

Stewardship of God's Creation

Intro/Etymology/History

I confess that I have not invariably been comfortable in front of a pulpit; I have never been comfortable behind one. - Wendell Berry

My primary goal here today is to remind you that, “Stewardship is not just for pledging anymore,” (despite the fact that pledge cards will be showing up in the post momentarily). Stewardship impacts all facets of our lives; big and small, visible and invisible.

For those of you who might not know, my background is not farming... it's actually engineering. If you haven't had the pleasure of associating with engineers before, let me simply say that we like to take things apart, see how they work, and sometimes manage to put them back together again. It's a character trait/flip... whichever you'd like.

I personally like to do that with language as well. I've always had a fascination about where words come from-- the technical term is Etymology, and has nothing to do with insects.

I'd like to begin examining four words relating to stewardship. The first would be STEWARD. Originating from the Old English, *stig* meaning house or hall, and *weard* meaning keeper or warden. (How appropriate.)

The second two words are the Greek words used in the Bible for steward: *oikonomos* (*oi-ko-no'-mos*), a manager of a farm or landed estate, possibly the treasurer of a city; and *epitropos* (*e-pee'-tro-pos*), a curator, overseer, or guardian.

Historically, a steward was a servant who supervised both the lord's estates and his household. There were commonly two stewards in each house- one who managed the estates and the other to manage domestic routine. Stewards were commonly paid quite well, took care of the castles when their Lords were away, and collected taxes of the serfs on his Lord's manor.

A steward was a Lord's chief representative in a village. When a lord was not present in that village, the steward was effectively in control of the village - though answerable to the lord if something went wrong. (Remember that...)

Key to this position is the notion of responsibility, coming from the Latin *responsus*, to respond or offer in return. Note this conveys a sense of obligation..... “*All things come of Thee, O Lord. And of thine own have we given thee.*”

Personal Anecdote

Though I find myself blest to be tending and caring for many things in church and community, today I'd like to focus on our little part of Vermont.

Jane and I visited Vermont our first time while camping on our honeymoon over 24 years ago. We travelled south down Route 100 and spent some time in the Green Mountain National Forest. We both fell in love with Vermont's hillsides and fields, its forests and pastures, its covered bridges and attitudes. Later I took up the bagpipes and found an annual excuse for the two of us to visit; making a yearly trek to North Hero.

About ten years ago, while on a six month sabbatical, Jane and I, one dog and one cat spent a month in a cabin above Barnard. It was heaven-- at least for me. It was a magical time, sitting high up Mt. Hunger with the vast Connecticut river valley sweeping down to the east, and the White Mountains standing on the distant horizon when the weather cooperated. I reveled in being able to spend so much time out of doors (rather than in an office), and becoming re-attuned to daylight and weather patterns. By the end of the month the idea of returning to the metropolitan Cleveland area was quite daunting, and I planted the notion with Jane that, "wouldn't it be nice to stay?"

With that began a three year ordeal in finding "our place in Vermont", leaving family and friends and financial security behind, and moving a household worth of possessions six hundred miles east. Part of that effort was an attempt locate that bit of paradise-- and with the typical analytical approach of an engineer, I sent off a cover letter and full spreadsheet detailing 15 features and relative importance to over eight realtors from Ascutney to Moretown to Danville. Key to the search was to avoid undeveloped land-- we loved Vermont as it was, and didn't want to be responsible for contributing to its increasing development. Of those realtors who responded to my wild flight of fancy, most indicated that either properties possessing the desired features had been bought 10-20 years ago, or that what did match would simply be unaffordable.

To make a long story short, with the aid of a very patient and kind Bill Johnston of Century 21 here in Randolph, we did indeed manage to find "our place in Vermont."...

Born in Stockbridge in 1907, Homer Perkins was raised by his grandparents and in 1929, took over their farm and operated it for many years with his wife, Clara. Homer contributed much to his community, serving as selectman, road commissioner, constable, grand juror, and state representative. He also served as a trustee of the Belcher Free Library for more than 50 years.

In 1993, Homer decided to leave his land to the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) subject to his life estate. Homer reached his goal of living into the new millennium and knowing his 143-acre farm would be conserved forever. VLT sold the former Homer Perkins property in Stockbridge to Jane and Steven Eubanks, subject to conservation restrictions. The land is a mix of open meadows and forested slopes traversed by Stony Brook, bounded by Dalton and Broughton Brooks, and improved with a house, dairy barn, numerous outbuildings, sugar house, pond and stone walls attesting to its agricultural past and lending to its scenic beauty. [VLT]

For those unfamiliar with the Vermont Land Trust-- its mission is "to conserve land for the future of Vermont" focussing on productive, recreational, and scenic lands vital to Vermont's rural economy and environment. The VLT's Conservation **Stewardship** Program is responsible for

the long-term monitoring of easements to ensure that the conservation goals are upheld in perpetuity.

