

The Last of the Least of These
Romans 8:18-27 and Matthew 25:31-40
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The other evening, I was sitting in my living room reading a book called, “The Meaning of Prayer,” by the great 20th century preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick begins his book by claiming, probably correctly, that prayer is, and I quote, “a natural function of human life.” The inclination to pray, regardless of the quality of the prayer, or the direction of it, is hard-wired, according to Fosdick. It is the Christian’s task, he claims, to cultivate that inclination, so as not to squander the opportunity presented by the possibility of communicating directly with God. I shall return to the significance of Fosdick’s observation, but for the moment, I want to tell you what happened to me next. After reading a particularly provocative part of the chapter, I paused to reflect on it when my eye happened on the lamp next to me which I noticed for the first time was painted with flowers, flowers which exactly resembled the flowers in the curtains on the window next to it, a happy convergence of design elements even if they were not chosen to match one another. And with that observation, I realized just how pervasive is the human tendency to bring nature indoors, even as we build walls to keep it out. We keep our little houseplants and family pets, we hang watercolors of landscapes, we put flowers on the table, and we listen to hummingbird-shaped wind chimes. All but the plants and pets are artificial, but no matter, for all the rest reminds us of things

growing, beautiful, and alive, even if they are placed just so, that may have control over them, instead of them over us, as takes place outside our windows. If prayer is a natural function of human life, so too, I believe, is the desire to have nature in our midst. Following Fosdick then, it is the Christian's task to cultivate that instinct, so as not to squander the opportunity presented by the possibility of recognizing God not only in the things we can make and control, but also in those we cannot. There may be a human habitation somewhere that has no inkling of nature artificially placed within it, but you'll have to look mighty far to find it.

And yet, even with so much native desire, we are conflicted about the very nature we crave. At this very moment, there is a trap set in my house to catch a mouse who ought not be where I don't want him to be. He is messing with my arrangement of how I want my nature to be. And so, whether through cultural conditioning, corporate greed, or just a desire for comfort, we have arrived at a time and place where the very thing we crave is as close to being extinct as it has ever been. The planet's peril, in soil, air, water, and wildlife has been exhaustively well-documented, and despite the skeptics who argue that remnants of the ice ages prove that climate change is purely cyclical, they are but a shrinking minority who believe this is unprecedented change has not come primarily from the hearts and hands of human beings. The desire for nature, like prayer, may be natural, but unlike prayer, nature is not without limits. Prayer comes from the heart, mind, and lips, but nature lives where there is still exposed soil into which roots may sink,

clean air for animal lungs to breathe and running water in which salmon may spawn. It takes but a unexpected crisis or the coming of the hour of the believer's schedule practice to produce a prayer, but it takes decades to grow a tree that can be cut down in just a few minutes. In fifty years, will the nature we can reproduce, in silk or art or video, be enough to satisfy our need to connect with God through our Lord's wonderful creation?

It will not surprise you to learn that I think the answer to that rhetorical question is a clear no. Not even taking into account the consequences on actual human beings that could be offering glorious prayers to God, the condition of nature is inextricably linked to the very prayer that Fosdick calls natural, and which leads us into the shalom God has in mind for us. There will come a time when human impact on the environment will begin to claim enough human lives that we will officially and politically call it a crisis, not unlike in the various natural disaster doomsday movies that appear from time to time. But the time is already here when our prayers are both the poorer and the more necessary for the damage we have done, and it is already safe to say we are in a theological crisis that cannot wait to be addressed. It is here that I would like to turn to our passages from Romans and Matthew tonight to explore this crisis and this opportunity.

All Christian thinking about the environment must ultimately be traced back to the book of Genesis in which we learn of the human responsibility for God's creation, a responsibility often practiced as abuse, and not the stewardship and

caretaking God intended. The Apostle Paul was not uninformed about this very specific arrangement between human and planet, and understood very well the role redemption played in the totality of the cosmos, and not just among human beings. Hence, we have the beautiful statements we just heard, that “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God,” and “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Even in the midst of his passion for God’s redemption of the very human Gentiles whom Christ has invited into relationship, Paul does not forget all of God’s creation. Indeed, it is part of his argument for the inclusion of the Gentiles, that God did not only create the Jews, but all the world too, those living outside the promised land as well as those within. What Paul brings to light here as he waxes poetic about creation is this: that creation’s redemption is linked with our own; that the end of creation’s suffering begins with the end of our own. Here is how it works.

Paul reminds us of the subjection of creation, nature, to futility, a futility brought about by the unfortunate act of Adam and Eve. This futility, this suffering, persists as long as human beings, in the course of their sin, do not take seriously the responsibility of stewardship and caretaking originally given to them. And it is a futility destined to last until the end of time, for in our sin, we human beings will not be able to rejoice fully with God until God’s glory is revealed to us in the second coming of Christ. And neither will creation, since the end of creation’s

suffering comes when we are truly glorified. When our glory truly comes, we will then be fully able to assume to responsibility that is ours, and allow all of God's creation to rejoice with us in God's presence. This is why Paul says that creation *eagerly* awaits "the revealing of the children of God," or as other translations put it, "for God to show who his children are." It is our redemption that brings creation's redemption, our freedom which brings creation's freedom. If I were creation, I'd be eager for that too!

