

*Are You Not of More Value Than They?*

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*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*

*June 25, 2023 Fourth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Psalms 84; Deuteronomy 5:33, 6:5-9; Matthew 6:25-31, 33*

**Welcome:** Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome to the Cantornote Church Musicians—it is wonderful to have you here again!

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times to this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom which sees all life and the land itself as gifts of the Spirit and manifestations of the Spirit's presence.

In a way, this place is like every other place. If the Spirit is everywhere, then this is its dwelling-place, but so are our homes, and so are the woods and fields, and museums and concert halls, and shopping malls and prisons.

But in another way, we sanctify this sanctuary as especially sacred ground by trying to make it as clearly God's dwelling-place as we possibly can. We try to fill this church with the unconditional welcome, compassion and love of Christ, and that work makes this place feel more sacred. As we practice loving one another as Jesus did, we can come to feel that this truly is the Spirit's home and our home, a place of connection to our source of renewal.

Please continue to make this possible today, cultivating the peace and joy of dwelling in God's love by extending your care and support to one another, greeting especially those you do not know well and those you know are struggling.

**Call to Worship:** Aldo Leopold was a member of the first class of Yale's School of Forestry, decades before Gus Speth was Dean there. Aldo Leopold went on to be responsible for the designation of the first wilderness area in the United States and to be a founder of the Wilderness Society, and his book *A Sand County Almanac* is one of the most influential in American history.

Leopold said, “That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.” He saw that in this destructive age we need a new system of ethics, a land ethic. He said, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land....”

He said, “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

Today’s scriptures support Leopold’s vision. They call us to change our lives to reflect that land ethic and encourage others to do the same. Let us open ourselves to this calling as we worship together.

**Children’s Time**— One of my favorite stories was told by Carl Jung.

Many years ago in a remote part of China, there was a terrible drought. The people tried all kinds of Chinese rituals and Christian prayers to bring rain and nothing worked. They sent a messenger to a distant province begging a famous Taoist holy man to come who was called The Rainmaker.

At last he arrived and all he asked was for a quiet hut to be alone. He went inside, shut the door, and a day went by, then two and finally on the third day, a huge drought-ending storm began. The little man came out of the hut and a Christian missionary asked how he had done it.

The Rainmaker said that he had not created the storm. The missionary asked, “How do you explain it?” The Rainmaker said that where he came from the people and the land were in harmony with the Tao or Spirit, but here everything was out of harmony, and he himself felt so disturbed that he had to sit in meditation for three days before he was back in the sacred Way. After he was one with the Spirit again, he said, then naturally everything came into harmony around him.

I thought of that story because of the Psalm we just read. It said, “Happy are those ...in whose heart are the highways to Zion.” The Rainmaker found the highway to the Tao in his heart. He relied on that flowing spirit for all his strength.

The Psalm says that as such people go through a dry valley, they bring springs and rain that end the drought. That means that if you trust in the Spirit’s power within you and follow its

sacred way of love and right relationship to all things, then everywhere you go you make things good around you, the way the rain greens everything up.

This is the best way we can possibly be with each other and with the land around us. Our job is to love God and keep remembering God's love of all beings and all the earth, and if we do that, then the world around us will be more in harmony.

Prayer opens us to let the Spirit's love flow through us, which is what the Rainmaker did. So let us practice it. Let us take a breath, open our hearts and say together the Lord's Prayer...

### ***Are You Not of More Value Than They?***

Christ's Sermon on the Mount provided the ethic for Gandhi's practice of nonviolence and it points to the ethic that could reverse humanity's environmental destruction.

But one little question in it causes problems. Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your loving God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

A few chapters later Jesus says that not a single sparrow falls to the ground apart from God, but again he says, "You are of more value than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:29-31)

From a monetary perspective, this was true. Two sparrows were sold for a penny, and in the Roman Empire humans sold as slaves were worth the equivalent of tens of thousands of dollars.

But from a spiritual perspective, Jesus taught that life derives its value not from material worth, but from the Spirit, and from love—God's love for us and ours for God and for one another. The way the Spirit's love flows through our unique gifts into the world gives our lives ultimate meaning.

