

“Care for Our Common Home”
Sermon by the Rev. John D. Elder, D.Min.
Hector and Lodi Presbyterian Churches - August 30, 2015
Scripture: Psalm 104:1-4,10-13,24 and Philippians 2:1-4

Psalm 104:1-4,10-13,24

(1) Bless the LORD, O my soul.

O LORD my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honor and majesty, (2) wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent, (3) you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind,

(4) you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.

(10) You make springs gush forth in the valleys;

they flow between the hills, (11) giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.

(12) By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.

(13) From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

(24) O LORD, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

Philippians 2:1-4

(1) If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, and compassion and sympathy, (2) make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (3) Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. (4) Let each of you look not [only] to your own interests, but [also] to the interests of others.

Text: “Let each of you look not [only] to your own interests, but [also] to the interests of others.”
Phil. 2:4

It has been praised by Buddhists, Muslims and Jews. It has received mixed reviews from scientists. Some conservative evangelicals say we should study it. Many conservative Roman Catholics are criticizing it. Most Republican presidential candidates scorn it. What is it? Pope Francis’ encyclical “Laudato Si’ – On Care for Our Common Home.”

So what is an encyclical? A papal encyclical is a “circular letter” to be spread around a whole community. The community may be just the bishops and priests of a particular country or all Catholic clergy in the world or all Catholic faithful everywhere. But Pope Francis says he means this encyclical for everyone on planet Earth, which is, as he affirms, “our common home.”

Usually an encyclical clarifies, amplifies, condemns or promotes some issue related to Roman Catholic teaching. Nearly 300 encyclicals have been issued since Pope Benedict XIV wrote the first one in 1740. In 2013 Pope Francis issued his first encyclical, dealing with faith, but it was primarily written by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, before Benedict’s retirement. After Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical in 1897 on labor and social justice there have been a number of encyclicals on issues such as peace or human rights, and “Laudato Si’” is in that tradition of papal letters on a general social concern – in this case, the social concern is, first of all, climate change.

What does Pope Francis say about climate change? First, the solid scientific consensus is that we are witnessing a disturbing warming of the climate system. Second, we need to change our lifestyle and patterns of production and consumption to combat what humans are doing to produce or contribute to climate change. Third, the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system, aggravates the problem of climate change, and deforestation makes it even worse. Fourth, the devastating impact of climate change is greatest on the poorest people on our planet. Fifth, this is especially true in regard to water, whether we look at regions where fresh water is disappearing or regions where the sea level is rising. Sixth, one consequence of climate change is the increasing migration of desperate people, to whose suffering there is widespread indifference.

Much of what the Pope says about the causes and effects of climate change may sound familiar to you. Is he quoting Al Gore, Wendell Berry, Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben or Sandra Steingraber? Is he a spokesman for the Sierra Club, Food and Water Watch, or Greenpeace? No, read through the 96 pages of the encyclical – including the 172 footnotes – and you learn who his sources are: the Catholic Bishops of Southern Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Philippines, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Canada, and Japan - church leaders who are voicing the appeals of those most impacted by climate change – not only the humans, but all forms of life.

The title of the encyclical – “Laudato si’ – comes from the beautiful canticle by St. Francis of Assisi, which was our opening hymn: “Laudato si’, mi Signore cum tucte le Tue creature...” “Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures...”

Eleven paragraphs of the encyclical are on “the loss of biodiversity.” The Pope notes that we are losing species that could have been resources not only for food, but also for curing diseases. Then he says, “It is not enough... to think of different species merely as ‘resources’ to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost for ever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.”

A couple of weeks ago my wife, Anne, and I joined in one of the ongoing protests at the gates of the Crestwood facility across Seneca Lake from our summer home. Some year-round members of this congregation have also been participating. The purpose of the protests is to block further development of the gas storage facility that we believe threatens the ecology and economy of this beautiful area. The protestors have constructed a huge cardboard mock-up of the encyclical that they set up in front of the No Trespassing signs at the Crestwood entrance. At each protest demonstrators read from the encyclical. Just before the Sheriff arrived to begin arresting demonstrators, I was reading these words from Pope Francis [Part IV. The Message of Each Creature in the Harmony of Creation]:

[84] Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on a intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighborhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves.

85. *God has written a precious book, “whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe”. The Canadian bishops rightly pointed out that no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God: “From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine”. The bishops of Japan, for their part, made a thought-provoking observation: “To sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God’s love and hope”.*

Then the Sheriff came!

Over and over again, the Pope affirms the truth, “Everything is connected.” In the section “A Universal Communion” he writes: “Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined by a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.”

Two of the problems of society that the Pope sees as woven together with the problem of climate change are technology and consumerism – technology uncontrolled by ethics, and a culture of consumerism oblivious to limited resources. Science has given us the power to re-shape our lives and our world. But we need to ask, “Should we do it?” Our market economy has given us the power to produce a plethora of goods. But we need to ask, “Should we make all of them – and then throw so many of them away?”

