

Well, here we are at the end of the series. This was going to be called, “The ETC. Sermon,” but as I thought of it, I’m not sure that many of us go around with a burning concern for the use of the term et cetera. Some may get worked up over its correct pronunciation, but we tend to spend our intellectual energy and our Christian vocation on tangible concerns. And as I thought of the things that call for a Christian response from us, I came around to the matter of environmental stewardship.

This was something of an improbable topic for me as I’ve never preached an *Earth* sermon. As environmentalists go, I’m pretty lax. Sure, I’m good about recycling and I have compact fluorescent light bulbs, but by and large, I couldn’t pass a staunch environmentalist’s litmus test.

A few years back I took an environmental assessment. At the time I lived in a small condo, drove a four cylinder car and lived less than a mile and a half from work. I flunked it miserably, though. My carbon footprint was considered excessive. Now my house is bigger than I need, my car is probably just a little too powerful, and I drive three miles to work. I’m sure the standards haven’t relaxed in the intervening years! That mix seems to me to be just tailor made for a first class guilt trip. Which of course, would just add to my carbon footprint.

Add to that reality the additional complicating factor that matters of environmental stewardship have become something of a political football, and the result is possible paralysis when it comes to what we believe about the earth and how we live in it.

So today we will not wade into the policy debates. The Bible makes no recommendations where modern environmental issues are concerned. The ancient Hebrews had no knowledge of cap and trade policies and Jesus didn't drive a car. To make a universal claim about environmental stewardship with any degree of specificity using the Bible as backup would require that claim to be so vague as to be nonsensical.

And yet, the opening chapters of Genesis make it very clear that God loves what God has made. God calls it good. And there is no mistaking the fact that God has placed humans into creation as stewards.

You remember what a steward is – it's someone who manages something that doesn't belong to them.

God doesn't give the world over to humankind to *have*, but rather, to *manage*.

And interestingly, God has some opinions about the management of what God has made.

I remember when I was a kid my grandfather had a garden. He would spend hours painstakingly maintaining it. My grandfather was a bit of a neat-freak, which I respect, and his rows of okra, green beans and corn were a sight to behold.

Later when I was older I was talking to my grandfather about his garden again. And he said the most amazing thing. Amidst saying he did this and that to prepare the soil, he added, "And I let the land rest every seventh year."

I was puzzled, and I said, "You let the land rest?"

"The Bible says to," he replied.

I went and looked it up.

The Bible does indeed say that the land is to rest ever seventh year.

This points to a God who does indeed care deeply about creation, and not just about the human creation that God has made, but about the whole of it, every spec of dust and blade of grass.

Some weeks back, when we were talking about money, a topic incidentally, that we're not through with yet, we considered a false dichotomy that persists in the world and is extraordinarily detrimental to the life of faith.

The false dichotomy was of course, between the material and the spiritual. In talking about money, I observed that there is a somewhat pernicious tendency to divide the world into spiritual things, like worship and prayer, and material things, such as money and politics. This dichotomy is false because God made the whole thing and God loves the whole thing and there isn't an aspect of our lives where God doesn't want deep and personal connection to us.

And that's true. That's who God is. God, in triune nature, exists in deep and indivisible unity as Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And to be made in God's image means to be made for deep unity and integration – in life and in community.

But there is another false dichotomy that is like unto the first, and it is this: it is to treat this world as being of inferior, grubby stuff, because it is temporal and something better is to come.

Now what I mean by this is not to say that there is not a difference between life now and the life to come. Not by a long shot. But that life to come is remarkably vague in scripture, and I think for good reason – we are to be concerned with life now and trust God for life later.

Which is to say we aren't done with this world until we're done with it.

We live here.

We're the stewards.

We are God's agents in the world. It's a little bit of a cliché to say we hold it in trust for the next generation, but clichés exist because they point to a truth. God *has* entrusted us with the care of what God has made and it is so that we will care for it *wisely*.

So, theologically, we know what not to do: we don't treat this world like it doesn't matter, because it does. It's not disposable.

But what are we to do? How do we live a uniquely Christian ethic with regard to the world in which we live? And moreover, how do we live that Christian ethic when it is abundantly clear that some of the solutions to the challenges of modern life lie seemingly not in the hands of individuals, but in the hands of corporations and government?

We know full well that the living out of our theological thought may take many different forms, but I think we can use two words to frame our thoughts. Those words are *gratitude* and *rectitude*.

