

Compassion: What Every Living Thing Needs
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
June 11, 2023
(Scripture NRSV)

Our scripture today is a creation hymn. A psalm of wonder, praise, and joy to the God who is the source of our being. You can hear the amazement that the poet finds in the beauty and generosity of God's creation. The writer celebrates the aliveness of the earth, all living creatures and the way they work together.

I long to have the eyes, the heart of a poet (or even a 7-year-old girl!) to move through life in such a way that ordinary encounters inspire me to new expressions of seeing and feeling.

So, let us take a moment to center ourselves to receive these excerpts from Psalm 104 with open hearts. I invite you to close your eyes if you wish and let the rhythm and images of this poetry wash over you.

Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, ² wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent; ³ you set the beams of your^[a] chambers on the waters; you make the clouds your^[b] chariot; you ride on the wings of the wind; ⁴ you make the winds your^[c] messengers, fire and flame your^[d] ministers.

⁵ You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. ⁶ You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. ¹⁰ You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, ¹¹ giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. ¹² By the streams^[e] the

birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.

¹³ From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

¹⁴ You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to cultivate, to bring forth food from the earth ¹⁵ and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine and bread to strengthen the human heart. ¹⁶ The trees of the field^[f] are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that God planted. ¹⁷ In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees.

¹⁸ The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. ¹⁹ You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. ²³ People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening.

²⁴ O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. ²⁵ There is the sea, great and wide; creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. ²⁶ There go the ships and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it. ²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food in due season; ²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in their works—³² who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. ³³ I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to God, for I rejoice in the LORD. AMEN

This gorgeous poem is the foundation for our Vacation Bible School this week, entitled: Compassion: What Every Living Thing Needs. VBS at Oak Grove is an experience not to be missed with stories, games, science, snacks, art and so much more.

We want the children to know that God's abundant love and compassion for us is the source and energy for our compassion, not only for other human beings, but for the earth and her creatures as well.

Living with compassion expresses the truth that we belong to God, to the earth, and to one another. It is a tough concept for children to understand! At its most basic level, it's caring for another.

We will help the children to understand about compassion with their bodies and minds this week. We'll begin with this simple statement:

Compassion means I see your hurt, I feel your hurt, I help ease your hurt.

(Try it!)

I see your pain.

In a world filled with deep divisions, compassion is critical as a starting point for healing God's earth and her people.

By God's grace, the eyes of our hearts have the capacity to really "see" the world around us. Not with a critical or judgmental lens, but with curiosity. Why is there smoke in the air? How does it affect people with asthma? Why are butterflies and bees so important? Why is that person crying?

And then, "I feel your pain."

The ability to feel another's hurt can often require imagination. As human beings we can hardly experience everything other humans, plants, and animals face. But we don't have to have first-hand experience to imagine a feeling. Just last week I talked with our 10-year-old grandchild about gender fluidity what it might be like to be transgender. I haven't experienced it myself, but I do know what it feels like to be uncomfortable in my own skin, to struggle with authenticity in the world and I am committed to deep listening and learning from others who are going through this.

I help ease your pain.

Gratitude connects us with our creator and creation, giving us the humility to accept our sacred place in the web of life and the shared responsibility to act with care.

As part of our compassion action this week, children will make bird feeders, learn about wind energy, plant seeds, and will collect school supplies for children who cannot afford them.

We want kids to know that when we have compassion for all living things, we begin to see God's presence everywhere, in forest, oceans, desert, in school, camp, and in our own backyards.

The psalm highlights the many ways that creation allows life to thrive by God's provision of shelter, food, air, water, and community. Not just for human beings, but creatures as well. All flourishing is mutual.

Here's how our days will unfold:

Monday we will talk about shelter. Every living thing needs shelter; shelter protects life. Shelter protects us from rain and wind, from heat and cold, and from predators. God is our shelter.

Tuesday, we will talk about food. Every living thing needs food; food energizes life. Sunlight becomes food, plants are food, milk is food, animals and insects are food. There is enough food on our planet to feed everyone if we share.

Wednesday, we will look at water and air. Every living thing needs water; water hydrates life, it carries oxygen, and dilutes sodium, it moves nutrients. Water falls, rises, and washes away. Every living thing needs air; air sustains life. It carries oxygen and other gases. Warm air rises and cold air falls. Ocean plants create most of the oxygen on earth. Insects need air, fish breathe oxygen in the water. Air can regulate your body.