Along with the theme that everything is connected in our common home, the Pope stresses the theme that we are all responsible for our common home. If you have ever visited our cottage on Cartmell Road, you know that beside the kitchen door is a plaque that reads; “This is a self-cleaning kitchen. Clean up after yourself.” I guess that sums up a good bit of the message of the encyclical.

What is the first step the Pope proposes for resolving the problems of society he describes? The first step is dialogue – primarily, dialogue about our human responsibility as stewards of the planet. He calls for dialogue between faith leaders of all religious traditions and by those faith leaders with scientists, economists and politicians. He recognizes that consensus on some environmental issues is not easy to achieve, and he acknowledges repeatedly [188], “The Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics.”

But it’s not just the usual “experts” the Pope wants to bring into the conversation about “care for our common home.” Repeatedly he stresses that farmers, fishermen, and the millions and millions of people increasingly being crowded into huge cities – the ordinary people most impacted by climate change - need to have a voice in making decisions affecting their own future and that of their children [183].

Although much of the language of the encyclical may seem strange or even incomprehensible to those outside the Roman Catholic community, Pope Francis is personally committed to reaching out beyond the boundary of his church to those in other faith traditions as well as those who claim no religious belief. Here is a sample of his approach [section 93]: “Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged.”

Along with dialogue, the Pope calls for education, what he calls “educating for the covenant between humanity and the environment” or “educating for ecological citizenship.”

Ecological dialogue. Ecological education. One more step: Ecological conversion! Pope Francis quotes the bishops of Australia [218]: “[To achieve reconciliation with creation] we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart.”

But the Pope goes on to stress, in his words [219], “The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.” Of course this call to conversion, both personal and communal, echoes the story of the conversion of Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, nicknamed Francesco – we know him as St. Francis - and of his efforts to reform not only his church but his entire society. Pope Francis calls this “conversion to an integral ecology.”

The text for my sermon today is the admonition of St. Paul to the Philippians; “Let each of you look not [only] to your own interests, but [also] to the interests of others.” Today “the interests of others” includes the people most harmed or threatened by climate change and all other living things that have no way of protecting themselves from the damage humans can afflict on them.

A few of us here are members of a men’s group called Romeo (Really Old Men Eating Out) that meets Wednesday mornings at 8 for breakfast at Toni’s, across the street from the Hector church, and then adjourns to the church for conversation until the Bone Builders start their exercises at 10:30. Toward the end of last Wednesday’s discussion we talked about many of challenges Pope Francis describes in the beginning of his encyclical – global warming, pollution, fossil fuels, deforestation, drought, rising sea levels, the connection between climate change and war and mass migration, the failure of many presidential candidates to even mention these issues. Finally someone asked the question, “How long do you think humans will survive on earth?” To judge from the responses of the group, I’d say the prospects are pretty grim.

Maybe a dozen grumpy old geezers shouldn’t be expected to have much hope for the future. But then, Pope Francis himself is 79 years old and has seen the seamy side of life. Before joining the Jesuits, he worked in a chemical laboratory - and also as a bar bouncer and a janitor. He lived through Argentina’s “Dirty War” when his country was ruled by an oppressive military dictatorship. So perhaps the most pessimistic of us will appreciate that the Pope’s prayer is not just a pious platitude, “May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.”

Pope Francis states that hope in these words [245]: “God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. *Praise be to him!*”

I invite you to stand now and join in a similar affirmation, which comes to us from the United Church of Canada:

We are not alone, we live in God's world.

**We believe in God: who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the Spirit.**

We trust in God.

**We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.**

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Pope Francis concludes his encyclical in his typical fashion with two prayers, one that is couched in the language of the Roman Catholic faith, the other that he hopes can be shared by believers in many faith traditions. The more universal prayer I will use as the charge at the end of the service. But let us begin our time of prayer now with the Pope’s, “A Christian prayer in union with creation” and as we are able, make it our own prayer:

Father, we praise you with all your creatures. They came forth from your all-powerful hand; they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender love. Praise be to you!

Son of God, Jesus, through you all things were made. You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother, you became part of this earth, and you gazed upon this earth with human eyes. Today you are alive in every creature in your risen glory. Praise be to you!

Holy Spirit, by your light you guide this world towards the Father's love and accompany creation as it groans in travail. You also dwell in our hearts and you inspire us to do what is good. Praise be to you!

Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love, teach us to contemplate you in the beauty of the universe, for all things speak of you. Awaken our praise and thankfulness for every being that you have made. Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined to everything that is.

God of love, show us our place in this world as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth, for not one of them is forgotten in your sight. Enlighten those who have power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live. The poor and the earth are crying out. O Lord, seize us with you power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. Praise be to you! Amen.

Charge and Benediction:

This year the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church have designated September 1 as World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. Many other churches will be joining in. Pope Francis' "Prayer for the earth" is fitting for that occasion, and I take it as our charge today:

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one. O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light. We thank you for being with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.