

*Arvada*  
United Methodist Church

September 27, 2009

*The Natural World*

Rev. Rusty Butler

Job 12: 7-10

Well, today we come to the end of the three week sermon series on the United Methodist Social Principles. We did this series because a member of our congregation, Rebekah Fisher who happens to be the Social Concerns chairperson, attended a meeting last spring on the Social Principles. She mentioned this to Valerie and it was scheduled. Do you see the power you all have?

I know that both Valerie and I have been asked, “What exactly do United Methodist’s believe?” Whenever that question comes to me, I kind of laugh and try to think up a short answer but it seems like my answer never comes out quite right. There is just so much difference in our beliefs...not only in this church, but in churches across the country and all over the world. There is just no easy way to answer that question.

I have a feeling that sometimes when that question is asked, the questioner really has one central question in mind, it may be, “What is the position of the church on the subject of homosexuality?”, or it may be, “Is there a confession or a creed that I have to believe?” But, oftentimes what is behind the question is much wider. The person really does want to know if the stances, ideas and issues and agendas that the United Methodist church has (in whatever form) line up with their ideas about life and religion. People want to join an organization that has some connection with what they are interested in or passionate about! That just makes sense.

I think in one way, the Social Principles are an attempt by the church to answer a slightly different question not, “what does the church believe?”, but, “what exactly do United Methodists’ believe to be important in the world and how do we attempt to address those important issues?” That allows for some leeway and certainly some difference as we wrestle with the subjects.

As one person indicated last week during the talk back time after the 9:30 service...why put these positions onto paper in a formalized way if no one needs to confirm or affirm the ideas. Good question. It’s possible that they could be just a big waste of time...but then again, I like the idea of people, smart people, deeply committed to the church kinds of people, wrestling with these questions and issues and trying to find some common ground.

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And in the midst of doing that trying to be gracious to one another. I like that model.

Would you pray with me?

Living, Loving One, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together help carry us a little further down these many roads of faith and adventure.

I'm befuddled. I do not mind telling you that. We got to this third week on the Social Principles and I thought now what am I going to speak about. And someone mentioned why not the Natural World? That is after all the first section of the Social Principles and so I read it and I thought well there's nothing in there to argue about...nothing that should upset anyone. And everyone knows that when you preach a sermon there's got to be some tension in it. You can't just have everyone nodding along.

I didn't know how wrong I was! I went to the Wednesday Bible Study class, we read the text that you heard this morning from Job and another text from Psalm 24...it sounds like this and I thought to myself well, this is going to be a short class.

But surprise, surprise, surprise! Not only did the discussion get heated up, we went over the allotted time. Who knew?

It all started with the first sentence under the Natural world section, which is, "All creation is the Lord's and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. I think some people took exception to the abuse word. Not that we hadn't abused the Natural world, but that was a strong word.

A little later in the first paragraph it says, "Economic, political, social, and technological developments have increased our human numbers, and lengthened and enriched our lives." No doubt they have. I thought that was pretty positive but then it says..."However, these developments have led to regional defoliation, dramatic extinction of species, massive human suffering, overpopulation and misuse and over consumption of natural and nonrenewable resources." Some felt that was too one sided didn't allow enough of the positive parts of the developments to come through.

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Oh it was quite a discussion that day...you should have been there!

Growing up, my father worked for the Department of Natural Resources in South Dakota. I never did quite understand exactly what he did on a day to day basis...probably in the same way my sons don't understand what I do on a day to day basis as a minister. But I caught the idea that the water that he was constantly checking on in the rivers, lakes, ponds, slews, creeks, wells...was vitally important to him and important for the people of South Dakota. He wanted to make sure that people both had enough water and that the water was taken care of. That part I got. And he was part of government...maybe that is one of the reason I have a high regard for people who work in the government...I knew how important those things were for him.

I think one of the larger issues for the group of people who met on Wednesday was the fact that it sounded to some of them that the United Methodist Church was advocating a great deal of governmental influence on the issues, in the social concerns it indicates we are for policies and regulations. I heard it loud and clear that some of the policies and regulations seem to be unnecessary.

That may very well be. I'm sure some of you have had very negative kinds of interactions with various government agencies and people. It seems to me that we are still trying to figure this all out.

I was at Iliff this week. Now Iliff is a very progressive forward looking place. And we had lunch and we ate on plastic plates and used plastic silverware...I thought well that's just strange. Then the other day I was sitting behind a car in traffic, I noticed there were two people in it, and while I was sitting there, out of the window into the middle of the road came a Jack-In the box cardboard french-fry container. Right in the middle of traffic. I don't know about you, but that was the first time I've seen someone just throw something like that out of their car window in years. I drove up beside them and looked, a young man in his early twenties. I gave him a rather quizzical look, like what the?

Now I want to tell you we don't do everything right here...I know that...

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We recycle paper, ink cartridges, computer equipment, aluminum cans, cell phones and chargers. We collect stamps, soup can labels, eye glasses, greeting cards and probably a half dozen other things I don't even know about. We try to be good stewards of the materials that we've been given. In the last few years, we've put in energy efficient boilers, changed out light bulbs to reduce energy, try to make sure we heat or cool the sanctuary and other parts of the building only when we need to. We've got photoelectric cells on some of our lights. Last year, the trustees looked into putting a large block of solar panels on the roof...but the cost was prohibitive.

We've got a way to go, we've got single pane windows all over the church, we still have grass over a large area of the church lawn which we've got to water, we've got cracks in the doors that let hot air out and cool air in, we use Styrofoam cups and plastic forks and spoons. I know we've still got work still to do on becoming a greener church.

In April of next year, we've got an expert coming to speak to us and lead us in how to become a greener church. I look forward to that. What I'm trying to say is we've done some things but there are probably many more that we could do.

I know the same thing happens in your houses. Renew, recycle reuse....we all know that is the way to go, it helps the earth by reducing the amount of waste we create, it helps give people jobs, it seems like a better way to live.

I kept thinking well now this is an easy topic...it is too easy...doesn't everyone want to say to each other we are using the resources we have in a intelligent, forward looking manner. That is our responsibility and commitment to the ones who come after us. But it's not easy. Charlene Hosenfeld is a psychologist who's written a book called ***EcoFaith: Creating and Sustaining Green Congregations***. In her book she talks about motivation. In her book she quotes this passage from a Book called the Voice of the Earth:

“The question of motivation sets the tone and shapes the tactics of every political program. Start from the assumption that people are greedy brutes, and the tone of all you say will be one of contempt. Assume that people are self destructively stupid, and your tactics are apt to become overbearing at best, dictatorial at worst. As for those on the receiving end of the

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assumption, shame has always been among the most unpredictable motivations in politics; it too easily slides into resentment. Call someone's entire way of life into question, and what you are apt to produce is defensive rigidity. It is elementary psychology that those who wish to change the world for the better should not begin by vilifying the public they seek to persuade, or by confronting it with a task that appears impossible."

I don't know how we will get better, I have a feeling that we have just started down the road of this idea of taking better care of the world that we live in and that the generations to come will be even more inspired and more influenced to work on these hard issues.

The evidence is in, the work has just begun, and people of faith like you and me are positioning ourselves to transform our lives in small ways and large ways to be better stewards of God's incredible creation. Amen.