life to thrive.

Pastor Steve and I absolutely love living here in Largs. We love the people, the town, the hills and beaches. It's beautiful here. One of the things we love to do is walk along the shore at low tide and search the sand and rocks for bits of seaglass. And as fall is setting in and the days grow shorter, those moments become even more precious. Just recently we enjoyed an abbreviated but still really fun Viking Festival and although I'm happy that we were able to have the event, I have to admit, it's pretty disheartening to see the overwhelming amounts of rubbish left by those who don't live here and don't seem to care about the trash left on our beaches – trash that's washed into the sea, Styrofoam chipper containers and plastic cutlery that will take thousands of years to break down – or may never break down completely – non-trash that folks nonchalantly cast away that in a short time from now will outnumber the fish in the ocean. I know you've seen the photos of seabirds and ocean mammals who have died of starvation because their bellies are full of that same Styrofoam and plastic trash. And I wonder – what does God think of the way we're treating his beautiful world. This world he loves so much.

In preparing for today's sermon, I began by looking at scriptures that described God's love for the environment. And what I found is that God's love for creation is woven

through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In fact, you **could** say that the entire Bible is a story of God's love for his creation.

So let's begin at the beginning... In the book of Genesis, there are two stories of creation. The story was so good that the writers told it twice from two different perspectives. The first is what theologians refer to as the Priestly account – and the Priestly writers see God as, of course, a Priest. So God is described as and has personality traits of a priest. God speaks things into being. Let there be light and let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures. God speaks and creation forms. And it was good.

In Genesis 2, just after verse 4, there is a second account of the creation story. This story is written by Jahwist writers and Jahwist writers describe God with more human traits – so in this second account of the creation story, God gets his hands dirty. Verse 7 that says “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.” “And the lord God planted a garden in Eden and put the man whom he had formed.” And skipping to verse 15 we read, “The lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till and keep it.” The very first job we are given when God creates **humankind** is to take care of God's creation. Adam and Eve were farmers.

Adam and Eve were put in the garden to till and keep it - that word for keep in Hebrew is Shamar – it means to guard, keep watch, preserve, protect, take care. It's the same word that's used in Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:15 when in his vision, Jacob saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth and the angels ascending and descending on it and God stood at the top of the ladder and promised “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go” Shamar. To keep watch, protect, take care. We are God's children – he created us AND this world we live in. We are intimately connected to this creation – to this environment because we are part of it. I love the definition of environment that Lowell Bliss, Director of Eden Vigil shares– he says that our environment is “that which surrounds those we love. That which surrounds the people

Jesus died for.” For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . The word used for World is Cosmos. And that word Cosmos doesn’t just refer to people – it means the

ENTIRE universe. And not in past tense but in PRESENT TENSE Revelation 21:15 tells us in “Look I am making all things new” And what that means is that the entire cosmos is being transformed as part of Gods redemptive history.

As Christians, if we love God, we should love what He loves, am I right? And if we could grasp the magnitude of God’s love for creation, then we would see care for the trees, the soil, the air, the oceans, the birds, mammals and all living things as an expression of worship to our God.

So humankind is in the garden – this perfect world – where they have everything. All of their needs are taken care of and they are caring for creation. Adam and Eve had everything but what did they see? They saw the one thing they couldn’t have. You know the story – the serpent tempts them to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree because they were convinced that what they had wasn’t enough. That even though they lived in a world of abundance they were convinced they lived in a world of scarcity – of lack. These humans only saw what they didn’t have. They wanted more – and so for humankind the world changed. (Pause) Instead of a glorious and perfect creation of our God, the world became a conduit to satisfy our insatiable appetites. From that moment, our relationship with God was broken. The ground became cursed, the tree of Life is out of reach and abundance became scarcity. Work became toil. Fruitfulness became labour. Things that were clean and precious became dirty and cheap.

Consumerism is an enormous contributor to the degradation of our environment. In this mindset, we want more, faster, cheaper and we view all of creation as a commodity to be consumed. So how and where and whether or not we spend our money on things is a factor in how our environment is **kept** - Shamar– taken care of, protected or not protected. Abusing the resources in our environment causes people to become sick and

die. How we use or abuse our resources affects the brothers and sisters that we as Christians have been called to heal, feed and clothe.

Creation care impacts others. In the greatest commandment we are charged with loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. In Health part one, last week, Pastor Steve reminded us that if we don't take care of ourselves, it's almost impossible to fulfill that command. How can we love our neighbor – take care of our neighbor if we don't take care of ourselves? And how can we love our neighbor if we don't take care of the environment our neighbours live in?

