

Falling in Love with the Earth
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Psalm 104:1-13
St. John United Methodist Church
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Perhaps you have seen the TV advertisement for the Planet Earth special on Discovery Channel? The announcer's voice beckons us, "Fall in love with the planet again." As I thought about how to approach this earth stewardship message it occurred to me to ask you, "What is your relationship with the earth?" Are you in love with planet earth? Do you remember your childhood when your mom showed you the wonder of a grasshopper up close? Do you recall that day when your grandfather took you for a walk on a farm and showed you how to catch minnows in a shallow pond? Do you remember a special teacher taking your class to a museum where you touched dinosaur bones?

My little brother has always been afraid of snakes. I was a budding science teacher and he was about 16 when we were hiking in the backwoods of Georgia. I found some baby snakes no more than six inches long and figured that Brian could face his fears with these little snakes. I picked one up and showed it to him. "Look, Brian, it's a baby snake. Do you want to hold it?" He stepped back and said, "NO!" With more encouragement he cautiously moved towards the snake. "You can do it!" He reached out and took the snake by the tail. I patted him on the back and said, "Way to go, Brian! You're doing it! You're actually holding a snake!" A big smile crept on his face. It was a special brother moment...until the little snake opened its mouth. I noticed tiny little fangs and a diamond shaped head. Without thinking or speaking calmly I hollered, "Omgosh! It's a poisonous snake! Drop it! The mother is probably near!" His 16 year old legs were faster than mine as we hightailed it out of the woods. I don't think he ever has touched another snake in 30 years.

Sometimes it's hard to fall in love with a planet that can bite you. People have different feelings about nature. Many see nature as an enemy or at least a hostile place that can hurt you. Others enjoy nature but do not feel comfortable when they venture too far from civilization. There are some who feel just the opposite: that concrete and asphalt is not home for their souls, but rather trees, rivers, and mountains. Souls come alive when they are fishing an Alaskan river for salmon, or hunting sheep in the high country, or photographing bears scratching their backs on a tree.

It is entirely possible to fall in love with this planet and still enjoy the comforts of civilization. You don't have to be an expert outdoorsman in order to deeply appreciate and respect the earth. So I ask you, "What is your relationship with the earth?"

To help you answer this question I want to compare our relationship with the earth with our human relationships. We have not likely given much thought about our relationship with the earth but we clearly have relationships with people. There are four levels of friendship: acquaintances, casual friends, close friends, and intimate friends. We could illustrate this by an inverted triangle. Most people will have more acquaintances than casual friends. We'll have more close friends than intimate friends. This is because as we grow in friendship we go deeper with each new level. We don't

share personal stories about our marriage difficulties with a casual friend but would with an intimate friend.

Let's take a look at these four levels and think about them in terms of our relationship with the earth. Would you say that you are an acquaintance with the planet? Are you in a casual or close friendship? Or is your relationship at the intimate level?

When it comes to human relationships the first level of friendship is characterized by occasional contacts. As you go through the routine of your life how often do you think about your natural environment? When you notice a migratory bird do you ever think about the long journey it made to rest and nest in Alaska? Or is it just another bird?

I suggest that one criteria for being an acquaintance with the earth is seeing a bit of trash as you walk but intentionally not picking it up. If your contact with the earth is occasional then you won't feel the responsibility to do something even as little as picking up a piece of paper.

Perhaps this is one reason why more people do not care more for the earth. The more I bond with the earth the more responsibility and work I will have to do. So a certain amount of laziness can affect our friendship level with the planet, just as it affects our relationships with people.

The second level is casual friendship. In our people relationships we move to this level when we discover common interests and activities. If we have a casual friendship with mother earth then we realize from time to time that we do care, that our lives are linked with the earth, and that we do need to take care of it. But our earth-care actions such as recycling, picking up trash, turning out lights come in spurts. Something happens to give us energy and passion but it fizzles out.

A good example happened years ago when our family would go camping and hiking with another family. We noticed that every time we hiked they would bring a trash bag along to pick up trash. What a great idea! When our family would be out in the wilderness I would remember once in awhile to bring a trash bag. But most of the time I forgot. There was an initial burst of energy and will to make a difference but it fizzled out.

The third level is close friendship. In our human relationships a casual friendship involves oneness of the soul (the mind, will, and emotions), but a close friendship reflects oneness of spirit. In terms of our relationship with the earth this means that we come to see the earth more than the third rock from the sun, but as a living entity with its own spirit. Being in nature or watching a TV earth special invokes emotions that can only be described with words such as awe, wonder, and beauty. When we become one with the earth we take time to ponder the earth's health or lack thereof. We listen deeply to the science of global warming and how it is affecting animals like the polar bear. Because we feel a oneness in spirit with the earth we feel its pain as carbon based pollutants fill the air with poison. As this level of friendship suggests we feel close to the earth. We think about it. We talk about it. We are willing to do something about it.

Intimacy is the fourth and deepest level of friendship which is marked by a commitment to generously invest in one another's lives with the goal of helping each other grow. Intimate human friendships have qualities of honesty and humility.

How does this relate to our relationship with the earth? In a spiritual sense one could say that the earth is generous in providing for, not just our survival, but our growth. There is a humility that comes with this level of relationship that recognizes our place in the larger circle of life. That place is a small but important one. It is not about humankind dominating nature, but more about humans understanding our interdependence with the earth.

It is clear that many Biblical people experienced the intimate friendship with the earth. This is because they could not look at anything in their world and not see God. Listen again to Psalms 104. *You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.*

I've been thinking about water lately. We take it for granted as we spend much too long in hot showers. We think it comes, not from the earth, but from a faucet. And yet only half of the people in the world can turn on a tap to get water. Thirteen percent or 887,000,000 people do not have access to safe drinking water.¹

Noted preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells this story. Several years ago, I spent a week working on a Navajo reservation in Arizona with a youth group from Atlanta. We were assigned to a family who lived way out in the middle of nowhere, who hauled their water from town in 30-gallon containers. During my first day on the job, the mother of the family washed the lunch dishes in a big plastic tub while I rinsed and dried in another. I will never forget the look on her face when I flung the used rinse water into the yard. She was too polite to say anything, but her face said it all. I could have given that water to the chickens. I could have poured that water on the tomato plants. She knew where water came from, and at what price. I still thought it came cheap from sinks.²

From the earliest writers of scripture the earth is viewed as God's home and our physical and spiritual home. We experience God as Creator and are told that all creation is good. Water is one of our most precious gifts. You and I are called by God to become intimate friends with this home planet. It's okay if we're not there yet. We may be at the casual friendship stage but it's important that we're moving deeper, to a deeper level of caring, a deeper level of action. Because the goal is, and God's desire is, that you and I, that every human being on this planet would fall deeply in love with our home, the earth!

¹ http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_people_in_the_world_do_not_have_safe_drinking_water

² <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2000/10/The-Sacred-Well.aspx>