

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, September 24, 2023
10am

Texts: Genesis 2:4-17 & 1 Peter 1:1-2

Theme: Love Where You Live: Work and Keep the Land

[prayer]

When I was ten years old, my family moved from a suburban neighborhood – much like the kind that surrounds our church – to ten acres in north Spokane County. My dad grew up on acreage with a creek and a barn and a big garden, and it was always his dream to raise his family in the same kind of environment. So, when some farmland west of Green Bluff was parceled off, my parents bought a corner lot with a view of Mount Spokane and built their dream home. The barn is still on the list, but we've got that creek and a big garden. It has been our family's home for twenty-three years now.

A dear friend who grew up in a historic, tight-knit neighborhood in Spokane always scoffed when I talked about my neighbors. "What neighbors?" she'd say. For her, neighbors are people who live a stone's throw away, people who you wave to from your front porch and talk to across a picket fence.

It's true that the neighbors in our rural valley are spread a little further apart. But we still manage to cultivate a sense of neighborliness. The kids on our road congregated at the same spot for school bus pick-up and walked home together in the afternoons. We played at each other's houses and jumped on each other's trampolines. We knew the names of who lived in which house and kept a list of phone numbers on our refrigerator. Even twenty-three years later, after some of the founding families have moved away and new families have moved in, my siblings and I still refer to certain houses by their original inhabitants: "The Johnsons," "The Cordiers," "The Zerbsts."

A big part of our neighborhood is taking care of the land our homes stand on – 150 acres in total. There is grass to cut and weeds to pull and snow to plow. The road periodically needs grating and new gravel – an expense the neighbors share

equally. One neighbor farms several of our fields, planting alfalfa and baling hay that he then sells to neighbors with livestock. Speaking of livestock – the animals are our neighbors, too. We know each other’s dogs and who to call when a horse or cow gets out, and we always laugh at that one rooster that crows at sunset instead of sunrise.

We all live somewhere. We all have neighbors and a neighborhood—whether we live in a rural area, a housing development, an apartment complex, or assisted living. For the next four weeks we will be focusing on what it means to be the church in our neighborhood(s) - the neighborhood where our church building is located, and the neighborhoods where each of us reside.

Today we start with the idea of place and the land on which we live. From the first chapters of Genesis, we are called to care for the people and place right around us. In the creation story, God creates human beings not out of nothing, but out of dirt – *humus*, which is the organic component of soil, rich in nutrients. Notice that *humus* and *human* share the same Latin root. These two words are connected in the Hebrew, too: The word for soil is *‘adamah* and the word for human is *‘adam*.

From the very beginning, God intended for us to have a mutual relationship with the land. In Genesis 2, God gives human beings what is called the ‘creation mandate.’ “The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it” (Gen 2:16 CEB). Other English translations say “to work,” “to till,” and “to keep” the land. The Hebrew has an even richer meaning; it says God placed us in the land “to serve” (*abad*) it. We serve the land by taking care of it, and in turn it gives us sustenance, the food we need to survive. In fact, in Genesis 2 (distinguished from Genesis 1), God creates human beings *before* God creates plants and edible crops, because our labor is integral to producing food out of the land.

After the Fall, when humanity was expelled from the Garden, we retained this creation mandate. All of Israel’s history centers around the land that God promised to her ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the same land that God led the people into after they were freed from slavery in Egypt – and again, the same land that Jesus trod during his earthly ministry. The land is a major character in the Bible. Even when we speak of the end of time, we speak of God’s promise

of a “new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). We will not spend eternity in a disembodied state, but in resurrected bodies on a redeemed and recreated earth.

So, place matters very much to God. In Genesis 2 we are given the names of rivers and countries, some known to us and others lost to history. Likewise, in the Apostle Peter’s letter, he addresses real people in real places. Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia are all regions in Asia Minor/Anatolia, which is now the country of Turkey.

We are going to read sections of Peter’s letter throughout this series. Peter was writing to Christians who were exiles in the land. The NRSVUE translation calls these Christians “exiles of the dispersion.” This phrase may be a historical reference to the Jewish diaspora – Jews who were dispersed beyond the borders of the Promised Land during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. It could also be that Peter was specifically addressing Christians who had left their homelands and settled in Asia Minor. Additionally, there was an element of cultural exile for Peter’s readers. These early Christians were practicing the Way of Jesus in a thoroughly pagan context, which is different from our context here in North Idaho, where Christianity is still very much a cultural force in our society. These early Christians were surrounded and outnumbered, even persecuted, by people who did not understand their beliefs. Their faith was constantly being tested and so Peter wrote them to encourage them to remain steadfast in their obedience to the Way of Jesus.

Some years ago, Stanley Hauerwas, one of our most influential living theologians, wrote a book with Bishop Will Willimon, a United Methodist bishop. The book is called *Resident Aliens*. A resident alien is a legal term in the U.S. tax code for non-U.S. citizens who are legal residents in our country, whether by a green card or some other residency program. In their book, Hauerwas and Willimon argued that as Christians we should think of ourselves as a kind of resident alien – citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven through our baptism but residing by the call and election of God in our present time and place. We are here because we have been ‘elected’ or chosen by God for a special purpose. We are “chosen strangers” (1 Peter 1:1 CEB) – made holy and set apart *from* the world to accomplish God’s purposes *in* the world. That purpose is to transform the world through our obedient witness to the Way of Jesus Christ.