For the first time ever, this week, the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church and Anglican Communion have jointly warned of the urgency of environmental sustainability, its impact on poverty, and the importance of global cooperation.

The statement, presented to delegates attending the UN Climate Summit in Glasgow reads: “We call on everyone, whatever their belief or worldview, to endeavour to listen to the cry of the earth and of people who are poor, examining their behaviour and pledging meaningful sacrifices for the sake of the earth which God has given us.” Today, we are paying the price...Tomorrow could be worse,” and the statement concludes that: “This is a critical moment. Our children's future and the future of our common home depend on it.”

Hear me church - When we abuse the resources we are given, we sin against God. Because when we abuse the resources we're given, someone gets hurt. Now, does that mean that when someone sprays herbicides like glyphosate on their lawn to kill the weeds they're committing sin? Not necessarily. But we know that those chemicals contribute to the accelerated rate of species extinction on our planet – and so now instead of seeing 1 or two or at the most 5 species go extinct every year – which is the normal rate of species extinction, we're now seeing that rate accelerated by 1000-10,000 times which means that every hour, one species goes extinct. Every hour one

species, one of God's precious creations disappears forever. It's mind boggling. All creatures have value before God, because God made them and called them good. If we love what God loves, then we must lament biodiversity loss and the extinction of other species—especially when we're the cause.

James 4:17 tell us, "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin." and so what I'm saying is that when we careless and selfishly act without consideration of the detriment of what we might do to others and to our environment – that is sin.

You and I – as bearers of God's image, as followers of Christ, we have the responsibility and privilege of caring for God's creation **and** for those who are surrounded by it. Creation care affects not only the planet but the people who live on it. Caring for the planet is caring for our fellow humans. We tangibly show love for our neighbours when we act in ways that promote their good.

There's a quote in your listening guide that's attributed to John Wesley and it sums it up beautifully:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

And to break it down even further.

Do what's right

Don't do what's wrong

I'd like to tell you a story about a friend of mine named Pam Everett.

This beautiful farmland you see on the video is called Hard Earth Farm in a little town called Modoc in South Carolina. One hundred years ago, this land was a cotton farm that was severely overworked (this is that greed we talked about earlier) - the soil was drained of nitrogen and other vital nutrients and had become hard, dry, barren. In 2007, all of this pasture had been clear cut for timber and the land was a sea of stumps and red clay. Now I don't know if we have anything here in Scotland like the parched red clay found in the south - it's truly clay - like the clay you'd use for bricks. It's good for some things, but certainly not for gardens and healthy pastures. The land was naked and barren, the soil depleted of nutrients - with most of its woodland cleared away for profit. When Pam, her husband Mickey, their son and daughter acquired the 140 acres of land, they set out to heal it - to bring the land back to fertile pasture, and restore a large portion of it back to woodlands. Pam and her family used regenerative agriculture methods like cover cropping and green manure to restore soil health and nourish the microbes living in the soil. They utilised livestock rotation with their adorable goats, llamas, alpacas, horses and cows. They paid attention to the wild things like clover and dandelion growing in the pasture - knowing that certain plants like red clover and the symbiotic bacteria within their root systems actually produce nitrogen for the soil and other organisms living in the soil - red clover and dandelion also help nurture and feed the bees they have cohabitating on their farm. Pam and her family worked and continue to work harmoniously with God's creation to bring back the natural order of the environment and in only 14 years, the land has gone from sick, hard and barren and sterile to lush, healthy and fertile. We are called to be part of God's redemptive relationship with creation. We are called to be in communion with the God who gives himself to the world through the cross. Because just as surely as humans have the ability to create scarcity from abundance, to create deserts from rainforests, we are also (with God's help) just as capable of restoring and transforming the barren places into fertile sanctuaries. Our planet, this incredible, beautiful, amazing creation of our loving God is resilient. Conservation and restorative measures do work. Everything we do to restore it, with God's help, heals the hurt that **humankind** has inflicted.

What is God saying to you this morning? What can you do to better care for your environment and for your neighbor – both near and far? What would happen if we, the church truly caught a vision for creation care? If our attitudes and actions were guided by the greatest commandment? What if we really believed the end of our own story, that Christ is reconciling the entire creation to himself and we have been called to be a part of that? I believe we have and I know that with God's help, we, as the body of Christ, can make dynamic changes – together.