

First Congregational Church, Cannon Falls
April 24, 2022
In This Time of Great Change . . .
Rev. Dwight Wagenius, Guest Preacher

Good morning. It's so good to be with you in Cannon Falls on this Earth Sunday.

This is a kind of back-to-the-roots event for me. My Grandma and Grandpa Wagenius were married in Cannon Falls. Betsy Hagman was a young girl when her family emigrated from Sweden to Cannon Falls where she grew up. Samuel Olaf (known as SO) Wagenius at age 18 traveled alone from Sweden to America in about 1867. After a year or two in Iowa, he came to Cannon Falls. Betsy and SO met, married, and moved to Holmes City, in west central Minnesota where, subsequently, my father and then I were born and raised. I am pleased to be here.

Pastor Grace invited me to your pulpit on this Earth Sunday because she knows of my work to protect God's creation, an ethic that was slowly and surely formed, as was I, within the mores of the culture of Holmes City, where folks were stewards of the land. That ethic was nurtured further when I spent two years on the edge of the desert in the Peace Corps in north Africa.

God is still speaking! We know that. We believe that.

So on this Earth Sunday it's good, it's appropriate, to fully ground ourselves in the words about God's creation, in the understanding that this is God's earth on which we are the current tenants.

The word of God from Genesis is not history or reporting but rather a sustained story. It's an origin story— created and carried through time orally by telling, and retelling based on retelling, and finally written down.

We know the story well. At each step in the story of creation God stepped back, reviewed what God had created and assessed it as good or very good.

Some have said that the creation of humanity in God's image with a commission to rule over the animals, plants, and all living things carries a license for ecological irresponsibility. But the Bible portrays humanity not as the owner of nature but as its steward, strictly accountable to its true owner.

Leviticus 25 makes the point clearly. In God's words, in verses 23 and 24 (quote) "the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land." (enquote)

For a long time I thought redemption referred only to a response to a claim from prior owners. But in its discussion of sabbatical years and the every-fifty-year jubilee year, Leviticus makes it clear that the jubilee is the year in which the land is redeemable by God, the true owner. The phrase, "you are but aliens and tenants" emphasizes the transitory nature of human land

ownership. We humans occupy the earth only for our lifetime. God remains. God's word in Leviticus leaves no doubt about what is required of a steward of creation—to care for it while in our tenancy.

Because we are stewards caring for God's earth while it is in our temporary tenancy we need to listen to what science, another gift from God, is telling us about God's earth.

The recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change restated the perilous state of creation and told us what must be done. We must take actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions by roughly 50% by 2030 to avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change on the earth and its creatures. It's a huge task, doable, but huge.

So, People of Faith, what does all of this mean for us?

Science tells us what we need to know; Jesus tells us what we need to do.

The gospels of Mathew, Mark, and Luke tell us the same story with almost the same words about a lawyer or scribe who was questioning Jesus. The lawyer asked "which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus uncharacteristically did not answer with a parable. His answer was direct: (quote) "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (enquote)

One obvious extension of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is taking care of the animals and plants and other living things that God created and called good, and doing so with ALL of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Focus with me on loving God with all our mind. That to me is *being mindful* of the consequences of our actions, each one of our actions as it impacts God's earth, God's creation.

When Jesus said we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, it may be that to love God with all our strength is the most difficult. It's a huge commitment.

Some have argued that individual actions alone will not solve the changing climate problem. We need systemic change. That's true. We need systemic change. But it's also true that it's individual actions that have initiated systemic, institutional change. Think for a moment about divestment from fossil fuels. Our UCC was one of the very early leaders in the fossil fuel divestment movement that's less than 10 years old. Divestment has been wildly successful by anyone's standards, and its impact great.

Historically using fossil fuels to generate electricity has contributed significantly to Minnesota's greenhouse gas emissions. Right now those emissions are at about 25% of our total emissions but are dropping rapidly. Electricity is getting cleaner with the addition of very inexpensive

wind- and solar-generated electricity. And electricity will continue to get even cleaner as expensive coal-fired electric generation is retired as planned.

Structural change, i.e., systemic change, is now creating a path forward. Now we must *use* that cleaner electricity. Our individual actions, our individual decisions, matter. Those individual decisions need to consider the impacts on our neighbors, every one of them, following God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Science tells us that powering everything in our lives by electricity—especially using the new and most efficient electric appliances—will go a long way toward getting our emissions down and reducing the impact of the changing climate on our neighbors, that is, on everyone.

I would not be comfortable advocating for electrification if I weren't working on it.

We own some land near where I grew up. We have an old house and some outbuildings in a grove of trees. Trees have blown down and other trees threaten the buildings on the farm. I've needed a chain saw, and I have two gasoline-powered saws. But after I started thinking about the greenhouse gas emissions I was creating, I bought an electric chain saw. A big one. I was surprised that big ones were even made. It works great. It's not for taking down or cutting up the trunk of a large tree, but for everything else it's great. With proper safety equipment, a son and a grandson have used it as well. No greenhouse gas emissions, no flammable fossil fuels to buy or transport, no noxious fumes, less noise, lighter; I call it a sweet deal.

Our house in Minneapolis was designed for natural gas, a fossil fuel that is mostly methane. My wife and I recently replaced our gas water heater with an air source heat pump hybrid electric water heater. We replaced our gas dryer with an Energy Star electric dryer, and our gas stove with a super-efficient induction stove. Two weeks from now a contractor will install a highly efficient cold climate air source heat pump with electric resistance backup to heat and cool our house. We've never had air conditioning so we're pleased that greatly reducing emissions from heating includes a flip side of providing cooling.

We've transitioned primarily to reduce emissions, but the operating economics work in our favor too. The estimated yearly energy cost of the new water heater is \$113 as opposed to more than double that with the old gas heater. The estimated yearly energy cost of the new dryer is \$35. We don't have an estimate for the stove but by all accounts it uses far less energy than the gas stove it replaced.

I'm not going to advocate that you follow the same path we did and make multiple conversions over a relatively short period of time. What I will suggest is that you have a plan to convert any fossil fuel appliances and furnaces to electric ones when the fossil fuel appliances fail or become outdated, as they inevitably will, or a plan to replace failing or outdated electric appliances and furnaces with the new very efficient ones.

In Minnesota the use of fossil fuels to move cars and trucks accounts for 25% of Minnesota's greenhouse gas emissions so you can see how important individual actions are. Structural change is happening. And here, in Minnesota, it appears that individuals are more than ready to switch to electric vehicles.

Another 25% of Minnesota's greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture. Change here is not close to meeting the goals necessary to protect God's earth. For our part, being mindful of the foods we eat—plant based, lower on the food chain, are individual actions that can spur the needed systemic change. I like to remind myself of God's provision of nourishment that will not harm God's creation.

God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food." (Genesis 1: 29.)

In this time when we need profound change, every one of us will be a role model and a support system for each other as we model the needed profound change. That's what Jesus meant when he charged us to "go and do likewise." It will take all of us doing everything we can. This is where we can show our love of our neighbor.

The same forces that are harming God's creation are harming the future of our children and grandchildren, and those future generations that are no less our neighbors than those who are our neighbors today.

So we, People of Faith, will—and must—exercise everyday ethics, the consistent changes—the thoughtful and intentional acts for the common good, that will be part of the change.

And we, People of Faith, will not be deterred.

For we, People of Faith, love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength.

And now more than ever, we, People of Faith, with dominion over living creatures of every kind and every plant yielding food of every kind will steward, will protect, what God created. We can do it. We must do it.

The jubilee is coming. The jubilee when we return a healthy sustainable earth to God. And to the next generations of humankind.

May it be so.