Now, one way of reading this passage is to do with all of creation what we have often done with the bodily needs of suffering people, to remind them that their glory awaits them in heaven, and the body is but a temporary container for their invaluable soul, and to make sure that their soul is right with God above all else, as if someone's soul could actually do that meaningfully in a tortured or starving body. And since there were always still many souls to save, the church could not spend too much time on non-soul work. Similarly then, since God will redeem creation at the end of time, there is really no need to get too worked up about our treatment of it. This was the strategy of a large portion of the Christian church for a long time, as it lived out its reluctance to get its hands dirty in issues of social justice or charity work or care of the earth. It is also a strategy that has largely been shown to be a discredited shadow of the Gospel Jesus preached, and thanks be to God we have come to better understand a more holistic approach to sharing the Good News Jesus shared with us.

And how did we arrive at such a conclusion, such a change in approach? Well, although we can't say it wasn't there all along, we found that answer in the Bible, in passages like Matthew 25, wherein we rediscovered the divine link between mind, body, and spirit, and realized we had a responsibility to care for people in this life, as well as prepare them for the next. "Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you food, thirsty and gave you something to drink, a stranger and welcomed you, naked and clothed you, in prison and visited you?" "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." We found it in the wise words of the book of James: "If a brother or a sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Most, maybe all, of us have been well schooled in this understanding of the Gospel, and we, and our denominations, have responded generously to photos of emaciated children in famine-stricken areas, and survivors of hurricanes and tornados, the homeless sleeping under bridges and children panhandling at the streetcorner, and may God bless us always with more of that gift of generosity which helps us become more human in Christ's image, and closer to God. Let us be counted as sheep, not goats.

Now, I may not be telling you anything you don't already know or do, but perhaps I can plant this one, small seed within you: that even though it is not listed as one of the measures by which we will be judged, God creation, and especially

God's wilderness, is every bit as much one of the "least of these" as the hungry, thirsty, alien, naked, sick, or prisoner. You see, when we look at what all these groups have in common, we see that their common condition is one of suffering, one which runs contrary to God's intention for the world, a common condition for which there is a remedy, for which there is a solution, if only God's people would put their hearts, hands, and voices to work on it. There is no consideration here of the reasons by which each came to be in the condition of needing love and care, only that they do need it. There is no caveat that the poor will always be with us, and so to concentrate on matters more spiritual. There is not even an acknowledgement of the enormity of the task, and it is big. There is only the reminder of the need, and the commonality we share, the commonality Christ shared with us, as human being, and as creation. And so, even though Christ's list in Matthew is not meant to be exhaustive of the ways in which we are called to be good stewards of creation, human beings included, we are still able to see that creation suffers, that we can do something about it, that even though creation will not stop groaning until God's glory is revealed in us, that is not an excuse not to tend to it now, as we tend to the other more immediate needs that confront us in the faces of human beings. "When did we see your wilderness facing destruction, and turn off our chainsaws?" Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." Herein lies both our theological crisis and our opportunity.

In this morning's New York Times is an essay by Verlyn Klinkenborg about his recent trip to the very north of Finland, just below the Arctic circle. On his first night there, he observed a strange phenomenon: there was nothing to hear, no cars, no birds, not even the rushing river he could see with his own eyes. The landscape swallowed up every sound. He put it this way: "The silence felt more like an unnatural muffling of my senses than the porous stillness of the natural world, of which I was a part." But on his last night in Finland, at the same spot as a week before, this is what he observed: "As I stood there, I heard the faint, but quite audible roar of the rapids a half-mile downstream and around a great bend. Why had I not heard it that first night? The answer, I suppose, is that I was too busy not hearing the things I'm used to hearing, including the great roar that underlies the city's quietest moments. It had taken a week to empty my ears, to expect to hear nothing and to find in that nothing something to hear after all." Most of us come to terms with our humanity, or our knowledge of the grace of God through the gift of other humans who show us what life is all about. Sometimes those human beings are those we know and love, and sometimes they are the nameless and faceless people Christ called us to serve. Imagine the loss in your own life that would result from the lack of even one of those gifts of God's grace in your life. And then place yourself in Klinkenborg's north Finland wilderness and imagine what you would never hear if that wilderness weren't there to help you hear it. Maybe you'd miss the very voice of God, for the constant ringing in your ears of "the great roar which

underlies the city's quietest moments." Remember that it was a moment of utter silence on a mountaintop which captured the Old Testament prophet Elijah's attention long enough, even in the midst of his despair, so that he might hear the word of hope God was speaking to him. May we preserve God's wilderness not only for its own sake, reason enough, but also so that we may not squander the opportunity to recognize God not only in the things we can make and control, but also in those we cannot, like a cave on a mountaintop or a river in the north of Finland. Amen.