

***Good Shepherding***  
***Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder***  
***United Church of Strafford, Vermont***  
***April 25, 2021 Fourth Sunday of Easter,***  
***Good Shepherd and Earth Day Sunday***  
***Luke 15:4-6; John 10:11-16; 1 John 3:16-17, 24***

**Call to Worship:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter and Good Shepherd and Earth Day Sunday. Today I want to begin by honoring a small but significant act toward creating the realm of God on earth: the responsible verdict in the murder of George Floyd.

We are coming to see that the way we shepherd humans and the way we shepherd the earth are inseparable. Racism not only fosters environmental injustice, it is an injustice against God's earth.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The verdict in Minneapolis was the result of millions of people taking to the streets, pulling with all their weight on the arc of the moral universe, and now we have seen it bend, and feel moved by the courage and persistence that made this happen, moved that a world of justice is possible.

We still have far to go, but we can feel good today that our church was part of that arc-bending.

And we can recognize that this enormous movement that we were a part of is something even greater. It is not just a movement of people, but a movement of the earth, because as Jesus and all the major religious traditions teach us, Good Shepherding is a core characteristic of the creator of the universe and all that the creator made. It is the sacred way that flows through nature.

The Spirit that created the earth wants it to be the realm of God, a place of justice, harmony and sufficiency for all, and so the Spirit designed our hearts to be moved to shepherd the lost and hurting people and creatures around us.

This is a beautiful thing, a source of hope and joy, a love that can change the world. Let us celebrate it and pledge our entire lives to serve it as we worship together.

*the sermon begins below*

## *Good Shepherding*

One of the tragic errors of any religion happens when it places the individual at the center of its concern and loses the truth that the Spirit of the universe is also concerned with the entire community, with the entire ecosystem, with the entire species, with the entire planet, in other words, with the whole of which the individual is a part.

The opposite is equally tragic, when a totalitarian leader or cult denies the sanctity of the individual and enforces lock-step uniformity.

The truth of the Spirit of God is that it creates a wide diversity of individuals that it unites as one through interdependence and dynamic harmony and balance. This is true in our bodies and the complex systems of the earth and the vast, unified galaxy of over one hundred billion stars. Both diversity and unity are necessary and sacred, and we cannot live sustainably without honoring and working with both.

The passages we just heard use the image of living water in both ways, individual diversity and collective unity.

Revelation sees a river of God flowing through the ideal human civilization, producing the fruit of the earth and bringing the healing of the nations. The river of living water is an image of sufficiency, sustainability and harmony.

Revelation says living water flows from the throne of God in the city. The Gospel of John says that the living water is the Spirit of God flowing from our innermost depths. These are not incompatible.

Jesus said that the realm of God is within us. God's throne is there, within every human on earth, and within all that the Spirit of the universe has created. Jesus said in the Gospel of Thomas, "Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find me there." We are each created to be a source of living water to the world, our diversity feeding the unity.

The other passage we heard from John takes place at the well of Jacob, a well dug into the earth that had sustained the people of Israel and Samaria for generations. Jesus compares it to the Holy Spirit that we can find within us by opening our hearts and minds and believing in it.

We can believe the physical fact that our hearts and brains are over 70 percent water. We can believe the physical fact that the surface of the earth is also over 70 percent water. It is equally a physical fact that the living water, the Spirit of the universe that created and evolved all things, flows through us, and all around us. We are made of water and star dust that the living water has shaped into conscious humans.

Jesus said that the living water would lead us to eternal life if we believed in it. We can hear that individually and think he means heaven when we die, but we need also to hear it collectively as meaning that the living water will lead us to the conditions that will allow life to continue on earth for individuals and for all beings.

Imagine that the woman in the story is all of humanity today. We dig into the earth to quench our thirst. We dig for oil to quench our thirst for power and wealth and ease, we exploit other species and other humans, we force the poor to drink polluted water or to pay for clean.

Jesus finds us standing at this ancient sacred well of a planet. He comes to us in the form of the poor, in the form of oppressed racial groups, in the form of climate refugees at our southern border, in the form of children who are inheriting a ruined earth. The Jesus in them is looking us in the eye and asking, "Give me a drink."

And we don't know what to say any more than the woman at the well did. How can we possibly answer?

But Jesus understands our situation, he has compassion for us, and he tells us that if we were wise we would ask him for the living water, the Spirit that he can lead us to, that can quench our thirst as none of our programs for happiness in wealth or power or ease can do. The living water that gushes up in those who drink from the well Jesus offers us will carry humanity in its flow to eternal life, to a sustainable way of living as the realm of God's peace and justice and generosity on earth.

Earth Day is April 22nd. After fifty years it still means that we need to clean up the waters we have polluted and steward earth's water, land and air and bring environmental justice and reparation to those who have been abused.

We need to go farther, though. We need Earth Day to be a high holy day, a day both of atonement and at-one-ment, a celebration of renewal and hope, when we recognize the

living water of the Spirit that makes every individual and every community on earth sacred and worthy of compassion and love.

The solution to humanity's crisis is in us each and in what theologians and systems scientists call the noosphere, which is a name for the river of living water covering the earth, the global network of diverse human minds that together form a living consciousness of the earth itself. We each contribute our part by listening to the Spirit within us and within the local home place that we know intimately, and by following where the voice of that Spirit calls us to bring our gifts of love and care.

So let us pray in silence, practicing listening to the Spirit moving in our heart and in our place...

***A Haiku by Mel Goertz:***

A chickadee sits  
on an elderberry branch.  
Now his perch has leaves.