

Caring For Creation
Jeremiah 2:4-13 Luke 14:1-14
September 1, 2019

The distance from the head of the table to the foot was pretty far in Jesus' day. Everyone wanted to sit at the head. They wanted to be seen by other people as important and they figured that if they sat at the head of the table, then everyone else would know just how special they were. Well, not everyone can fit at the head of the table. One, maybe two people can sit there, but most of us have to find a seat along the side somewhere, if we are even lucky enough to have a seat at the table. Sitting at the head of the table is a position of privilege, and unfortunately, way too many of us assume that we should hold a privileged place in society. Even if we don't actually express this attitude in words, we *act* in ways that assert it loud and clear. We assume that we have the right to take what we need, and maybe even a little extra just so we don't run out. Some of us have overflowing closets of clothes and refrigerators that have food that has gone bad because we didn't eat it in time, while many more of us have very little. Some of us have more than we need, and yet we find it difficult to share, difficult to give up anything that we consider to be "ours", even when there are others who don't even have the bare minimum of what it takes to live. We hold onto what we have just in case there comes a time that we might need it, without regard for those who don't have enough to get by.

This attitude is at the root of so many problems we face in the world today. Too many of us want the very best for ourselves, and we don't stop to think about what the cost might be for anyone else. We don't stop to think about who loses when we elbow our way to the best seat in the house.

The vast breadth of environmental problems we are facing in the world today is one of the most glaring examples of how a privileged way of looking at the world can wreak havoc. Throughout much of modern history we have not thought carefully about the affect our actions have on the world around us. We have not considered the true cost of the choices we make when we mine coal by excavating the tops off of mountains or when we build enormous dams that hold water in reserve for far-off cities and use the flow for power. But building a dam floods vast areas of land, often land that people live on, and it blocks salmon from spawning. Scratch the surface of a choice we make and what happens as a result of that is mind-boggling.

Today is the beginning of *The Season of Creation* in the life of the church, a period of time set apart when we attempt to take a deeper look at the ways in which we might be better stewards of the earth. In the midst of recounting God's complaints about the Hebrew people, God through Jeremiah said, "*I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.*" These are strong words, and so often when we read the scripture we often gloss over phrases such as this, attempting to wrestle them into a context that doesn't make us feel too uncomfortable. We want to wiggle our way out of feeling guilty, moving out of the way of God's pointing finger. But I think we have to take responsibility for ourselves. We have to take responsibility for the choices we make and for the ways in which we contribute to the challenges facing the earth and humanity today.

A good friend of mine and I were walking one morning, talking about what we would make for dinner that night. I talked about a recipe I wanted to try, and how I needed to run into the grocery store to pick up a few things for that dish. My friend said that she didn't know yet what she would make because she had to check her garden to see what was ready. It hit me that even the way we think about what we eat can originate from a place of wasteful privilege. I hadn't even thought about what was ripe in the garden, or what was already in my refrigerator, and because of that, food was being wasted. This realization made me start to examine other choices I made in life a little more closely. How many choices did I make in the course of a day that were based more on what I wanted, rather than on what was readily available or in season? How many decisions do any of us make that are based on our own whims and desires rather than on what is best for the earth or for the community itself? Our choices, made from a place of privilege, can cause harm to those who do not have that same privilege, and often we don't even notice. We are not aware, and so we need to *make* ourselves aware. We need to become more conscious of the affects our choices have on others and on the earth itself, because our fate is tied up with the earth and all of her inhabitants. Our fate is tied up with all other people, whether they have the same privilege we do or not.

It has been 56 years since Dr. Martin Luther King gave a speech in which he famously said, "I have a dream..." His speech was given at the culmination of a march on Washington, which drew an estimated 250,000 people from all across the country. Officially, this was called the March for Jobs and Justice, and it expressed the participants' determination to take a stand for the civil rights of black men and women in this nation, but it ended up being so much more than that thanks to the heart-centered way that Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King

spoke. Many things have improved since he gave that speech, but there is still much to be done in the way of winning equality and justice for all people.

