

“... And They Will Teach You”

A Sermon for Worship on EARTH DAY SUNDAY
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
April 23, 2017
Text: Job 12:7-10

I remember the first Earth Day, sort of. It happened in 1970 when I was in high school. I remember that it was associated with “Hippies” and those who observed it were called “tree-huggers” and worse. I remember being confused by the whole idea of Earth Day and only at this point do I understand why I was so confused. I didn’t understand what all the fuss was about but not because I didn’t see the need to care for God’s Creation. Quite the opposite. I was confused because I had grown up in a household that already valued and respected God’s Creation.

My mother was an avid environmentalist before the word existed. She gardened passionately growing everything from roses to vegetables. She practiced a limited form of composting in her gardens and had since long before I was born. She canned her own fruit and tomatoes, following in the footsteps of her mother and her grandmother as she did. When my parents began visiting Maine annually in the 1970’s, my mother was most excited to be in the state which inspired Rachel Carson, one of the first great environmentalists. So, you see, I was confused by all the Earth Day celebrations of 1970 because they were celebrating as new the environmental awareness and practices I had grown up with. As I

got older, gradually I realized that Earth Day happened because most people did not grow up like I had. Most people didn't have a clue about what it meant, what it means, to care for the Earth as the cradle for the lives we live each day. Most people had to learn on their own all those ways to love the Earth that my mother had instilled in me from childhood.

As you undoubtedly noticed when you arrived this morning, we celebrated Earth Day here at our church yesterday in a big way. Planned and coordinated by our Pollinator Garden Committee with the oversight and cooperation of the Trustees of this church, we spent yesterday in the midst of Phase I of our Pollinator Garden and Labyrinth project. As some of you are aware, the Pollinator Garden Committee has been working for over a year to come up with a plan for our church to embark on a unique and exciting project with the goal of addressing one of the most pressing environmental issues of our time – the rapid and sudden dwindling of many species of pollinators such as bees, butterflies, birds and many assorted of God's Creatures. The rusty patch bumblebee was placed on the Endangered Species list just this past February, the first time any member of the bee species was given such status. Some people were confused about this action because a bee is just a bug. We run from them when we see them for fear of being stung. We complain about them when they buzz around our picnic tables. We may even wonder why God

would create such annoying little creatures. I know! I felt the same way myself, ever since I was 6 and stepped out a friend's little backyard pool and right onto a bumble bee, stinger side up. I ran, or rather limped all the way home where my mother pulled out the stinger, and had me put ice on the red bump. My face red from crying, I couldn't believe my mother was sympathetic to the bee! "It gave its life to sting you," she gently explained. "It didn't mean to hurt you. It was just doing what it had to do to live, drawing nectar from the clover the pool was on top of. It was just trying to get food for its family. I know it hurts, but please shed a tear for that little life lost too."

See what I mean? Extraordinary! And I just took all that for granted. But no more. Bees matter to all of us. A lot! More than I understood all those years ago and more than most of us truly understand now. Bees and other pollinators are a vitally important part of the food web from which we get the vast majority of food. Notice I did not say, "food chain." This is just one important new fact I learned from the documentary movie we have shown here twice in the last two months, *Hometown Habitat*. In that movie, produced by Catherine Zimmerman and narrated by Dr. Douglas Tallamy, I learned that the notion of a food chain is not only inaccurate, it's part of the problem in understanding just how existential the threat to us the recent pollinator die-off really is. Food web is a much more accurate

description of how the food we need to survive ends up on our tables each day. The food web is intricate because it involves so many creatures whom we never see and therefore just don't understand why each one is so vital. Quite literally, the food web reveals that the way we get our food is not a straight line with humans at the top and tiny creatures like bees at the bottom. The food web concept makes plain that every single organism involved in the production of the food we eat is interconnected. Just like with a spider web, the food web reacts to pressure placed on any section of it. Enough pressure on a spider web and it tears and collapses. So too with the food web. It's just that basic.