So the question, "Are you not of more value than they?" can be answered yes and no. Yes, by monetary standards, but no, because human life has no value apart from the same thing that gives the birds of the air and lilies of the field their value: our source in the Spirit, and the Spirit's love flowing through us.

If God loves and cares for the smallest sparrow and wildflower, then they have infinite value, and we fight against that love if we jeopardize the ability of birds and lilies to live.

The problem is that too many people, including many Christians, act as if our human value gives us the right to devalue and abuse the earth to serve our self-interest. This leads to the removal of mountaintops, the polluting of water and air, the imbalance of the earth's climate and all the local damage we inflict.

So much depends on the way we answer that little question, "Are you not of more value than they?"

Aldo Leopold was not an overtly religious writer, but a hundred years ago he had a revelation of the spirit that flows through all creation, what he called the "green fire" that he saw in the eyes of a dying mother wolf that he had shot.

Leopold had been an avid hunter. He supported and even encouraged the hunting that was driving many species to extinction. But once he saw the green fire, and recognized the inherent value and interconnectedness in all life, and understood the balance that is essential to an ecosystem's equilibrium, he did all he could to harmonize human activity with nature. He helped restore endangered species and the habitats they needed to survive. He bought a run-down farm and worked with his family to renew its health.

Leopold said, "Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

The 84<sup>th</sup> Psalm begins, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O God of hosts!" It teaches that God's dwelling place is wherever there is longing for God, wherever there is trust in God, wherever there are songs of praise for God, wherever there is humility in relation to God. Where these things dwell, the sparrow finds a home. Rain ends the drought and the dry valley becomes a place of springs.

Today's passage from Deuteronomy is one of the cornerstones of the Jewish principle of *tikkun olam*, repairing or restoring the earth. Having a good life on the land God has given us depends on us living according to the ways of God, creating a sustainable harmony between humans and the earth.

Deuteronomy places love at the heart of the sacred way. Aldo Leopold places love at the heart of his ethic, too, the love of the land and all the members of the earth's biotic community.

Robin Wall Kimmerer acknowledges her scientific and spiritual kinship with Aldo Leopold in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Love is at the core of her ethic as well, and so is the indigenous understanding of the human place in creation.

Her answer to the question, “Are you not of more value than they?” is a definite no. Indigenous traditions refer to humans as the younger siblings of Creation who need to learn from their elders, the sparrows and lilies, more ancient species that can teach us how to live in harmony, practicing virtues like generosity and reciprocity.

It takes humility to learn from other species, and it takes an awe that is a form of love. The other night Christina and I climbed to the top of our field and looked down at thousands of fireflies dazzling our eyes. We rarely see the diminutive winter wren but the great life flowing through its melodious trill makes us pause in the garden and sing our own songs of praise.

Aldo Leopold wrote, “Our ability to perceive quality in nature...expands through successive stages of the beautiful.... When we hear [the crane’s] call we hear...the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution.” (*A Sand County Almanac*, p 96)

“Look at the birds of the air,” Jesus said. He wanted us to see how much God loves them, and how God cares for them. Surely part of his message is that we should love them and care for them, too, and feel how blessed we are by the love of God we can hear in the songs of the thrush or the geese.

“Are you not of more value than they?” Maybe not of *more* value, but you, too, are one of God’s blessings of creation, and God’s love is in your song, too.

Robin Wall Kimmerer shares the indigenous understanding that out of our love and gratitude for the earth should flow a sense of responsibility and reciprocity, using our gifts to give back to the source of those gifts. The scriptures teach us to stop worrying about material things and strive to live in the sacred way instead, trusting in the Spirit to show us how to use our gifts and live in harmony with one another and with the land. This is the earth’s one last hope for humankind.

Aldo Leopold wrote, “No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions.”

Let us pray in silence, listening for the Spirit to show us what we can do with our gifts to help bring about the change of consciousness that will transform humanity to value and save life on earth. Let us pray...

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

Outside my window  
fluttering Swallowtail wings.  
Phlox is in blossom.