

Loving God's Creation One Limit at a Time
First Congregational Church, Burlington, Vermont

March 4, 2010

Bill Vitek

Thank you Andy, and good evening Rev. Lee, members of the congregation and guests. I am delighted to be with you this evening, and to share some thoughts—and to hear yours as well—about your community's yearlong theme: "Loving God's Creation." The Lenten season is an especially good time for this kind of reflection. The word "Lent" is old English for "lengthen," in recognition of the slow coming of spring and its promise of renewal and resurgence. More light, warmer days, those first crocuses breaking through the icy soil. Let's be honest, loving nature is just plain easier in the spring. We made it through another winter of darkness, cold, and deprivation. Life goes on.

For Christians the Lenten season follows a similar course. Lent is a time of sacrifice and preparation for a similar promise of new life and renewal. The Easter promise of everlasting life is available not just for the risen Christ, but for all who are prepared to follow His message of love and forgiveness, and to trust His claim that the Kingdom of God is within us all. Life goes on.

The forty days of Lent **also** parallel Jesus' forty days of temptation and deprivation in the desert, and both symbolize the sacrifice and self-control necessary to prepare for the promise to come. Jesus is tempted three times in the desert, and his temptations are not unlike our own. His first temptation—to turn stones into bread—is our temptation to have what we want whenever we want it, and usually right now! Jesus' second temptation—to have power and

authority over all—is our temptation to control nature, the gene, the atom, the economy, and even the weather. Jesus’ last temptation—to throw himself off the temple spiral without harm—is our temptation to live forever here on Earth, or at least as long as we can, without limit and without recognizing or caring about the needs of the rest of life on Earth.

But unlike Jesus’ ability to resist these temptations, I think you will agree that they have more or less, and on a global scale, gotten the better of all of us. Worse, how can we love God’s creation when our impetuosity, greed and lust for power lead us to treat the living Earth as nothing more than our supermarket, playground, laboratory and dumpster?

The story of how we humans were tempted to separate ourselves from God and his living Earth is well known to Christians. It’s the Genesis story of creation and of the “original” sin. The first couple was tempted by a tree of knowledge that would make them like gods. Like Jesus they were tempted by abundance, power and the promise of invincibility. But how is it that they were tempted by a tree, by food, while in a garden of abundance? How was this tree so different from the rest that it could tempt Adam and Eve to turn away from their creator?

Scholars tell us that the “tree” was no tree at all, but rather a grass, wheat grass. The temptation was agriculture itself, the most significant break from nature in human history, and with it the temptation to control our food supply rather than relying on nature’s abundance. The serpent, these same scholars tell us, symbolizes the snakes used to guard the surplus wheat stored in ancient

granaries against rats and other “pests.” Nature becomes the enemy when we consider it our competitor.

The story of Genesis is the story of the birth of agriculture and the birth of the modern human being. Humanity’s original sin, St. Augustine tells us, is pride and a turning away from God. I confess it’s a pretty powerful temptation, and it looks like we have quite a bit show for it. Ours is a 10,000 year history of unprecedented abundance—at least for humans. But it has come at a terrible cost to the rest of God’s creation.

Loving God’s creation requires us to better resist these ancient and modern temptations, and to embrace the thoroughly paradoxical claim that prosperity in all of its forms requires limitations on our freedom. This is the message of the Garden of Eden, of Jesus’ power over his temptations, of the Lenten promise of new life through sacrifice, and the clarion call of environmentalism since Henry David Thoreau. Life must go on, and limits are the roots of its prosperity.

I’ve brought along a short presentation on limits that I’d now like to share with you, and with it to encourage you to consider making limits an everyday part of your life long after this Lenten season has passed. Don’t worry, it’s not as bad as it sounds!