

SERMON
(Grace Church, Keswick)
Pentecost Proper 22, Year B, October 6, 2024
Genesis 2:18-24; Ps. 8; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Good morning! A warm welcome to all of you who are worshipping here in person and online. My name is Benjamin Webb. I'm a recently retired Episcopal priest from Iowa who moved to Charlottesville a year and a half ago with my wife Lindy.

I'm here this morning at the kind invitation of your Rector, Miles, who as most of you probably know is on retreat at Shrine Mont with some of your members this weekend.

You would normally be blessing the animals today, but with his absence that is now postponed to next week. I loved hearing from Miles that you bless generously here at Christ Church. You bless the animals associated with the feast day of Saint Francis (the Sunday closest to October 4); you bless the horses and the hounds around Thanksgiving time; and you even bless the grapevines in the vineyards! Perhaps you also bless the farms that are a part of your annual farm tour! Along with the vines, that would be fitting since we already consecrate and bless bread and wine for communion every Sunday, and so it would complete the link from farm to table – the Lord's Table in our case, the Table that is spread for all.

Do we bless enough? No. Can we bless too much? I doubt it. My wife says it's hard for her to get enough blessings from her husband! Hear that, all of you husbands! We need to summon more blessings! Note how even today's gospel concludes...

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them...And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

I knew an Episcopal priest in Iowa who took this to heart. Every time he saw a baby in a restaurant, he'd ask the parent if it was okay to bless them. I don't think he was ever refused. Imagine all the eyes that beheld this loving act each time.

In the Episcopal Church, it is normative for us to welcome and bless the newborn child, to mark/seal and bless the newly baptized, to confirm and bless young adults committing their lives to Christ, to ordain and bless a priest, to consecrate and bless a bishop, to solemnize and bless a marriage, to forgive and bless a confessor,

to anoint and bless the sick, to extend last rites and bless the dying, and to bury and bless the dead.

This is our Anglican way of marking milestones in our Christian life and journey, making clear what a sacred and holy thing it all is. It's a way of consecrating our lives and our various life-stage vows to God.

These are what we call Sacraments, traditionally defined by Saint Augustine as, "An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."

Meaning, I think, that we don't so much bless someone or something and thereby make it holy. Rather we bless to acknowledge the inherent holiness we perceive is already there. We bless to elevate our understanding of a person's true identity and purpose in God, and we do so in a very intentional and public way that validates it communally. Blessing accords a respect that is meant to be affirmed and honored by others. It raises our spiritual awareness and mutual regard, and thus our ethical standards in relationship to one another, which increases our care and treatment towards others.

When we bless our pets - who wear so naturally the boundless love of their Creator that we experience through their constant trust and love for us - the blessing is an explicit acknowledgement by us of that preexisting reality. It's not something we conger up on their behalf, because every creature is a word of God already.

Yet with all of this in mind, I'm just no longer sure that these 7 traditional sacraments and their blessings go far enough to meet the enormous challenge of our time that so many of us perceive in the widespread groaning of the creation.

We are living in a perilous time when God's magnificent creation is experiencing such devastation at the hands of modern society. The church universal is to blame for some of this wanton destruction, because we have largely failed to assert that "The earth is the Lord's and everything therein," together with all its ethical implications. But the roots of this crisis all begin with devaluing the creation - of modern man vainly imagining that creation exists apart from God and for our own purposes. This in turn erodes the high standards of good stewardship that our relationship to God's creation properly requires of us.

First we thought the world apart, in order to take it apart. Now we have to think it back together, in order to put it back together. We have to resanctify the world, and

reconsecrate the people to our proper place in the creation as caretakers and good stewards.

And the good news, I believe, is that the Episcopal Church holds one of the keys we desperately need going forward.

It's been said that the task of the last generation of Episcopalians was to recover the *centrality of the Eucharist* as part of our regular Sunday worship. Mission accomplished. The task of my own generation has been to recover the *centrality of Baptism* which commissions each of us for ministry and service in all its varied forms. Mission partly accomplished. But many are now coming to see that everyone's task in our time is to recover the *centrality of our care for creation* as the first and finest form of faith and stewardship. So we're trying to recover this fugitive dimension of our faith that's always been there, but we've allowed to run away from ourselves. We are trying to bind this back into the heart of the church and what it means to be a Christian: that *to keep the faith we must also keep the earth*.

At Grace Church it seems you're already on the right path with this broader pattern of blessings. But if we are truly orthodox Anglicans, we can also comfortably embrace what 20th century Archbishop William Temple called our "sacramental worldview." It's not really an extension of our current 7 sacraments, but a theological and spiritual foundation that undergirds them all in the sacredness and sanctity of life itself, of life in a world made and filled and sustained by God.

Because our modern culture does not share this view, and because our weekly Eucharist does not highlight this orthodox theology of creation as much as it might in our regular worship, the good news is that the Episcopal Church is now making a set of Creation Season worship resources available for use for a 2-month period. These must first be authorized for use by Bishop Stevenson who will be visiting here with area clergy later this month, so I wouldn't be surprised if the topic is discussed. For those interested, I'll put a link to those Creation Season resources in my sermon:

<https://newcreationliturgies.org/seasonofcreation/>

Grace Church, with its agrarian roots and tradition of extending blessings toward the creation, would seem well suited to lead the way in Virginia with these Creation Season liturgies that inspire us to live aright with God and Creation.

I will close by recalling Miles description of your blessing of the hounds and horses. “While the logistics and congestion and cameras can get a little intense,” he said to me, then paused, “you just wouldn’t believe what a stunning spectacle of life it is, Ben, and what a gift it is for the church to be there to proclaim the blessing it is.”

In a related way it brought to mind the Feast of St. Francis and the blessing of the animals that I once attended at the Cathedral St. John the Divine in NYC, mind you its third largest service of the year behind Christmas and Easter. That gargantuan cathedral is absolutely packed with people of all ages **and** species as the great bronze doors are then opened and a silent procession begins with an elephant, who looks small passing beneath those huge doors. Behind the elephant comes all manner of creatures both great and small as they process the length of the nave, 200 yards long! There is hardly a dry eye in that huge throng of people as everyone asks themselves, *Just when was it that we ever shut these creatures out in the first place? Why did we shut creation out of the liturgy?*

Much as I’d like to be part of the church of all ages and species, it’s perhaps less important to bring them in than it is to recover this fugitive faith we’ve allowed to run away from ourselves, to be inspired by its grand and humbling vision each week in worship, and to take our vision and witness out to the world to heal and restore God’s creation.

We need to Resanctify the world as God’s creation, and Reconsecrate ourselves to its care as Gods stewards. This is the Great Work of reverence and restoration efforts that surround us all in our age.

Let us pray:

There is no plant in the ground
but tells of your beauty O Christ.
There is no creature on the earth
There is no life in the sea
But proclaims your goodness.
There is no bird on the wing
There is no star in the sky
There is nothing beneath the sun
But is full of your blessing.
Enlighten my understanding
Of your presence all around O Christ
Kindle my will to be caring for Creation. AMEN