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Living in Caring Consumption: Sermon Study



Enfolded (Interior 2)

Artist: Karl Fay, 2013

([assets/images/EnfoldedInteriorPanel2Print.jpg](#))

Biblical Theology and Ecology:

Have you noticed how grocery stores are being transformed? With the proliferation of farmer's markets and the development of an ecological consciousness, grocery stores are becoming grocery stories.

You go to the produce section and there, above the corn, is a small sign with a map and a picture. You can see the place where your food was grown, the farmer who produced your food, and, in the accompanying description, you can read about the farm. Its history or agricultural practices. Behind four ears of corn, tightly wrapped in cellophane, there is a story. A story of how the food that you eat was brought to you from the world you live in. Near the door of the store is a barrel asking for your used plastic bags and, nearby, a stand that provides reusable cloth bags for sale. A sign here offers you another story, a story of where the waste that you produce ends up in the world. As you walk into a grocery store, therefore, you are no longer simply in a place that provides commodities for purchase. Instead, you are drawn into a community. You have moved from commodity to community, from resources to relationships. You begin to see how the food you eat comes from the larger world you live in and how the waste you produce returns to the world once again. Grocery stores have become grocery stories and the question is "where does the church fit into this ecological conversation? What story do we have to tell?"

For some Christians, the question itself is odd. Our attention has been focused on mission. Saving souls not trees. Caring for people not animals. To even begin the conversation seems strange. It appears as if the church is somehow selling out to a political agenda, letting the environmental movement dictate our theological conversation. Yet, you don't have to read very far in the bible (try starting at Genesis 1!) to find out that God indeed is involved in an ecological conversation with his people. Scripture is filled with the language of God's creation of the world and his care for the world that he has created. So deep is that love, so certain is that goodness, that the future life is not pictured as a disembodied existence. Rather, Jesus rises in his body, the first fruits of a new creation. God promises us a new heaven and a new earth and eternal life in glorified bodies. Does the conversation seem strange? That's simply because the church has not talked about God's care of creation enough over the years. But Scripture is filled with resources that enable us to enter into this ecological conversation.

Beginning the conversation can be hard, however. This is primarily because the voices that are calling for care of creation often do so without an appreciation of the Christian story. Christianity, itself, has been seen as part of the problem. The popular evolutionary biologist and atheist, Richard Dawkins has attributed to Christianity the ideological crime of speciesism: separating the human species from other species and thereby making it possible to do things to other species that one would not do to the human species. In his book *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins describes "the breathtaking speciesism of our Christian-inspired attitudes": "the abortion of a single human zygote (most of them are destined to be spontaneously aborted anyway) can arouse more moral solicitude and righteous indignation than the vivisection of any number of intelligent adult chimpanzees!" ¹ Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics at Princeton University and animal rights activist, claims that the Judeo-Christian tradition is a fundamental problem for the animal rights movement. The

Genesis account is a "myth to make human beings feel their supremacy and their power" and results in "species-selfishness." 2 When the Christian story has been so ostracized and demonized in the cause of care for creation, Christians can mishear even one another. A Christian who speaks about care for the treatment of animals suddenly sounds political and the church can develop an overemphasis on the language of human dominion in order to counteract the cultural denial of the word of God. Suddenly, the church is divided between those who speak about care for creation and those who advocate human dominion, while the majority of believers try to avoid such conversations and turn their attention to subjects about which we can all agree: seeking to save the lost.

Scripture, itself, however, invites us into the conversation and provides us with the language to speak. In reading Genesis 9, one discovers a delicate balance between what could be called care and consumption. At the heart of Genesis 9 lies God's value of life. All of life. God cares for life in several ways: (1) in the reiteration of the original command to Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (9:1); (2) in the direction not to eat meat with its blood in it, for "its blood" is "its life" and life belongs to God (9:4; cf. Lev. 17:10-14); (3) in the protection of human life (9:6); and (4) in God's covenant established not only with Noah but with all living creatures (a fact repeatedly emphasized in 9:10, 12, 13, 15, 16), a covenant to never again destroy the earth through flooding. The text overflows with God's care for life.

