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Mindful of Downstream

Ezekiel 34:17-22

Matthew 6:25-33

A year before I arrived at Forest Lake Presbyterian as your Senior Pastor, this congregation organized an Environmental Stewardship Committee. The formation of a committee was a formalization of the growing environmental conscience and spiritual discipline that had been growing in this congregation. So, it must have been in the spring of 2005 or 06, that Forest Lake observed its first, organized Earth Sunday Celebration. There was conversation, at first, about whether or not this was an appropriate focus for worship, but the faithfulness and persistence of those who believed in the importance of environmental stewardship has cultivated in all of us a belief that caring for the earth that God has made and given into our tending is an absolutely right focus not only for our worship, but for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Each Earth Sunday, we have focused on an aspect of what it means to be faithful stewards of the world God has entrusted into our care. This year, the Environmental Stewardship Committee chose Eco-Justice as our theme. And while we may not use the word, “eco-justice” every day, it is not a new idea. Eco-Justice means that we acknowledge that we must care for and share God’s Creation with everyone and everything God has made. In other words, Eco-Justice is not some new buzz-word or politically correct idea. Eco-Justice is the common sense, faith based idea that the earth does not exist to serve our every need, but that we exist to serve God’s every need. And God needs us to care for the planet and for all that inhabits this planet.

Jesus told us not to worry about our lives, what we will eat, or what we will drink. Instead of worry, Jesus encouraged us to look at the flowers and the birds and notice how the Creator provides for them and to trust that God will do the same for us. Instead of worrying first about how much we can get, we are to worry first about seeking and serving God’s Kingdom. So, we are not to worry about what we eat or what we wear, but everything we do, or wear, or eat either serves God’s purposes or not. And this understanding is underlined by the prophet Ezekiel who speaks to the people of God and chastises them for pushing and shoving and taking what they need in such a way that the pasture and stream are unfit to feed and water the sheep that come after them.

People who serve God are to be marked by a mindfulness of those who come after us, and a mindfulness of how our living affects those downstream. That – in the words of Scripture – is what we mean by Eco-Justice.

For every Earth Sunday Celebration, since I can remember, Gills Creek Watershed Organization has come and brought exhibits and information to help us live mindful of the downstream. The Watershed Model is a 3-D topical map that reminds us of how the water cycle works. The map shows an aerial view of the earth's topography and is a visual reminder of how creeks flow into rivers and rivers flow into oceans and how the sun makes the water evaporate into the clouds and then, finally, how rain falls from the clouds and begins the cycle all over again. And, then the Gills' Creek Watershed volunteers will allow you to squirt paint/dye into one of the streams, which flows downstream into the rivers and further into the oceans. It is a simple reminder, from the order of creation, of a basic faith directive.

People who serve God are to be marked by a mindfulness of those who come after us, and a mindfulness of how our living affects those who come after us, who live downstream – literally and figuratively. Eco-Justice. And in our world, that means that people of faith have to admit that we have not lived mindful of the downstream. People of faith must recognize where we push with the flank and shoulder and push away the weak animals with our horns until they are scattered. We know that, because we have not lived mindful of downstream, poor communities bear the brunt of environmental pollution. We know that wealthy communities protect their beach front property at the expense of those who cannot afford to do so. The fertilizers and oils that get either poured or washed into storm drains foul the water for all of our downstream neighbors – fish, fowl and human. In fact, in South Carolina, we are so collectively unconcerned with the downstream that there are times when it is not safe for us to swim in the water at our own beaches. And wealthy countries produce waste that makes life in poorer countries miserable and dangerous. Too often we live without being mindful of downstream. Eco-justice means that we acknowledge that what we buy, what we throw away, what we hoard, and how we secure ourselves has real consequences for those who live downstream from us – both literally and figuratively.

Our faith requires that we shift our focus from only on what we need, want and can get, to a focus on what our living does to those around us and those downstream from us. In that way, eco-justice becomes, for us, a non-negotiable spiritual discipline or faith practice.