And thus we became Stewards of a part of rural Vermont. Homer and Clara were well-beloved icons of a rapidly disappearing breed of hill farmers in Vermont. With forty Jerseys, a couple of pigs and some chickens, bees, 2 draft horses and 1200 taps, they lived as Homer said “off the depreciation of their farm equipment.” The fact that roughly three years elapsed between Homer’s passing and our arrival was good— it gave the folk of our little valley a chance to grieve over a significant and profound loss. And even then, on one of our first encounters with a next door neighbor, that misty-eyed neighbor gruffly warned us that, “we had big shoes to fill.” There’s not a day I walk the fields when I don’t remember the legacy we’ve been blest to oversee. And though I’m no farmer and have no agricultural background, Jane and I have in many ways become a stewards of Homer’s place. Mowing hay fields. Tending the garden. Drafting forestry plans. Felling trees. Building chicken coops. Dreaming of a new sugar house. I find myself constantly asking both God and Homer just how to keep everything going.... or *standing*. And much as Homer and Clara did in their time, we continue to share *our* piece of Vermont-- the sledding hill with the kids in winter, the pond with the swimmers and anglers in summer, the forest and hills with the leaf peepers, and hunters in fall. One hundred and forty-three acres of God’s Creation entrusted to our care through the changing of each season, and the rhythm of each day.

One day, shortly after moving to Vermont, Jane and I went to see Homer and Clara’s graves which sit on a hillside cemetery looking east down the White River Valley along Rt 107. It’s a beautiful view. Rain clouds were scudding along here and there when we found Homer and Clara toward the top of the grounds. It “seemed like the thing to do,” to go see them... to pay our respects... with hearts full of thanksgiving. Their marker was simple unlike many of the grand monuments scattered throughout. Hard pressed by the corner, Homer once remarked that his legs might wind up hanging out, so close were they to the edge of the cemetery. After a brief time, a light rain began to fall and Jane and I saying our goodbyes, left for home a mere five minutes drive away.

There’s a hill directly behind the house. It’s a bony piece of land with an old apple tree in the middle and a piece of ledge jutting down toward the house from the tree line. We climbed out of the car and as has become practice, scanned the horizon just in case any local wildlife decided to visit in our absence. At that moment, the afternoon sun broke through the clouds above the ridge-line to the west, and there spanning the hill behind the house shone a perfect rainbow from end to end. Now it might just be coincidence, or it might be grace-- but Jane and I suddenly felt very welcomed to our little piece of Vermont.

Stewardship of Creation

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

- Genesis 9:16-17

The words of the Gospel Hymn we just sang, (and I thank you all for persevering through all eight verses of an unfamiliar hymn,) were written as a canticle by St. Francis of Assisi in the first

half the the 13th century. In it, St. Francis thanks God for all the works of His Creation. It is an affirmation of his personal theology that all creatures are given their own purposes by God, not necessarily related to God's purpose with humans.

Indeed, many of Christianity's early theologians believed that God sent Christ in the flesh not just to redeem humankind, but to bring salvation to all things... to the entirety of God's creation; the creation God entrusted to Adam and Eve-- "*God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'*" Unfortunately, in later years the concept of "dominion" came to be closer to "domination", and the Biblical texts a pretense for a wanton disregard and irreverence towards God's creation. It should be pointed out however that the Hebrew word, *radah*, usually translated as "to have dominion" is typically used in Biblical texts emphasize a humane and compassionate rule that displays responsibility for others and that results in peace and prosperity. "The Christian imperative to love God, ourselves, and our neighbor should be extended to nature" states the Rev. Akintunde Akinade, Professor of Religion at High Point University, ordained in the Anglican Church of Nigeria. "We are enjoined to love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Today's earth distress requires that this love also embrace everything within the entire *oikos* [home] of God."

Creation and Climate Change

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" - Job 38:4-7

So Job finally gets fed up with his lot, and gets so obnoxious about it that God responds in a tornado. In a sermon entitled, "The Comforting Whirlwind" given in 2001, author Bill McKibben indicates that God puts Job in his place, pointing out that Job (and inferentially we) are but one small part of a much larger creation-- "a world incredibly beautiful, full of meaning and sweetness..." To which Job is simply speechless, "Now I will speak no more."

McKibben points out that though humankind has long seen itself as but a small part of the physical universe (Creation) run by 'some force larger than us' (God), our pride and appetites have increasingly placed us in a pivotal position to be able to alter the "chemical reality" of the planet on which we live.

