

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2009
Lessons: Exodus 20:1-21 and Romans 8:14-25

RESURRECTION HOPE FOR THE GENERATIONS

*Honor your father and your mother,
so that your days may be long in the land
that the LORD your God is giving you.*

What a week has just passed! We have mourned and continue to mourn the death of a thirty-five-year-old son of this congregation I had known since he was twelve and many of you longer. The rose announces the birth of baby girl for which we give thanks to God. And yesterday, some of our college seniors were graduated, even though just yesterday in my mind they were high school seniors in our seminar on adjusting to college. How can that be?

God of generations, we are all your children.

Shortly, we'll sing those words penned by Carolyn Gillette while she and her husband Bruce were co-pastors of our Pitman church. But am I bringing together in one sermon two oil-and-water ideas that do not mix? One great deficit in Christian theology has been our failure to speak forcefully for generational responsibility in modern Western society. Because Christians have failed to love this world God made, we have not offered a strong alternative to the consumerism that seems to be trying use everything up before the next generations even have a chance and to poison everything we don't consume. Am I going in two opposite directions? Does the resurrection hope God has given us in Christ have anything to do with caring for this world for the sake of future generations?

Asked the meaning of the phrase "resurrection hope," most Christians would, I think, talk about heaven, not earth, and about eternity, not the passage of generations in historic time. But for the New Testament, resurrection hope changes the way we live *here and now*. This world is God's creation, which Paul portrays as groaning under the strain of its bondage to decay and descent toward death. For Paul, the entire creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the children of God, because the creation itself is to participate in their newness of life with Christ. God loves this created world. The term "mortal trash" should never have entered the vocabulary of Christian faith. Life is good, not because it always goes swimmingly for Christians (which we know it does not), but because God loves life and

shares it with us in love. The name Eden for the garden in Genesis means “delight,” and God created this earth to be for us a garden of delight. Our job is to take care of the garden.

Our resurrection hope challenges the modern and postmodern ways of thinking in our society. The Bible sees life as relational and ongoing. Life is not mine to keep to myself but is given to me to share. My life does not begin and end with me. True, stewardship and conservation were not such pressing concerns in the world of ancient Israel because (a) human beings did not yet have the power to poison or blow up the whole earth or to use up its resources, and (b) people needed to preserve what little they possessed because goods were not easily replaceable. Disposable goods were unknown until our era.

Jesus speaks of rust and moth destroying the treasures of earth. How can we today understand him when we don’t even wait for clothing to wear out but replace it as a matter of fashion as soon as it’s “out of style.” Our business enterprises exist for the present quarter, and so putting money back into infrastructure and long-range development is rendered self-defeating because it makes the next quarterly report look bad, and so people get fired. Mistakes get shoved off even though they will become more and more costly to fix because acknowledging them would spoil the next set of numbers. Step by self-preserving, self-indulging step, we have developed a culture of waste and careless short-term thinking. Who cares what mess we leave behind, right? Well, there is a rose in our sanctuary this morning reminding us that God gives us very good reasons to care, and like all of God’s best messages, they come in living flesh and blood to be loved and nourished.

Life did not begin with me and will not end with my generation. As mere fact, that truth is obvious, but mere fact is not good enough because we human beings are adept at ignoring facts when we form our attitudes and the habits of our day-to-day living. Our “lifestyle” of consumption and waste is trashing the earth we will leave to our children and their children, to the third and fourth generations of those who inherit the results of our un-caring. But this morning I want to go beyond that increasingly common warning and call for “resurrection hope” to be applied to generational responsibility.

We need to rid ourselves and our gospel of the false message of contempt for this world, and we need to shift our thinking away from consumption and toward stewardship. Earth does not belong to us. Earth is not just a warehouse of resources for us to use and use up for profit. And people are not “human resources”; they are people, and their time is life given to them by God. Jesus tells and shows us that people are to be respected as persons God loves, not evaluated for their usefulness to us.

Resurrection hope will be about heaven when the time comes for heaven, but right here and now, it is about earth and our daily living. Jesus’ resurrection is the triumph, not

of eternity over time, but of love over waste. Observers thought Jesus had wasted his time and abilities on the wrong people – people who gave him no power or influence but only dragged him down into their shame and powerlessness. He put his trust in God and lived as though life were a gift to be shared rather than opportunity to be seized before somebody else grabs it. Our resurrection hope arises from our belief that he is right, and so in hope we seek to choose love over power, faith over the cynicism that uses people and consumes without regard to future generations, and service over self-serving.

Early in the week, I blogged against taking the play out of kindergarten by turning it into a matter of testing the children against each other, then driving them with test preparation for further evaluation. A friend reminded me that adults need to play, also, but in our society, adults do not play; we escape. As a society, we drink too much, watch TV shows without caring what's on, and play video games until we zone out. Play is not escape, nor is it limited to expensive excursions; play expresses a freedom from anxiety that comes with trusting God. Modern life has deluded us into thinking we must first succeed and secure our lives before we can let ourselves live them freely. Postmodern discouragement comes from the bitter realization that the time of achieved success and invulnerable security never comes, and we will chase it until we die. Jesus told us long ago we could not secure our own lives, but he told it without bitterness and cynicism, to set us free so we can live each day God gives us. We have forgotten how to play. Do our children even know they can play without scoring a goal, bettering a previous time, or beating someone else?

Here's the conflict we need to resolve. "All work and no play" sounds hyper-responsible, but it has made us less responsible toward future generations. We have consumed "like there was no tomorrow" to the point that our consumption threatens the world with having no tomorrow. The "bottom line" message of resurrection hope is, *Love matters more*. Matters more than what? Matters more than anything else. Of course, our habit of taking and consuming has led us to misunderstand love itself as just another matter of taking gratification from other people. The resurrection is the triumph of self-giving love. A child is not born to make us feel good or look good, or to fulfill the dreams we have not ourselves been able to achieve. She is a child of God in her own right.

Stewardship and conservation of the earth for future generations are not add-ons to the central message of the gospel, because the gospel's central message is self-giving, self-sharing, redemptive love, not grabbing a ticket for heaven. We treat heaven the same way we treat success on earth – as something to strive for and get settled and secured so we possess it. Jesus calls us to trust God and loosen our grip on life so we can live it, share it, and be grateful to God for each day of it. A hymn from my childhood begins, "I would be true, for there are those who trust me." Oh boy, more duty, more pressure, right? No, the hymn leads to this line, "I would look up and laugh and love and lift." Amen.