

Rogation Sunday
May 21, 2017
John 14:15-21

My sisters and brothers in Christ,

On our liturgical calendar, today is the 6th Sunday of Easter, but it also is Rogation Sunday.

I opt for Rogation Sunday. If the church does not commemorate its own pastoral events, who will? Traditionally on Rogation Sunday, we pray for the stewardship of God's creation. In past centuries, processions from the church blessed farms and lands. This has been part of our Anglican tradition for centuries – a moment celebrating how we relate to God through our living on this planet. Today, we do not commemorate a single event of great magnitude – like the Ascension – but rather a way life in God's creation. It is a quiet day on which we humbly remember our continuing dependence on God's great gifts to us.

On Rogation Sunday (rogation comes from the Latin word *rogare*, to ask) we think *truly big* so that we can see ourselves as truly small – in relation to the whole creation. As the soil warms and life in all forms picks up, we are reminded of how we are *part of* this enormous, glorious creation. Being “part of” means that we have to live in resonance with, in harmony with, the natural world. We are not “apart from” that natural world – we are not distinct from that world. We are in that world, and that world is in us.

How we comport ourselves in relation to the rest of the natural world is the evidence of how well we have understood God's message to us, and how well we have understood that we are not above the natural, but intensely in it. What this day tells us is that in our being meditative, we come to recognize that we are not the greatest thing to live on this earth. We are not the boss of this earth or this universe. You know the story: over the ages, God sent prophets to teach us, then he sent his only Son to teach us – yet some people still have not gotten the message.

I am convinced that our arrogance toward the natural world, our disregard of our responsibilities toward the natural world and of those who come after us – our disregard is a product of our cult of individualism that has come up over the last three or four centuries – a belief that puts the individual human above everything else – that puts individual wants above the good of the social community and above the balance of the natural order.

There is a tipping point between, on one hand, the communal good, the social good – and on the other the individual and personal good. As a society, we have gone beyond the tipping point, toward individual benefit and enrichment at the expense of everything else. Then when we mix greed into this, you get a system that runs amuck and results in plunder and rapacious behavior that cannot be repaired.

Freedom can easily turn into irresponsibility and into the belief that any restraint whatsoever – even a restraint of conscience – is an infringement on individual liberty.

I cannot imagine Jesus walking through Galilee telling the crowds that it's okay to despoil the earth – telling followers it's okay to pillage the creation of God.

I cannot imagine Jesus urging everyone to pursue their own selfish interests, to seek personal gain and not to be concerned about the needs of others, or what is happening to the land, the waters, the air.

What we learn from Holy Scripture is that we are not called to subdue or wreck the natural order – but *we are* called to be stewards of that order. We are not called to conquer and exploit that order, but to be its trustees and to live in harmony with it, not just to preserve it, but to preserve it for those who follow us.

We remember Eucharistic Prayer D, a prayer that borrows from Genesis: “Your mighty works reveal your wisdom and love. You formed us in your own image, giving the whole world into *our care*, so that in *obedience* to you our Creator, we might rule and serve all your creatures.”

What does it mean to be formed in the image of God? This has nothing to do with physical appearance – it refers to what we do and how we behave – it is relational in character. In other words, we are the incarnation of God’s will in the natural order – and we have been commissioned to act as God’s representatives to carry on God’s work. God created – and God asks us to care for what was created, to be prayerful trustees. We are here to manage the assets, not to destroy them. We get into trouble when we think of things as our personal possessions, to do with and squander as we like. But they are not ours, but God’s. And we are accountable – not just to generations who come after us – but ultimately to God.

I found one of these the other day. When I was the rector here, Sylvia and I made little crosses that were blessed during the Rogation Sunday service and then given to parishioners. Over the years we probably made close to 400 little crosses. (Sylvia made most of them.) What does this tiny replica of the empty cross have to do with the lofty themes of this Day? – this tiny cross that people put into their garden or flower pot?

Since early Christianity, people have prayed to God to supply their needs from the land. Since the mid-16th century, our Anglican ancestors have put into our liturgy: prayers for the needs of the people, for the fruits of the earth. On Rogation Sunday, we do not pray out of our selfishness for special favors. What we do ask is for God’s blessing on our land and labor – we ask for God’s presence in what we do *in and with* the creation – we ask that we can discern God’s will so that what we do will be in accord with that will... -- “that our works may find favor in your sight” – “that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways.”

But above all, what we do on this day is to give glory to God, to praise God for the creation, and for allowing us to be part of it. The Rogation Cross that we put in our garden or flower pot, is not some magic talisman that will scare away evil spirits and prevent crop failure. That’s just superstition and that is not part of who we are as Christians. In reality the Cross is our sign that what we do is dedicated to God, that we acknowledge God as the source of all.

It is the pledge of our selves to God. This empty Cross is our reminder that Christ is risen, and that Christ and the Holy Spirit are among us, even as we work in our fields, gardens and flower pots.

I am reminded that as Christians – because we are not gods but made in God’s image, we have a unique relationship to the natural world. We look to God for saving grace for ourselves, but we must share that grace in our ministry for the earth. We are not called to conquer God’s creation, but to live in harmony with it. What we do to the creation, we do to ourselves, and we feel the pain.

So Rogation Sunday is not so much about what we get, but about who we are, how we live, and to whom we give thanks. ❀