And on Thursday to wrap it all up; every living thing needs community. Community produces life. Community protects each other and helps loneliness; even solitary creatures need community sometimes. Community creates language and produces life.

Now I want to share a story with you from Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Dr. Kimmerer is a botanist and professor, who weaves Indigenous wisdom, personal narrative and science to tell the story of her life and culture of the Potawatomi and other Indigenous people.

The essay on "The Council of Pecans" has intrigued me since I first read it two years ago and wanted to share it. See how the themes of community, food, air, and water emerge in this brief excerpt.

The author tells the story of her grandfather and his brother walking through the Oklahoma prairie on a warm, dry September afternoon in 1895. She describes how they high step barefoot through the draught-dry, prickly grass looking for grasshoppers to use as bait to catch fish to bring home for supper. They come to a channel that is spared from

draught, but nothing is biting but the mosquitoes. Stomachs rumbling, they are sorry to disappoint their mother, who will fix them biscuits for supper, no meat.

Along the Canadian river is a rolling savanna and the boys follow the stream from grove to grove. They continue looking for a deep pool but find nothing. And then one boy stubs his toe on something hard and round in the long grass. Piganek! Nuts! One after another, the boys fill their pockets with nuts, encased in tough exteriors the size of tennis balls and eventually remove their jeans, tying the ends with twine to carry their bounty.

The boys arrived home fish-less but delivered nearly as much protein as they would have if they had caught fish. Nuts are high in calories and nutrients.

Dr. Kimmerer writes, “Thinking back to that old story again, it strikes me that the boys in the pecan grove were very wise to carry home all that they could: nut trees don’t make a crop every year, but rather produce at unpredictable intervals, a boom-and-bust cycle known as “mast fruiting.” Some years a feast, most years a famine. Unlike juicy fruits and berries, which invite you to eat them all at once before they spoil, nuts protect themselves with a hard, almost stony shell and a green, leathery husk. The tree does not mean for you to eat them right away with juice dripping down your chin. They are designed to be food for winter, when you need fat and protein, heavy calories to keep you warm. They are safety for hard times, the embryo of survival. So rich is the reward that the contents are protected in a vault, double locked, a box inside a box. This protects the embryo within and its food supply, but it also virtually guarantees that the nut will be squirreled away someplace safe.”

In order to generate new forests, each tree needs to make lots of nuts, enough to overwhelm the would-be seed predators. It takes years to save up the sugars required to produce nuts. And the phenomenon of mast fruiting is cause for multiple hypotheses. It would make sense that a tree would make fruit only when it could afford to do so. Each would make fruit on its own schedule. But that is not how it works.

“If one tree fruits, they all fruit — there are no soloists,” Kimmerer writes, “Not one tree in a grove, but the whole grove; not one grove in the forest, but every grove; all across the county and all across the state. The trees act not as individuals, but somehow as a collective. Exactly how they do this, we don’t yet know. But what we see is the power of unity: What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together. All flourishing is mutual.”

“The pecan trees and their kin show a capacity for concerted action, for unity of purpose that transcends the individual. They ensure somehow that all stand together and thus survive.”

“The pecan groves give, and give again. Such communal generosity might seem incompatible with the process of evolution, which invokes the imperative of individual survival. But ...we make a grave error if we try to separate individual well-being from the health of the whole.”

Kimmerer goes on to describe how this mast fruiting has an impact on the food chain, plants, earth, climate, intricately working together to sustain life here on mother earth. It’s just so beautiful and inspiring, like the poetry of the psalm, like our delightful children, and volunteers.

Friends we, you, me, birds, fish, micro-organisms, plants, rocks, we are part of an intricate web of God’s design.

So, this week let us pray that our children will come to see themselves as people beloved of God, belonging to one another, God, and the earth, called to play a vital role in the co-creation of a just and healthy world. We will begin and end with compassion for every living thing.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Sources

Illustrated Ministry, *Compassion Camp: What Every Living Thing Needs*. Illustrated Ministry Publishing, Racine, WI, 2023.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions, Canada, 2013. "The Council of Pecans," pg. 11-22.