If we are living lives of gratitude it will shape our actions.

Now I find this to be a true statement on a variety of topics. If we are living lives of gratitude for what God has done for us, we tend to be generous in our spirits. I never tire of thinking that every nickel this church spends in ministry and mission is spent because someone was motivated by gratitude to give it to service of God.

But where environmental stewardship is concerned, it goes deeper. When you are grateful for something, you treat it right. You make note of its condition and your obligation to care for it. Not to do so implies the opposite.

I have a clock in my living room. It came from my grandparents' home and my mother tells me that it came before that from my great-grandparents' home. After that the trail goes cold. But it's really old.

When this clock came into my possession it had sat on the mantle of my grandparents' home for many years in disuse for my entire life. No one thought it worked. But when I got it home, for just a few minutes, I heard rapid ticking. Not rhythmic, but machine-gun fire type ticking. I didn't think anything of it. And then I moved it to another shelf in my living room, and I heard the noise again. And I began to wonder, "Does this thing yet have life in it?"

I opened the back of it and found the winding key. I wound it up. Then I got non-stop rapid ticking, of the pneumatic drill variety, as in drilling in your brain, and I knew it would go on unless I did something about it. So I got a flashlight and looked into the casing – back in the recesses of the case I found the pendulum weight. I attached it. The clock slowed to a rhythmic *tick-tock, tick-tock*.

Eventually, after many months, it became erratic again and I took it to a clock-maker. He said, "It needs cleaning and care, but it will run just fine. What is it's history?"

"Well, it was on the mantle in my grandparents' home for many years, and before that at my great-grandparents' home. I don't remember ever hearing it chime, but when we cleaned out the house, I asked for it. My parents took the grandfather clock and I got this little one."

"Well," he replied, "You got the more valuable piece by a wide margin."

I took the clock because it made me think of my grandparents. I cared for it because I loved them. And astonishingly, in caring for it, I realized it was worth a very great deal.

I share this little story because when we neglect something, it appears we don't think its worth very much. In time, with enough neglect, it may come to appear not to *be* worth very much. But what it is – made by God, for good purposes - remains.

That's true of clocks. It's true of people. And it's true of the world God has entrusted to our care as well.

And I don't know, perhaps its Pollyanna thinking, but I can't help but believe if our posture of engaging the world in which we live is one of deep gratitude to God who has made it, if we won't find ourselves more cognizant of the ways in which our actions either give honor to what God has made, or give dishonor to what God has made. But as far as the biblical witness goes, there can be no mistaking that what God has made, God loves.

Which brings me to rectitude. *Rectitude* is a word that seems to have fallen into disuse in recent years, and that's something of a shame, to my mind. It just means to be concerned with correctness and right behavior morally.

If we are grateful, we will live as though we recognize the value of what has been given into our care. And if we live grateful lives, we will live with a certain amount of rectitude.

Which seems to me to be natural the conclusion of our series.

It has no doubt come to your attention that some version of the great commandment has been the “other lesson” all six weeks. It appears three times in the New Testament and also in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, it is the heart of the law, in the Gospels, it is Jesus' answer to the question, “what is the most important thing we can do?”

You know the words, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” And then Jesus adds, “And love your neighbor as yourself.”

You see, for generations, the church has struggled to divine what God’s will is for modern life. It goes back, way back, to our formative years. Throughout our history, Christians have sought to take this holy text, which tells us of our God and the incarnation, and apply it to our lives.

In time, the early bishops began to discern a “rule of faith” for way of life for the believer. What it meant was that those who seek to understand how God would have us live in the world start with faith, with the teachings of the church and the scriptures.

In time, St. Augustine came to add what is called the “rule of love.” In the preface to his monastic *Rule*, he wrote, “Before all else, beloved, love God and then your neighbor, for these are the chief commandments given to us.”

Meaning, as we seek to understand our way in the world, we will be guided by love because it is for love that God has made us. A life of rectitude will necessarily be governed by faith, but more, it will be governed by love.

When it comes to understanding sin and violence, relating to money and sex, and making our way with politics and care for the environment, the way of gratitude in turn becomes the way of rectitude.

Friends, for the short span of six weeks we have delved into a way of thinking about our place as creatures that God has placed in the midst of a good creation where we will encounter such things that require us to use our minds. But the simple truth remains that, as much as our minds matter to God, so much more do our hearts. And living into this

rule of faith and love will very well take our whole lives. But then, what else were we going to do?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.