

TILL AND KEEP

Psalm 104: 1-7, 24, 35b

[Augsburg College Chapel, 21 October 2015]

Our chapel services last week, organized around the themes of Care for Creation, healing ourselves and the world, and the possibility of Augsburg becoming an urban arboretum (as oxymoronic as that may be, Professor Crockett!) gave me pause to consider one of the most meaningful experiences I've had in my 9 years at Augsburg.

It was back in the fall of 2006 at my first Board of Regents meeting as Augsburg's 10th president. We had invited Professor Mark Tranvik and then Christensen Professor David Tiede to share with Regents some of the ways they engage students around the theological concept of vocation. The specific exercise they chose had the Regents read the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 – perhaps students still do this exercise in Religion 100, I hope so. The Regents then were asked to underline in the text the specific ways in which God was speaking to them (and all of us) and to compare the different “calls” from God in the two creation stories.

I was struck, as never before, by one glaring difference in the two accounts. In Genesis 1, God calls for humans to be created in God's own image and then charges them to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing,” and “to fill the earth and subdue it.” Dominion, subdue – words of power and control.

In Genesis 2, however, God forms humans from the very dust of the earth and likewise creates all living things on the earth, and then charges humans to “till and keep” God's good creation. Till and keep, of dust created – words of care and stewardship.

The theological tensions between these accounts of creation have played themselves out over the millennia. I don't need to rehearse the ways in which dominion and power over creation have too often led to degradation and violence unleashed on God's good creation. And stewardship of the gifts of creation we all enjoy has not been the leading edge of our environmental behavior and policies.

Well, I'll be so bold as to claim that Augsburg intends to be a Genesis 2 sort of community – a till and keep community – a community of stewardship, as we plan for our lives together on this campus and in the neighborhood in the years ahead. We've not always been so. Histories of Augsburg's environmental policies and practices – written by our students in recent years – point to example after example of decisions and behaviors that undermine our callings as stewards of the people and place we call Cedar-Riverside and Augsburg College. From the sorts of materials we use to build buildings, to the waste we produce, to the irresponsible use of fossil fuels in our

facilities and vehicles, to the lack of attention we pay to the implications of our behavior to our neighbors, both human and natural. “Forgive us” must be our lament. And conversion – genuine changes of heart and mind and hands – must be our way forward.

And based on what I see happening on campus in recent years, we are practicing what we preach. The Green by 2019 plan – though still a work in progress – set a framework for our “till and keep” community. Students challenged us to employ alternative sources of energy, like wind and solar. A new solar farm is planned for the roof of the ice rinks. We focused on composting and reducing waste in the cafeteria. We prepare and give away excess food through Campus Kitchen. Nice Ride bikes and Hourcars and light rail lines became more and more primary means of transportation. We committed in our Campus Space and Master Plan to create an urban campus that embraced the oldest city park in Minneapolis and made its presence at the heart of our lives together a pathway to seeing the entire campus as an urban park and arboretum. I could go on and on for these and more initiatives that symbolize our embrace of the call to till and keep God’s good creation, to be stewards of the remarkable gifts we have been given.

“O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you made them all, the earth is full of your creatures.” So writes the Psalmist, who calls us back again and again to witness to gifts of our Creator – gifts not to be subdued and controlled, but tilled and kept. But, as much as we embrace our roles as stewards of creation, the fact is that the world tends to be much more concerned about power and control – and we live in the world. So how shall we remain faithful in our calls as stewards when the temptations and demands of the world steer us toward dominion and entitlement?

A few rules help. First, we must truly treasure the local – the place and people around us. Too often, we are overwhelmed by the claims of our increasingly complex global lives and it is daunting to imagine how we can do anything to make a difference over against big corporations and systems and governments. It is precisely for this reason that we must embrace the difference we can make where we are – in our local place and with our neighbors. Augsburg’s community garden will not feed the entire city, but it will help to feed our neighbors – and others will be inspired to create their own gardens to meet the needs of their neighbors. Augsburg’s Urban Arboretum will not save all the native species, but it will save some and through its educational purposes will teach others how to plant and save trees and other vegetation in their own local places.

I often return to Kentucky farmer and author Wendell Berry’s “17 Rules on Sustainability” as guides to treasuring the local. Among his rules are: (1) Ask of any proposed change or innovation: What will this do to our community? How will this affect our common wealth?; (2) Include local nature – the land, the water, the air, the native creatures – within the membership of the community; (8) Strive to produce as much of your own energy as possible; (11) Invest in the community to maintain its properties, keep it clean (without dirtying some other place), care for its old people, and

teach its children; and (15) Be aware of the economic value of neighborliness – as help, insurance, and so on. The costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighborhood, leaving people to face their calamities alone. Simple rules to help us treasure the local, to till and keep God’s good creation here in this place.

We also must learn to live with patience. Again, easier said than done in a world of faster and faster, instant gratification and one hour Amazon deliveries – even on Sunday! But surely God’s good creation offers us a daily reminder of the horizon of patience, our lack of control over the pace of growing seasons, our need to imagine the future even as we tend to the present. I have long been a student of Frederick Law Olmsted, the great American landscape architect who designed Central Park in New York, the National Mall in D.C. and myriad other remarkable places around the world. Olmsted was once asked how he had the patience to plan a garden or park when he might not see the full execution of the plan in his lifetime. He responded with this inspiring vision of life: “I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future.” Do we have the patience to “consider distant effects” in our lives as stewards of this place and community?

Last spring, I had the privilege to work with 2015 Auggie grad, Emily Knudson (who, by the way, is one of the wilderness guides on this fall’s River Semester). Emily was an environmental studies major and she wanted to do a project for our honors keystone course that both drew upon her major and had an impact on campus. So she worked with our grounds staff to make a plan to replace the giant Spruce tree that used to stand outside this chapel building – a tree that was overgrown and a threat to security – with three apple trees that will grow over the next decades to frame the entry to this building and to produce fruit that can be enjoyed by all of us. You can see the trees as you exit the building – they are tiny and it’s a bit hard to imagine what they will look like in the future, but Emily had the patience and vision to imagine that future and to consider distant effects, surely part of the call for those who would till and keep God’s good creation.

[As an aside, sometime this summer Emily and I both received a text with a picture of the apple tree, onto which someone had photo-bombed a big ripe apple – fruit that will not be produced for years to come – but impatience tempts...]

And finally, as those called to love the local and practice patience, we must believe that what underlies all of our work as stewards is a profound sense of thanksgiving for God’s good creation and continuing presence in our history. We must give thanks constantly – and truly mean it. The Psalmist concludes as he begins: “Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great...Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!”

In response to the many gifts we have been given – gifts of place and community and education and justice and health – we ask how we can be even more generous and

faithful in our callings to till and keep, to be stewards of God's good earth and creation and people. It's a theological claim, to be sure; but even more urgently, it's a practical claim, one that transforms how we live and work and have our being in this place we inhabit with our neighbors all.

Wendell Berry writes rules, and he also writes poems – Sabbath poems like this brief excerpt:

We live by mercy if we live.
To that we have no fit reply
But working well and giving thanks,
Loving God, loving one another,
To keep Creation's neighborhood.
(from "Amish Economy," 1995)

Urban arboretums, healthy and vibrant neighborhoods, food and justice for all, education for service – may God's good and loving presence in our midst strengthen us to treasure the local, practice patience and give thanks always – may we always follow God's call to till and keep all with which we've been entrusted. And God's people join together to say, Amen.