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THE EARTH IS YOUR NEIGHBOR

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Text: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." (John 14:27)

So I was jogging along the street the other day. Actually, not *on* the street. To protect my aging knees, I was running just off the edge of the street on a neighbor's neatly mowed lawn. As I jogged along, I was having fond thoughts about how friendly the people in my neighborhood had been to me. I was remembering how, as I slowly, oh so slowly, jog by, I typically wave at my neighbors and they smilingly wave back – wondering, no doubt, as they contemplate my tortuous gait, whether they're going to have to call 911.

Just as I was savoring that pleasant thought about neighborliness, the front door to the house I was running by opened. A man stepped out and called to me: "would you please *not* run on the grass?!" So much for neighborliness.

Apparently that man behind the voice assumed that he *owned* that grass. The man apparently was unaware of the fact that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."(Psalm 24:1) Nor, apparently, did man want to share any of what he considered *his* turf with anyone else, surely not with some old guy plodding along on worn-out knees.

Be that as it may, the Bible gives us a completely different perspective on such things. As you well know, the Bible very much wants us to be neighborly toward others. That, of course, is the second "great commandment," according to Jesus, neighbor-love. But what you may *not* realize is that according to the Bible that's the way the Lord wants us to be toward *all* creatures -- dogs and cats, whales and bald eagles, fields and mountains -- neighborly. If some stray dog would

have run across that man's lawn, would the man have yelled at the dog, too?

No matter. Let me get to the point on this day, when we celebrate all the blessings of God's good earth: *the earth is your neighbor.* This theme suggests itself to me in conversation with the Gospel reading appointed for this, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, words of Jesus to His disciples, recorded in John, chapter 14, verse 27: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." I want to show you now the relevance of this peace that passes all understanding for *all* our relationships, including grass and flowers, dogs and cats, whales and bald eagles, fields and mountains, and all the rest. (I won't explore here the obviously important relevance of godly neighbor-love for the man who told me to get off his lawn, nor its relevance for me, who at that time felt a little bit miffed by the whole experience!) The God whom we know from the pages of the Bible is the God who calls us to be neighborly to the earth itself. That's the theme I want you to ponder now.

I.

Christians, in this respect, as in many others, have not always practiced what they've preached. Or, in this respect, Christians haven't always even preached what they ought to have preached!

Enter the idea of *dominion.* This is what lots of Sunday School kids used to be taught; and doubtless in some places some still are being taught such things. Yes, the earth is the Lord's, but the Lord gives it to you and to me as our own, so that we can be productive. Right? You can even quote Scripture in favor of this view, and Christians often have. Does not the Lord give Adam and Eve the garden, according to Holy Scripture, and tell them to "till it and keep it"(Gen. 3:15)? And doesn't the Lord say to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue* it; and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28)?

Well, yes – and no. To "till the earth and keep it" – that's simply a *mis*translation. The original

Hebrew is much better translated: to care for the earth and to protect it. The word "keep" here is actually the same Hebrew word we use, in translation, in our benediction every Sunday: "the Lord bless you and *keep* you." Which is to say: *protect* you. So you, earth creature, are placed by God on this beautiful garden planet to care for the earth and to protect it, not to use it and to exploit it, for any self-serving purpose.

Likewise with that other dominion text from Genesis 1 about "subduing." Yes, sometimes, in order to find food and shelter for our families and larger communities and for the poor of the earth, it's necessary to *wrestle* productivity from the earth, to subdue the earth, in that sense. But *how* you do that subduing is another question. In a neighborly fashion? In a friendly way? With a spirit of humble caring? I want to address that question now in terms of the words Jesus speaks to us about peace.

II.

You may have watched the final episode of "Seinfeld." I did, and I found it a remarkable TV show in many ways. Seinfeld has been a great show about *nothing*, from the beginning, as its own cast has said, on more than one occasion. It's been a comedy of trivialities. It hasn't been a show that's been big on caring or commitment, certainly not for the poor, nor for any other creature for that matter.

In the end, strikingly, Jerry and his friends, end up *in jail* -- after all their trivialities had been paraded in front of them. The charge: failure to come to the aid of a neighbor in distress. The four of them just stood by and made fun of a fat guy who was being accosted. Kramer even made a video of it! At the end, the four of them sit there in jail, mouthing still more trivialities to keep them preoccupied -- *appropriately* in jail, some might say.

Now the logic of the Bible is entirely different. It's a logic of a profound neighborliness, of a deep commitment to those in need. The story of the Good Samaritan, for example. In this

parable, Jesus praises the Samaritan, because the Samaritan went out of his way to reach out to a man who had been mugged. In contrast, a priest and a Levite passed by on the other side. They paid no attention to the man in need.