At the same time, however, the text expands the complexity of the human experience as a creature caring for God's other creatures. In contrast to Genesis 1:29, God gives Noah and his descendants animals for food (9:2-4). In doing this, God places fear of humans in the hearts of his creatures (9:2) even as he entrusts these creatures to the human community for consumption (9:2-4). The human being, therefore, is always in a position of tension. The tension of caring consumption. On the one hand, as a steward of God's creation and as one who knows how God values life, the human creature cares for other creatures in order that creation might flourish according to God's original design. On the other hand, as a recipient of God's care, the human being also receives the gift of animals for food, knowing that God provides this means for his creatures to sustain life. God's people, therefore, care for creation even as they consume of it. Both are recognized to be part of God's good design and acknowledged as God's gift.

Thus, Christians have a God-given interest in the care of animals. They seek to help them flourish and can explore with faithful responsibility the ecological effects of patterns of human consumption. The grocery store, for Christians, is more than a place to purchase goods. It is a place where Christians can confess the goodness of creation. Changing how we see things, examining our purchasing habits, moving our conversation from the goods of creation to the goodness of creation, from resources to relationships, from commodities to community, are part of a faithful responsible witness. Some Christians articulate this care for animals in a way that calls for vegetarianism as the most responsible form of Christian living.

3 This sermon does otherwise. Building on God's gift of animals for consumption in Genesis 9:2-4, this sermon calls for a compassionate treatment of the animals that God has given us for food. 4 It seeks to articulate that tension wherein we do not deny God's gift of animals for consumption but we also do not overemphasize that gift to the point where

animals are no longer cared for as they are processed and packaged for consumption. 5 God calls us to live within the delicate balance of a faithful responsible caring consumption.

6

The book of Jonah has what might be considered the strangest ending of all of the prophetic books: ". . . and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:11). God has sent Jonah in mission to call the people of Nineveh to repentance. After recounting Jonah's resistance and ultimate obedience, the book brings the reader to the end of the story. Not just the salvation of the people of Nineveh, but something more. At the end of the story, as God reveals his great missionary compassion to his reluctant prophet, God suddenly expands Jonah's vision. God speaks of his pity for the people of Nineveh: "and should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left" (4:11). But then, God expands his vision to include even creation itself: "and also much cattle" (4:11). The mission of God has suddenly been transformed from saving human lives to caring for creatures as well.

A similar transformation is happening in the following sermon. The sermon seeks to expand the church's vision from the covenant with Abraham, wherein God will bless all nations through him (Gen. 12:1-3), to the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:1-17). Here, the church suddenly sees another gracious working of God. His care for all of creation. Historically, the church has been deeply engaged in missiological witness. Our members are accustomed to hearing sermons that encourage them to witness to others about salvation in Jesus Christ. And congregations have engaged in demographic studies, knowing in great detail the people of their neighborhood. This sermon, for a moment, suggests that we broaden our vision. That, in addition to people, we manifest God's concern for "much cattle." Imagine a congregation engaged in an ecological study, considering their contribution as Christians in that location to the community of created life. 7 For some, this will sound as strange as God's words to Jonah. For others, however, it will help them honor the good design of God.

The goal of this sermon is that God's people participate in a faithful and responsible practice of caring consumption. Since this aspect of discipleship is appreciated in various ways in various congregations, the preacher will want to be discerning in how he uses the material presented here for a sermon. Some communities may be pushed deeper into a concrete examination of their practices of consumption; while other communities may only begin considering this faithful expression of the life that God desires. The goal, here, is to gain a hearing: to proclaim God's word faithfully in a way that does not unnecessarily offend. By doing this, you will help the church enter into the larger ecological conversation of our culture and discover that God has given the church a voice, along with a life of witness to share with and for the world.