In 2001, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change representing the work of thousands of scientists from hundreds of countries indicated a 66% probability that humans were the cause of global warming. Its 2007 report raised that probability to 90%. Of greatest concern is the increase in CO2 levels due to emissions from fossil fuel combustion.

Global temperatures have increased 1.4F since 1880 and that rate of warming is increasing. Temperatures in Alaska, Western Canada, and Eastern Russia have risen at twice the global average and the permafrost isn't so permanent. In fact, the Arctic may be ice-free during summer months within as few as 10 years impacting both wildlife and indigenous peoples. Glaciers and mountain snows are receding: freezing almost a week later, thawing a week sooner.

Coral reefs dying due to rising sea temperatures and acidity, reducing food and shelter for aquatic species, and significantly reducing ocean diversity. (16% loss in 1998 alone)

There's a noticeable upsurge in extreme weather events: wildfires, heat waves, and storm intensity.

Despite the controversy regarding the cause of Global Warming, computer climate modeling cannot adequately explain recent temperature increases using only natural climate drivers without additionally incorporating human factors and measurements of lower atmosphere warming are consistent with the growth in our use of fossil fuels.

If left unchecked, some of the potential impacts of global climate change include:

- Increased spread of infectious disease
- Mass displacement of people from coastal areas due to rising sea levels
- Increased volatility of weather: rains in some areas, droughts in others dramatically impacting aquifers and agriculture.
- Significant loss of wildlife diversity including the extinction of many species.

For those of us in Vermont, the results would include warmer/wetter winters, less snow, longer mud seasons, shorter and more sporadic sap runs, more violent summer storms, and more insects resulting in fewer maples, ash trees, and hemlocks. More like Tennessee.

A team of researchers led by Dr. James Hansen of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies posed that a concentration of 350 parts per million atmospheric CO₂ is the limit at which it is possible to reach a "climate balance". The current level of atmospheric CO₂ sits at 390 ppm, and that figure is increasing by two ppm per year. This September the U.N.'s "top climate scientist" and leader of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has come out in favor of reducing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide to 350ppm.

Bill McKibben of Ripton, is environmentalist and writer who frequently writes about global warming and alternative energy. He is the author of numerous books including, The End of Nature, The Comforting Whirlwind, Deep Economy, and Hope, Human and Wild. He gave the Keynote address at last year's Diocesan Convention in Rutland.

He is also the founder of 350, an international environmental organization set up to facilitate the mitigation of global warming. This organization is spearheading a Day of International Climate Action, this coming Saturday, October 24th (United Nations Day) helping to raise global awareness of climate change and the importance of "350" in advance of the UN's Climate Change Conference this December in Copenhagen, where a new international climate treaty will be authored. McKibben's organization currently lists over 3500 planned activities across 161 countries (including ours).

What can We Do?

Despite the dire outlook, the outcome is not inevitable. How can we be better stewards of God's creation? Personal efforts alone, though important and valuable, aren't enough-- the only way we can reach a sustainable climate is through global action and international cooperation.

First be a servant of God's creation:

We need to hear and obey the command of our Creator who instructed us to be stewards of his creation. We need to understand as Job, that we humans are but a part of creation, we can't afford to act as if we were the entirety of it. We need to understand that all of us are part of the miracle of Creation-- that what adversely impacts one part of creation, impacts us all. We need to understand how precious and marvelously fragile our particular part of creation is and act accordingly. We need to act as responsible stewards and we need to make sure our every action bears witness as a people who have been given a gift beyond measure.

Raise Public Awareness:

Remember: **350!** It may be the most important number for the planet. Make sure those around you know that too. Make 350 a household word! See the 350.org website for more information.

Bell-ringing:

There was a wonderful front-page article in the Herald this week about a variety of "350 events" this Saturday. St. John's will participate by ringing our very own bell 350 times! Come at 1PM next Saturday, be a good steward, have fun and let's help fill the hills around Randolph with the sounds of your Creation Stewardship.

Bearing witness of love and hope:

"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." - 1 Corinthians 10:13

Continue to be faithful stewards of God's love and grace. It is in that imperative to love God, ourselves, and our neighbor, *and nature* that we will do the right thing-- and **be** the change that needs to happen. *"For the good earth which God has given us, and for the wisdom and will to conserve it..."* [BCP]

Stewardship of our Lives:

Share your stories! Remember that with each story you tell, you serve as inspiration to others.

In closing,

"If the only prayer you could say in your whole life is 'Thank You' that would suffice." - Meister Eckhart

Sermon preached by Steven Eubanks at St. John's, Randolph