That's one of the biggest reasons for our Pollinator Garden project. The problems we must face as our food web is threatened by so many different factors, including the existential threat to pollinators, just cannot wait. We must act now and, while there is much beyond our control, there is so much we can do right here and right now in our own lives. That's the single biggest and most important thing I have learned as a result of this Pollinator Garden project here at our church. We can make a huge difference in protecting the food web by making changes in the way we manage our use of the property our church already owns, free and clear. In so doing, we will be beautifying our church grounds, taking full advantage of this incredibly precious piece of property our founders entrusted to us, purchased by the way just

as the environmental movement was cranking up in the late 1960's. Even more important to this church and her people, we are well on the way to becoming a living environmental example of what it means to care for God's Creation by stepping up, stepping out and stepping into the future by doing what we can to make sure there IS a future for ourselves and our planet.

Pollinators are the "canaries in the mine" for us. Their die-off is a huge warning that the way we have been living our lives is quite simply not sustainable. Things like our picture-perfect lawns made possible by the overuse of dangerous pesticides and the unnatural and unsustainable farming practices of corporate farming are quite literally killing the very species we need to stay alive and keep our planet healthy. Of this there is no doubt. But why should a church care about this? Why should a church become so involved, so committed, to becoming even a small part of solving this problem?

Well, that's where our friend Job has something important to share with us. Job, as you may recall, is the original guy behind the concept of bad things happening to good people. Written as a story to address the problem of theodicy or the relationship between God and evil, Job is just that, a story. But it is surely a universal one, which is why it resonates with people so powerfully, and has for millennia. Job was, by all accounts, a good and faithful guy. He worked hard, conducted all his affairs as a

righteous, God-fearing man. He took care of his family and was just in all his doings. Then, as the story goes, God and Satan were having a conversation in which Satan told God that anyone would deny him if enough bad things happened to that person. God said, no, he didn't agree. God said that even though truly righteous people were far and few between, there were still a few truly faithful people. They decide to settle the argument by inflicting calamity after calamity on a righteous man and that man was Job. We won't take the time to recount everything that happened to Job but it was horrendous and each time Job refused to deny God. Even Job's friends kept asking him what his sin had been that God would allow such terrible things to happen to him, but Job just kept trusting that God had a plan. Job refused to deny God.

In the midst of his many, many conversations with his friends, Job touches on important issues and situations every human being faces and, as it happens, living in harmony with nature is one of those topics. That is the text we read this morning. Job is telling his friends in no uncertain terms exactly the same message as the environmentalists of today are saying and having been saying literally for decades. "Ask the animals and they will teach you; and the birds of the air, and they will tell you, ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you," Job tells

all those who question God's wisdom. "In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being."

In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. That was Job's truth, after God had taken literally everything away from him. That is our truth as we stand on the brink of an environmental crisis the likes of which our planet has never seen or experienced before. And, that, dear friends, is the real why of our Pollinator Garden project. When it all comes down to it, we are doing this because God the Creator entrusted us with his beloved Creation and we love God by loving his Creation *in the way that Creation needs to be loved*. And that, dear friends, is not the way we have been caring for God's Creation. We have been caring for Creation in the ways that please us – manicured lawns, insect free landscapes and shrubs and plants planted on our properties for no other reason than they are pretty. But, not being native, they require excessive maintenance and water. They require pesticides because they have no natural predators and those pesticides have seeped into the very seeds we plant to grow new flowers and vegetables. But, when we tire of all this work and all this expense, these non-native species run amok becoming invasives that crowd out the plants that should be here. They literally kill off the good plants and trees and shrubs because they run amok. When this reality is

added to pesticides now showing up in seeds, the reasons pollinators are dying off become every clearer.

This is all our problem because God's Creation is our responsibility. Humans have created the problems that are wreaking havoc in God's Creation and humans will have to fix it. Our Pollinator Garden project is one tiny step in that direction. Every bee and butterfly, every bat and bird, we save is one more patch to the web of nature while it heals. We can make a difference by showing ourselves, our community and, yes, the whole world, that we take seriously our responsibility to care for God's Creation as God expects. That means learning to live in harmony with nature instead of doing battle with it. That search for God's harmony in the midst of God's bounty as revealed in this beautiful, spectacular world God entrusted to us is the reason for our Pollinator Garden. It is a living example that what we do can and does make a real difference in the lives of real people. It is a tangible symbol that we embrace the sacredness of God's gift of Creation to us. Like Job, we are willing to learn what the animals and birds, the plants and the fish have to teach us, because we know if we don't, we could lose it all. Thanks be to our God for new beginnings and exciting challenges. May God guide us forward one step at a time to becoming the church God needs us to be. Amen.