The need to work for justice is something that has accompanied the human race for most of its existence. It seems that there is always someone who gets the better end of any deal and someone who gets the worst of it. And human nature being what it is, we tend to push our way to the top whenever we can. No one wants to be left in the dust when it comes to getting their fair share of the pie. No one wants to settle for less when they could have everything they have ever hoped of having. Labor Day is a holiday, a weekend, really, that is built on ensuring that everyone receives appropriate compensation for their work. It is built on honoring those whose work keeps our society moving along smoothly, which, in a just world, is every single person.

When Jesus was invited to dine at the home of the leader of the Pharisees, Luke says that the other guests "were watching him closely," but we also know that Jesus was watching *them* closely as well because he noticed that the guests all vied for the places of honor. Each one wanted to prove his importance and social standing by sitting in the place of honor at the table. But Jesus turned this all around when he started talking to them about humility, about taking the lowest place at the table. *"If you are to be granted a place of honor at the table, why not wait for the host to recognize you and invite you to take that seat? When you do this, you are doubly honored because the host singles you out from among the guests for that place of honor."* Unfortunately, I can hear all too well the workings of the guests' brains as they mingle and move around the room, waiting for the host to honor them and invite them to take the best seat in the house. There are only so many seats of honor. Most of the guests will have to sit at lesser seats at the table and may not even get a seat at all. I like the way we do feasts at church with long tables that have no head or foot. Everyone who sits down at the table is equal to everyone else. Everyone gets enough food. Everyone is welcome.

The march on Washington was an effort to ensure a place at the table for black and brown Americans. Today, many Americans of color are doing okay in terms of holding positions of power and social standing, but there is still a basic inequality in our country that is slanted in favor of white Americans. Racism may not be blatant, but it is still woven into our institutional structures in ways that it takes a practiced eye to see. White people have privileges that are not afforded to our black brothers and sisters, even today, 56 years after the March on Washington for civil rights. Basic among these privileges is the freedom to not even *think* about racism if we choose not to, and yet it is important that we all think about it because it affects us in ways that we barely even notice.

I associate racism with other inappropriately privileged ways of looking at the world and at one's own life. Many people who are concerned about the fate of the earth contend that the earth's health and wellbeing is tied up in the health and wellbeing of every one of her inhabitants. When we take more than we need the earth suffers. Everyone suffers. Martin Luther King famously went off of his written speech when Mahalia Jackson shouted out, "Martin, tell them about the dream!" And Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., spoke from his heart about what he hoped for, for his own children and for all children. In a similar way, I invite each of us to consider what our dream is for our children and for the earth herself. How can you contribute to making that dream a reality? Ask God for guidance, to show you what task is yours to do. Read the paper, watch the evening news, or listen to the radio with the intention of holding in prayer the people and situations spoken about in the newscast. If we really believe in the power of prayer, then we know that this can be an incredible positive force in the world, not only for the people and situations about which we pray, but also for us, as our hearts open up to include people we have never met and places we have never been. Praying for the world in which we live, connects us with each other and with the earth herself in powerful and beautiful ways.

What part of the dream of justice and unity is God is calling you toward? How are you being asked to participate in creating this dream in your own life?

God of compassion, you have created this world in which we live. You created each and every inhabitant, human, animal, plant, and every facet of this world whether earth, water or air. We know that you yearn for justice for all, for peace and unity to prevail. We know that you envision a dream of this earth that is more equal, more just, more kind and compassionate. Help us to take on your dream for us and for our neighbors. Help us to hold one another in prayer, and to care for the stranger and those in prison as friends, as we would care for ourselves. Help us to care more effectively, for the earth herself, for her rivers and seas, her air and land. May your dream of the earth and all of her inhabitants prevail. Amen.