The Way of Jesus is so different from the way of the world, so radical, that it feels utterly foreign to those who do not know our Savior. Remember what the evangelist said of Jesus in John's prologue:

“10 The light was in the world,
and the world came into being through the light,
but the world didn't recognize the light.
11 The light came to his own people,
and his own people didn't welcome him” (John 1:10-11 CEB).

Jesus was rejected because the faith he preached – a faith of humble servant love, mercy for sinners, justice for the poor and oppressed, and grace for all – this faith was radically opposed to the dominant worldviews of his time. And today this faith still stands in radical opposition to the value systems of our world! If the Way of Jesus does not feel radical, it is because we've tamed it and turned it into something Jesus never intended. If we are truly following the Way of Jesus, then the world will also receive us like strangers – strange because we are living lives marked by radical hospitality, compassion, grace, and justice.

God has not called us to live holy lives that condemn the world, but instead to share the radical love of Jesus with our neighbors. We are called to follow Jesus right where we live in our neighborhoods. One of the ways we can do this is by caring for the land on which we reside. Even as our world grapples with an escalating climate crisis, our economic system continues to treat the land as an inexhaustible resource that exists solely for our consumption. If this is our attitude toward the land, then we are disobeying the creation mandate that God has given us. As followers of Jesus, we declare that God so loved the *world* that He gave His only Son (John 3:16). The Greek word for world is *kosmos* and it refers to all of creation, not just human beings. Jesus's death and resurrection rescues and redeems the whole of God's beloved creation.

What then does it look like to demonstrate this saving message for creation in our neighborhoods? How are you being a servant of the land in the place that you live? Some of you may have yards and gardens; perhaps you keep these spaces for your pleasure. But in the diligent working and keeping of your little piece of creation, you are being obedient to the creation mandate. You are also cultivating a foretaste of the new creation and crafting something beautiful for your

neighbors to enjoy, too. Perhaps your garden yields food that you share with your neighbors (thank you to whoever left some zucchini here at the church last week!) or you donate that food to a food bank. I know one beloved church member who feeds the birds in his yard every morning. This simple and gentle act is a humble witness to the creation mandate, and I know this member takes deep satisfaction in partnering with God to care for God's creation.

If you are like me and you do not have a yard, there are still ways you can help fulfill the creation mandate. When I notice trash on the walking trails around my apartment complex, I pick it up and throw it away. I do this out of respect for the land and to bless my neighbors. I also do my best to recycle, and I am working on eliminating single-use plastics from my home. I strive to conserve water and electricity. I group errands together and limit driving to reduce my carbon footprint. All of these are examples of ways I obey the creation mandate by trying to live more lightly on the land God has placed me.

Here at the church our Property Team has had conversations about ways we might landscape our church property so it will need less water, use more native plants, and be more drought resistant. We've added an energy audit and exploring solar panels to our draft ten-year property plan. And we continue to have serious conversations with community partners about ways to steward and develop the extra land our church owns to bless vulnerable neighbors. In the meantime, we are thankful for the church members who faithfully mow the grass and trim the weeds and keep our sprinkler system working. Our Garden Team also re-formed this summer and began making plans for improvements to our Community Garden and dreaming about ways we can use it for mission and outreach in our neighborhood.

These are all examples of ways that we can work and keep the land as individuals and as a church. But loving the places where we live means loving the land *and* its people. It can be tempting to 'live above place' without any meaningful interaction with the people and place where we live. We live in an over-committed and overwhelmed society, and many of us lack sufficient margin in our lives to make those meaningful connections – I know I certainly do. But just like working and keeping the land, meaningful relationships take time and attention. There is also a real trust deficit in our community. I have heard from several of you who have lived in North Idaho for many years how much this community has

changed over the years and how you grieve the divisions we currently face and the hate and bigotry we are encountering. The only way we can fill in that trust deficit is by reengaging with our neighbors.

This Thursday, September 28, is National Good Neighbor Day. Did you know this day even existed? Me neither! Here's a short video that explains the purpose of this holiday: [show video]

The Good Neighbor Pledge referenced in the video reads:

I pledge to be the “good neighbor.” With the goal of becoming a more connected and caring community, I will be a person who lives with kindness and concern for my neighbors. I’ll take the first step by connecting with neighbors and introduce myself. I will practice the “good neighbor mindset” to make connections, invitations, stay aware, and be available to my neighbors. Good neighbors make great neighborhoods.¹

I signed the pledge, and so did our church! I hope you will consider signing, too. You also received a flier with examples of simple things you can do this week to engage with your neighbors and neighborhood. My favorites are meeting a neighbor for coffee, hanging out in a local park, and writing a thank you note to a community leader. I encourage you to choose one thing off this list to do this week, or come up with your own idea. These ideas are more than just fun ways to engage our neighbors; they can also be spiritual disciplines that draw us closer to God through everyday people and places.

What would it look like if every Christian took just five minutes each day to care for their neighbors and neighborhoods? I think the world would begin to look a little more like the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

¹ <https://nationalgoodneighborday.com/>