

This is part II of a sermon series on the topic of stewardship, which I know is everyone’s favorite topic. It’s my belief that one of the chief ways we can grow in our love of God and neighbor is to broaden our understanding of stewardship.

Last week, I defined a steward as a person who manages another’s property or financial affairs. I tried to convince you that our time, talents, and treasure belong to God. We just manage those things for the short expanse of our lives.

Today, I want to share some thoughts regarding our stewardship of the natural world. Some would say this is the most pressing issue of our time. Author, Emma Marris, once described the extent to which human beings have had an impact on nature. She described how humans now use half of the world. We cut roads through forests. At beaches around the world, the sand contains tiny plastic particles. We’ve changed the chemistry of the soil with artificial fertilizers. We’ve changed the chemistry of the air. Today, as we breathe, here at First Parish Church, we inhale 42% more carbon dioxide than those who gathered here for worship in 1750.

They say every aspect of nature has been altered by human activity. If we define nature as that which is separate and apart from human influence, that would mean nature is becoming a thing of the past. This argument led environmental writer Bill McKibben to title one of his books: *The End of Nature*.

Recognizing that York’s economic health is very much tied to the beaches and natural environment, hundreds of York residents have been involved in an effort called the “York Climate Action Plan.” They’re looking at what can be done to protect York from the impact of climate change and what steps the community can take to reduce its contribution to it.

So, why are we focusing on the environment this church year? Why would the Stewardship Committee use “Uniting for Creation” as the theme for this year’s stewardship program? It all comes back to the one sentence Polly read for us this morning: “So God took the man, placing him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

You may know there are two creation stories in Genesis. In the first story, God creates the world and everything in it in six days and rests on the seventh. The second of the creation stories begins in chapter 2. In the second story, God made the earth and the heavens in one day.

However, it was incomplete. The text says there was no shrub of the field, no plant of the field had yet sprung up and there was “not a soul to till the soil.”

In the first creation story, God created humankind in the image of God, blessed them, and said to them, “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.” In the first creation story, human beings just appear and the language connotes authority over nature.

The second creation story depicts human beings as part of nature. In the second story, God formed a human using the dust from the soil and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life. Humanity came from the earth like every other living thing. Then, God creates the Garden of Eden. Instead of subduing nature and having dominion over it, God placed the human in the garden to care for it.

I think the charge “to work it and keep it” makes all of us copartners with God in the work of creation. To “keep it” means to look out for it, to maintain it, and to preserve it. Last week, I was on the York River in my kayak, watching a nearby loon. By that I mean a bird, not a York resident. It was such a delight to just sit and watch such a beautiful creature.

Granted, you and I don’t live in the Garden of Eden, but we are nested in an extraordinary environment. Scholars aren’t sure from where the word Eden derives, but in the Hebrew, it refers to luxuriant growth and fertility. One biblical translation uses an Iranian word *paradaeza*, from which we get the word paradise.

I think there are many who think of this region as something of a paradise. I want to suggest, like the first humans in today’s creation story, we view ourselves as copartners with God in the work of creation. And nowhere is that partnership more evident than in a garden.

When we were in the throes of selling pumpkins a few weeks ago, I was there when a class walked up from the Village Elementary School. Chris Briley gathered the kids around and explained how a big pumpkin can grow from just a little seed. I’m a big believer that children need to know from where it is their food comes. An activity like carving a pumpkin can help kids fall in love with nature. They can taste the seeds and get their hands all messy with that slimy stuff inside a pumpkin.

I’m reading this book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer. She is a scientist, a professor, and is a member of the Potawatomi Nation, so she merges scientific method with indigenous wisdom.

She writes, “In a garden, food arises from partnership. If I don’t pick rocks and pull weeds, I’m not fulfilling my end of the bargain. I can do these things with my handy opposable thumb and capacity to use tools, to shovel manure. But I can no more create a tomato or embroider a trellis in beans than I can turn lead into gold. That is the plants’ responsibility and their gift: animating the inanimate...”

Now, I would attribute the growth of plants to God. The Christian witness is that God is the giver of life. God’s ability to animate the inanimate is at the heart of our resurrection faith. But Kimmerer goes on to write: *People often ask me what one thing I would recommend to restore relationship between land and people. My answer is almost always, “Plant a garden.” It’s good for the health of the earth and it’s good for the health of people... Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It’s a place where if you can’t say “I love you” out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate, in beans.*

You and I might frame caring for and keeping creation a bit differently than Robin Wall Kimmerer, but she speaks truth. In order to be copartners with God in the work of creation, we need to feel our connection to it.

Humankind was formed from the dust of the earth. That means we came from dirt. Some of you have heard me say this. If you have a lot of money in the bank, that just means you’re wealthy dirt. If you have a degree on the wall, that just means you’re educated dirt. If you’re famous, that just means you’re popular dirt.

And if you support First Parish Church, you are already engaged in caring for creation. Almost everything we use now is recyclable or compostable. I’ve never served a church that had a compost barrel by the side of the road for the community to utilize. Earlier in the year, we encouraged the proper disposal of textiles with a container out by the road. I fielded a few complaints about that container. It wasn’t pretty, but we raised a lot of awareness about not filling landfills with textiles.

We started a pollinator garden here at the church, which is an interesting thing. The way you start a pollinator garden is by not mowing. An ecologist in Finland did an experiment. He stopped mowing his lawn. After a few years, he had some grad students come and do an examination of his yard. They found 275 plant species including 2 endangered species. Nature found a hospitable environment and took advantage of it. It turns out, there are some simple and easy ways to care for God’s creation.

Another way we care for creation here at the church is by caring for ourselves. Five days a week, church members and folks from the community gather in Fellowship Hall for exercise and yoga. We call it Fit for Life. I think that's important, because caring for creation is not in either/or thing. We have to find ways for human beings and nature to flourish together.

You probably know, Adam and Eve eventually got kicked out of the Garden of Eden. They failed in their task of working and keeping it. But we don't have to fail. In fact, there are some positive signs for hope. Due to ocean acidification, a fifth of the world's coral reefs have died. However, scientists are finding success seeding reefs with coral offspring.

With the effort of conservationists in combination with the Endangered Species Act, numerous plants and animals have been taken off the endangered list in the past few years: the Whooping crane, the Snow Leopard, the Yellowstone grizzly bear, and the Lesser Long-nosed bat.

With the banning of chlorofluorocarbons, there is proof the infamous Ozone hole above Antarctica is in recovery.

God surrounds us with such abundance and beauty.  
Let's not just use it and enjoy it.  
Let's keep it!