Sermon Formation

Focus God values all life and calls us to a life of caring consumption in his creation.

that the hearers live in caring consumption. As God's people, we are mindful of

Function God's covenant with all creatures and demonstrate a faithful responsibility toward the created world.

although God has called us to a life of caring consumption, we fail to live in his good design.

Malady On the one hand, we at times deny the care of creation. In this case, we live solely in terms of consumption. We see the world as full of resources to be used and overlook the way God has filled the world with relationships to be cultivated. We reduce our world to commodities for our use and remain blind to the community of God's creatures.

On the other hand, we at times also deny the consumption of that which God has given for our use. Environmental activists can be so drawn into the care of creation that they deny God has given animals to the human creature for food. Such claims, they argue, are a form of speciesism or human exceptionalism.

Means Christ manifested God's value of life by valuing our lives. When seeing us in our sin, he offered his life for ours. In his death upon the cross, he shed his blood for all people and in his resurrection he calls us to live as witnesses of God's good design, careful stewards of God's gift of creation.

the sermon uses an image to create a frame-and-refrain design. g

The sermon opens with an image that will frame the whole sermon: the image of a mayfly in the palm of a child's hand surrounded by a rainbow. This image leads the hearers to the refrain that structures the flow of the sermon: "God has placed that which he treasures into our hands and invites us into a life of caring consumption."

Structure The sermon then anchors this teaching in the text from Genesis, revealing how God established a covenant with all living creatures after the flood and called humans into a life of caring consumption in his creation.

The sermon then explores this teaching in relation to our lives, moving from repentance for times that we fail to exercise caring consumption to our forgiveness in Christ, and then to envisioning the new life that Christ brings us in his resurrection.

The sermon then closes by returning to the image and meditating upon the work of God, calling us into a life of faithful responsibility as creatures in the community of his creation.

SECTION FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986), 263.
2. Peter Singer, "Prologue: Ethics and the New Animal Liberation Movement" in *In Defense of Animals*, ed. Peter Singer (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 2-4.
3. See Stephen R. Kaufman and Nathan Braum, *Good News for All Creation: Vegetarianism as Christian Stewardship* (Cleveland: Vegetarian Advocates Press, 2004)

- and Richard A. Young, *Is God a Vegetarian? Christianity, Vegetarianism, and Animal Rights* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1998), and Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating (The Christian Practice of Everyday Life)* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).
4. For a helpful defense of meat consumption within the Catholic tradition, see Beth K. Haile, "Virtuous Meat Consumption: A Virtue Ethics Defense of an Omnivorous Way of Life" in *Logos* 16.1 (Winter 2013): 83-100.
 5. This is not an easy task, as Beth Haile notes in her article (see previous citation), considering that "In 2008, 17,328,000 cattle, 4,590,314,000 chickens, and 57,542,000 hogs were slaughtered for food" (Haile, 85).
 6. For a theological elaboration on the tension of caring consumption, see Charles Arand's work in *Together with All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth. A Report of the Commission of Theology and Church Relations. The Lutheran Church "Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: CPH, 2010), 83-99.
 7. Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig offers some very concrete examples of such congregational activities in his article calling churches to enter into this ecological conversation. See Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig, "From Commodity to Community: Churches and the Land They Own," in *The Cresset* (Trinity 2013): 19-25. The article may be accessed at http://thecresset.org/2013/Trinity/Waldkoenig_T13.html (http://thecresset.org/2013/Trinity/Waldkoenig_T13.html). Accessed August 14, 2013.
 8. For a description of this structure, see the information posted on this sermon structure located at *The Pulpit* on concordiatheology.org. See <http://concordiatheology.org/sermon-structs/dynamic/imagistic-structures/frame-refrain/> (<http://concordiatheology.org/sermon-structs/dynamic/imagistic-structures/frame-refrain/>)