But this is only part of the biblical story. That logic of deep commitment to those in need, according to the Bible, begins with *God* himself. God himself is the one who constantly gives of himself, who constantly comes to the aid of those in need. And the greatest of the gifts God gives us, according to the Bible, is *himself* – in Christ Jesus. God, who is himself a shepherding God, becomes our Good Shepherd, in the person of his only Son.

Now watch this biblical logic of true neighborliness unfold. Saved by Christ, according to Scripture, Christ himself becomes your model and mine for the godly life. So St. Paul writes to the early Christian congregation at Philippi, chapter two, verses 5 through 8: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."

God himself, in Christ, is the Good Neighbor of all good neighbors, the Good Samaritan of all good Samaritans. So, in Christ, you and I are called to go and do likewise, to have the mind which was in Christ Jesus, the mind of true neighborliness, the mind of true friendship.

III.

Here's where the idea of *peace* comes in, according to the Bible. "Peace" for the Bible of course means putting an end to war. But not just the warring between humans that has so darkened our history. Peace for the Bible also means the cessation of what we can insightfully think of as – the rape of nature. A case in point: the war that huge economic interests are

currently waging on native peoples in the Amazon rain forests, by default if not by publicly announced intention, and the concomitant war against those forests themselves. The clear word of the Bible for this kind of situation is this: you shall make war no more.

But the biblical vision of peace doesn't just mean the end of war, however broadly that theme may rightly be understood. The biblical vision of peace discloses not just a world where a sinful humanity doesn't make war anymore. It shows us a world where many communities of people are actively engaged in the struggle for peace. Peace for the Bible means *making peace.* Peace means seeking out the lost and the weak, and caring for them so that they can be restored to the rightful niche where God wants them to be. Peace means many peoples working together to create a world where every creature can flourish in its own way, each to its fullest. This much is conveyed powerfully by the testimony of Genesis 1, where the Creator is depicted as seeing all things *as a harmonious whole*, which is to say, as "very good."(Gen. 1:31) In this sense, for the Bible, the Creator wants his creation, right from the start, to be his – Peaceable Kingdom.

More particularly, for the Bible, Jesus, in whom God so loved the world, blesses us with his peace. Jesus reaches out to us as our Good Shepherd, as the best and truest friend we will ever have, and calls us to go and do likewise: to be peace-makers, to seek to restore the abused, to forgive the fallen, to heal the sick, and -- to care for the earth.

I saw a photo the other day of two women, in parkas, kneeling down on rocky soil, making little indentations with their fingers. They were high above the tree-line in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. They were gently planting tiny shoots of Robbins Cinquefoil, as part of a small but to this point highly successful volunteer project to keep that wildflower from going extinct, in a world where 1 of every 8 plant species is endangered. They were being peace-makers, in the biblical sense of that expression.

Some might choose to make light of the efforts of those women, just the way the Seinfeld cast made light of the fat man who was being accosted. But I daresay that *God* calls everyone,

especially those of us who *know* we've been saved by Christ, to go and do likewise: to get down on our knees and to care for the little ones of this earth. God gives us Christians this holy vocation: to care for the garden planet on which he's placed us, and to protect it, not to exploit it and to do with it what we please.

What about animals? What, in particular, about animals whom we humans typically kill for meat? In twenty-five words or less, this is the Gospel truth: *You have no right to your Big Mac.* God created Adam and Eve to be at peace with the animals, not to kill them, not to eat them. It was only later, by grace alone, that God allowed us humans to eat meat, after the time of Noah. Some scholars have suggested that the historical realities behind the Divine permission to eat meat were times of threatened famine, when eating meat was the only way humans could survive. So God permitted it, for survival's sake. But not because you have any right to eat "your" Big Mac.

Perhaps the most striking biblical role-model in this respect is Noah himself. The whole point of the Noah story is not the divine concession that allows humans to eat meat, should that be necessary. On the contrary, the story far more urgently wants to announce to us God's glorious rainbow covenant of peace with all creatures and to show us Noah's righteous example, how he cared for all the animals and protected them from destruction.

It was no accident, then, that the movement to *protect* animals, rather than to exploit them and kill them without so much as a thought, emerged with great power in Western history among Christians who took the witness of the Bible and the example of Noah, in particular, with utmost seriousness. Consider, for example, the life of St. Francis, who felt called upon to love all the vulnerable creatures of this earth, tiny birds as well as little children, awesome wolves as well as fearful and banished lepers. You may not know it, but it was St. Francis who created the now famous creche scene, with all the animals, at Christmas time. This was his way of announcing the arrival of the Peaceable Kingdom of God in the Christ child. Francis fervently believed that the salvation and love brought into the world by that holy child of God was intended for all God's creatures.