

Proper 18A
Peace, Seattle
September 7, 2014
Genesis 2:4b-9, 15
Matthew 13:31-32

IT ALL STARTS WITH DIRT

It all starts with dirt—God making this world and molding the human creature.

This second creation story is our beginning today: the one which speaks of a Creator not above and beyond flinging words and singing syllables into stars, moon and sun, but rather a Creator with feet on the ground, committed—eager even—to plant a garden and get his hands dirty.

Kneeling in the clay, God scoops up some earth, adds water for good measure, works it together, shaping it, molding it, and when it finally suits him, inhales deeply, puts lips to nostrils &—AHHHH!—breathes into the dirt, and lo and behold the creature made of dirt begins...breathing on his own.

God will name this first creature ADAM, meaning “Earth man” or better yet “Dirt man,” because he comes from the ADAMAH – the dirt, the earth, the soil—and will find his life there. ADAM from ADAMAH, human from humus.

LOOK! says the story, OUR LIFE COMES FROM DIRT; IT’S WHO WE ARE.
YET, at the same time, in a fit of creativity we have yet to fully fathom, we are God-breathed creatures.

Let’s be clear: the poet who wrote this story of origins wasn’t offering a scientific treatise for how things happened way back when. This poet was intent on sharing with us the surprising intimacy of God’s act of creation and, above all, to show us the kind of Creator we have had from the beginning: One who’s willing to get down and get dirty.

Is it any surprise, then, when the children of ADAM in unprompted, unscripted fashion, find themselves drawn to eating dirt? Listen as Portland essayist Brian Doyle tells the story:¹

“I have a small daughter and two smaller sons, twins,” he writes, “They are all three in our minuscule garden at the moment, my sons eating dirt as fast as they can get it off the planet and down their gullets. They are two years old, they were seized with dir-fever an instant ago, and as admirable direct and forceful young men, quick to act, true sons of the West, they are going to eat some dirt, boy, and you’d better step aside... The boys are eating so much dirt so fast that much of it is missing their maws and sliding muddily down their chicken chests...I watch a handful as it travels. It’s rich brown stuff, almost black, crumbly.

“Dad, they’re eating the garden,” says my daughter.

So they are and I’ll stop them, soon. But for this rare minute in life...I feel, inarticulately, that there’s something simple and true going on here. Because we all eat dirt. Fruits and vegetables are dirt transformed by light and water. Animals are vigorous dirt, having dined on fruit, vegetables or other animals who are dirt. Our houses and schools and offices are cupped by dirt and made of wood, stone and brick—former dirt. Glass is largely melted sand, a kind of clean dirt. Our clothing use to be dirt. Paper was trees was dirt...We breathe dirt suspended in the air, crunch it between our teeth on spinach leaves...wear it in the lines of our hands and the folds of our faces, catch it in ...our noses, eyes, ears...We swim in an ocean of regular normal orthodox there-it-sits-under-everything dirt.” (end quote)

¹ Quoted in David James Duncan, *God Laughs and Plays*. (Great Barrington, MA: Triad Books) 2006, page 85ff. Thanks to Marcia O who brought this to my attention!

This story doesn't stop with the dirt, of course. God has bigger plans in mind for this Dirt-Man. And so we read in verse 15:

THE LORD GOD TOOK THE MAN AND PUT HIM IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN TO TILL & KEEP IT.

We are created for a purpose: to till the garden planet we call home; to tend it, keep it. It's what God created us for. It's our first vocation as humus beings.

For a good long while, we lost track of our calling. But lately we've been rediscovering it again. We're taking God's call seriously. We're reclaiming our vocation as Earth tenders.

- We're asking how we can touch the earth more lightly and creating plans for following through.
- We're educating ourselves on issues like climate change, ocean acidity, and coal trains.
- We're joining hands with **Earth Ministry** and with other communities of faith who, like us, are awakening to the first vocation.
- We're cultivating gardens and we're building seal rafts.

A year ago, author and advocate Brenda Peterson was a guest speaker at Peace.²

- **Brenda shared the work of Seal Sitters with us** and told us about the vulnerability that seal pups experience as they learn to negotiate the waters of the Salish Sea.
- **She told us about the need for safe havens** where they can haul out to rest without being in danger of being attacked or stressed out by curious dogs or humans.
- **And she challenged us**—do you remember?—**to do one simple thing** on behalf of the seals with whom we share Puget Sound. **She challenged us to build a raft.**

And a few weeks ago, under the leadership of our Green Team leader Michael Truog, four Peace families gathered outside on the patio, kids and adults, and built that raft, doing GOD'S WORK with OUR HANDS.

And after building it, we brought it to Brenda's home along Beach Drive, and towed it out to its anchoring place, and when it was anchored, we put our hands on it—three of us in kayaks—and said prayers over it. **We were acting on our first vocation, you see.**

And within 48 hours we got the first TEXT message: SEAL ON THE RAFT.

"In the future," writes Richard Rohr, "morality will come primarily from the earth and the very nature of the cosmos, not from religion (which hasn't done a very good job up to now). This one planet on which all of us stand will tell us that we must live simple lives, and that we must live reverent lives that produce and create instead of merely consume and destroy. And if creation itself is the body of God—the visible revelation of who God is—won't we find ourselves at home again?...Nature itself," he concludes, "is God's first, oldest, and clearest Scripture."³

Today after worship a crew of us will be heading out to dig dirt, pull weeds, pick litter, and shovel bark at the corner of Fauntleroy and Juneau. Another way of acting out our first vocation. God's work—our hands.

There are countless ways to do it. It's important work. It's good work. It's dirty work.

² <http://www.sealsitters.org/> You can learn more about Brenda's writing @ <http://www.literati.net/authors/brenda-peterson/>

³ *On the Threshold of Transformation*. P. 24.

It's the kind of thing God had in mind when God first bent down in the soil and shaped us and breathed life into us.

And it's the kind of thing Jesus had in mind when he said God's reign is like a tiny seed that grows and grows until it becomes a nursery and a safe haven for birds to raise their young.

Yes, it all starts with that dirt.

And our job—our calling—is to keep at it, keep living into this calling we've been given as Earth's tenders, until we ourselves are ready to be received back into the ADAMAH, dust to dust, human to humus, to become one with the dirt once more.

Amen.