

“Gardening in the Kingdom”

Lent is a good time to repent. Repent simply means to be sorry and to change ones ways. Sounds simple enough—just say “sorry” and “I won’t do it again” and that’s it—instant salvation. The reality is—it’s not so easy. So this morning I would like to confess a sin that I committed a little over twenty-five years ago and confess that I am still trying to repent. And it is hard, for it is not simply changing my behaviour; it is changing my understanding of Holy Scripture, my very relationship with God.

So twenty-five years ago in Terrace, B.C. my wife, Carol, and I lived in a house that had a garden and five fruit trees—a wonderful opportunity to do things together. Now I had just purchased the previous year an Apple II computer (and for you Geeks out there—a 6502 microprocessor with 48K of memory). So my idea was to use the computer to plan the garden. I had typed in all the code in the Applesoft Basic programming language. It was amazing—it would even do a picture of the garden in los-res graphics on the screen—a thing of beauty. All my wife had to do was tell me what needed to be planted and the computer would come up with the perfect design for her to follow.

Did you notice that last phrase? If you’re male you might not, but every woman here today heard it loud and clear. The perfect design for “her” to follow.

Another piece of information you should know. Carol’s family was in the nursery business. She had been tending gardens as soon as she was able to walk. While I marvelled that the computer would put companion plants together (onions and carrots), it would recommend marigolds around the edges to keep slugs away. Carol looked at me sadly, “everybody knows that.” Well, I didn’t and then became defensive and insistent that we use a higher power—the computer—to do the gardening.

From that day forward, Carol did the gardening (flowers and vegetables) and I was relegated to mowing the lawn and pruning the fruit trees. We moved to Burnaby but the pattern continued—gardening in two solitudes.

Now a couple of years ago, in Kelowna, I decided that the cedar hedge in front of Lynda’s house needed trimming. And I had just the thing to do it. No, not a computer, but a 36 inch Black & Decker Hedgehog Trimmer. I could take these unruly cedars and make a nice square shaped hedge. And so I made the first cut—perfect—almost as if it had been lined up with a plumb bob. However, all that was left were branches—I had cut all the greenery off. Lynda, took one look at the tree and another look at me. I thought for sure she was going to take the Black & Decker Hedgehog Trimmer and trim a few body parts off of me.

Lynda somehow has this strange notion that the trees ought to grow naturally, the way that God intended. I believe that if God wanted trees to grow naturally he wouldn’t have given us Black & Decker Hedgehog Trimmers.

Now if you haven’t figured it out I am the one that needs to repent. Bruce Sanguin, minister at Canadian Memorial United Church, suggests “our best gardeners operate not as masters over the garden, but as one intelligent source of creativity among other centres of creative intelligence, the plants.”

To be Masters of the garden, the world we live in, is an ancient longing. The opening chapter of the book of Genesis was an epic that gave hope to the people who had just returned from their exile in Babylon. Having lived for a generation as slaves to the Babylonian gods, they were now told that they were created in the image of the one true God and God thought it was absolutely

Continued on page 2

But the story goes on to say, “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’” (Genesis 1:28 NRSV)

Now because I was brought up in the United Church of Canada, I always understood this ‘dominion’ as being benevolent. First, because we were the Dominion of Canada and we are the nicest people around. And second, because I was in the United Church, it actually meant Stewardship—God has given us gifts and we are to look after them.

In my second year of seminary I went with another student to hear a Rabbi who was giving Torah lessons to Jewish students. And this particular text was one that they were studying. The words ‘subdue’ and ‘dominate’ are the same words that are used for crushing grapes. This bothered me so I did more research and discovered that these words are also used for conquering other nations and even dominating women.

We shouldn’t be surprised. At the end of this pre-history is this conclusion, “The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.”(Genesis 9:2 NRSV)

Sanguin notes that, “Stewardship has been the predominant metaphor in the Christian church to describe our relationship with creation. But it has limited usefulness in the new paradigm. In the stewardship model, we still see ourselves as managers who stand over and above creation, as opposed to being one self-conscious creature embedded in an intricate ecosystem with other creatures. Our task, then, is to find our place in the fit and flow of reality. We must learn to fit in, not manage.”

The Ten Commandments, we heard this morning, were given so that the newly liberated people of the Exodus could learn to simply live together in harmony. Today we might need a new set of commandments to live in harmony with creation.

Some could be fairly straightforward: Thou shalt not use plastic garbage bags or buy bottled water. Thou shalt recycle. Thou shalt swap old light bulbs for energy efficient ones.

But the minute we create new laws they are up for debate. CFL’s (compact fluorescent light bulbs) are good, but annoying because they are not instant on. They need to be recycled properly and they require special care if they break. So a whole lot of new laws need to be created (at least 10) just on the use of light bulbs.

Repentance is not about keeping laws. It is about changing our spiritual orientation: our relationships with each other, the environment and God. It is not about having power over one another—it is about living just relationships; it is not about subduing the world—it is about living in harmony with creation; and it is about becoming the people God created us to be.

Lent. It is a good time to repent. The salvation of the earth is at stake.