I'd like to invite us all to think about how we might practice our faith in such a way that we live Jesus' directive in Matthew 5, and begin to notice how we are ruining the pasture and muddying the water for others by how we live.

Of course, we know that we alone – or even our whole congregation together – cannot FIX all of the flattened pasture and muddy water by ourselves. Some of what needs fixing is systemic, and perhaps some here today are called to work on a larger scale for eco-justice. But, all of us are called, by faith, to examine our own practices and daily lives. Eco-Justice is a spiritual discipline.

And when I think about eco-justice as a spiritual discipline, I think of a story of my own education or growth in this discipline. I am grateful that Karen Webster is here with us this

weekend. Many of you may remember that Travis Webster served here for six years as our Associate Pastor and – by wonderful default – that meant that we also got Karen. And Travis and Karen Webster brought with them a well-developed and much more mature understanding of living mindful of downstream than I had or have.

I remember like yesterday the first time Travis and I went out to a restaurant to eat lunch. And when the waitress brought our drinks he said to her quietly, “No Straw.” The giving of straws is so automatic that she had already laid several on our table, so his request stopped both the waitress and me. She took his back, and as I peeled the plastic covering off of my straw and stuck it in my water, I asked, cluelessly, “Why no straw?” Travis said something like, I don’t really need a straw and the plastic straw will last a lot longer in the landfill than the 30 minutes I will use it. That straw could outlive me for no real purpose.

A plastic straw can take years and years to degrade. And what I have learned since then is that even when a plastic straw degrades it breaks into many microscopic pieces that find their way into the food chain and may have many, unforeseen consequences downstream.

I don’t promise that I don’t use straws – I do – but more and more often I refuse them and every time I use a plastic straw I think about that lesson. It was for me a beautiful example of what it means to live mindfully as a spiritual discipline. Travis did not condemn or preach or stare judgmentally when I peeled the plastic covering off of a plastic straw to stick it mindlessly into my drink. He simply witnessed to what he believed was one very small thing he could do to live out his faith and taught me, through his mindfulness, of how our small actions can affect those who come after us. Not using a straw is not going to have a measurable effect on the plastic trash now floating in our oceans, but it will remind me – every time – to be aware of how my lifestyle either focuses on others and the creation God has given us or not. The same thing happens every time I use a reusable bag for my groceries or other purchases. I must admit that I do take some pride in saving some plastic bags from the trash, and that I am excited that we give visitors reusable shopping bags and our new members a small pocket-sized reusable bag. But, more important than the pride, and much more effective in my own discipleship is the daily reminder that I can practice my faith in small, daily ways that help me grow in my own awareness of how to preserve the health and beauty of creation for those who come after me – for everyone downstream.

So, today is the day to look up towards God and downstream from where we live and evaluate how we might do a better job of flattening less pasture and muddying less water. Maybe our spiritual discipline is foregoing straws or refusing disposable plastic bags or carrying a reusable water bottle rather than purchasing another throw away. Maybe our spiritual discipline is refusing to pour oil or left over chemicals down the drain or storm drains. Maybe our spiritual discipline is using fewer or no pesticides, or refusing to have a company spray for mosquitos for fear of hurting pollinator insects. Maybe our spiritual discipline is helping join in the fight to help poorer communities recover from flooding caused by the thoughtlessness of other stronger communities upstream. Maybe our spiritual discipline is thinking twice before we

throw something that might be recycled in the trash or beginning a compost pile. Whatever it is, think of it as practicing what it means to live mindful of the downstream.

This living mindful of those downstream is a faith principle that can be applied to almost every area of our lives. Next Sunday we will hold a Wills Emphasis Sunday – this is another important way in which we can either live mindful of the downstream, or not. If God created it all, and put human beings in charge of caring for each other and the world God made, then we need to become better at living so that those who come after us, and those who live downstream from us (literally and figuratively) will thank God for our faithfulness.