

A few weeks ago, while visiting Florida for my niece's wedding, I stood on the beach, captivated by the view of the ocean. I heard waves rolling onto the beach as I caught glimpses of two dolphins playing in the water. I watched the shorebirds as they ran toward the water to find food and quickly scurried away as the tide came ashore. I felt the sun on my face, and then I watched it hover over the edge of the ocean until it quickly sank into the horizon as evening approached.

God's wondrous creation can *captivate* us—not only the vastness of the ocean and the variety of animal life that live there, but also the majestic mountains reaching toward the heavens, flowers emerging from the frozen ground in the spring, trees that stretch their branches to provide a canopy of shade, or cloud shapes dancing through the sky.

As many people celebrate Earth Day this weekend, numerous writers have called us to not only *celebrate* God's Creation, but to actually care for it as well. As one writer stated:

As Christians, we believe God created everything good, and that Jesus redeems all of creation. However, in our ecological and social sin, we have tolerated the development of sacrifice zones: places permanently damaged by environmental destruction or economic disinvestment. From blasting off the tops of mountains to leaving behind permanently polluted fracking wastewater ponds, sacrifice zones are commonly found in low-income communities and communities of color. Damage from climate change is becoming an increasingly devastating problem that also hits vulnerable communities hardest.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than respecting and honoring God's creation, some use it for their personal gain, taking whatever they want regardless of the long-term consequences. It's like what happened when the apostle Paul encountered a young girl who was, what we might call today, caught up in the evils of human trafficking and slavery. Rather than *captivated*, she was *captive* by those who exploited her. She had the gift of what we might call discernment or intuition. Some took advantage of her gift and used her, as one translation says, a

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“fortune teller,” which could also be translated as “prophet” or “one who brings a divine message.” Instead of celebrating her wisdom, some took advantage of her by getting her to perform for money and then lined their own pockets with the cash.

When she encountered Paul and his traveling companion Silas, she proclaimed, “These men are the slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Paul was so upset that he told those who controlled her to leave her alone, but of course, that suggestion was bad for business. Freeing the girl from her slavery would no longer make money, so they dragged Paul and Silas into court and complained to the authorities, who beat the two followers of Jesus and threw them into jail.

Standing up for what is right is not always easy, especially when it confronts the economic systems of injustice. Rescuing those who suffer from oppression may get one into trouble, which can also happen when one stands up for what is right in

caring for creation. Lutheran pastor, Leah Schade, serves as a professor at Lexington Theological Seminary, one of our Disciples schools. She struggled with what to say on Earth Sunday in light of today’s issues. She wrote,

When I was a pastor I would place a pot of soil, a watering can, and a basket of seeds on the altar and invite the children to help me bless them. We would invite congregants to bring their garden tools and gloves, wheelbarrows, and even tractors to church, and we would process outside and ask for God’s blessings on our labors for and with the earth. Everyone would choose a packet of seeds from the basket and depart with the promise of spring and new life—and with the satisfaction that we had done our part for God’s creation.<sup>2</sup>

She couldn’t do that anymore, she explained, for she realized that too many in power were taking advantage of creation, and our symbolic acts are not enough. She criticized the anti-environmental policies of the President’s cabinet, and then she proclaimed, “Now is **not** the time for feel-good ‘green’ hymns and ecological tokenism in our

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churches...Not when air pollution, pesticides, poor diets, and radiation have led to a sharp increase in cancer diagnoses among children. Not when fracking and drilling are poisoning the air, water, and land of our communities.<sup>3</sup>

Her statement may have gotten her into trouble with some who opposed her ideas. My quoting her thoughts may even ruffle the feathers of some among us today. Although we may not always agree on the best *way* to care for God's creation, I think we can all agree that we *must* care for our world, for it's the only place we have to live. If we destroy our environment, we have nowhere else to go.

I think the place to begin is with respect. When we respect what God has made, when we take time to look and listen to the world, we can learn from it. As Disciples pastor Carol Devine reflected:

Each creature of God has something to teach us. They demonstrate virtues like the teamwork of the ant, the loyalty of the elephant, and the playfulness of the dolphin. Each creature has intrinsic worth given to it by the breath of God. Each creature serves a purpose in an ecosystem, an elegant interconnected system where

nothing is wasted and where diversity is necessary. God's creatures, if we pay attention, if we stop and listen have much to teach us. Animals are great spiritual teachers for us... Something wonderful happens to our bodies and our spirits when we go outside and are quiet and still. When we empty our minds of the craziness of life and listen to the birds and feel the wind and sun on our face and the earth on our feet, we begin to notice things. We see the beauty of a spider's web. We notice the diligence of the bee. We hear birds and frogs singing praise. We feel the soft coolness of the earth. It is when our hearts are stilled that we can truly appreciate God's majesty and mystery.<sup>4</sup>

In looking at the world and respecting God's creation, we might not always understand the way it's put together, such as was the case with a group of children at summer camp.

A counselor was leading a discussion on the purpose God has for...creation. They began to find good reasons for clouds and trees and rocks and rivers and animals and just about everything else in nature. Finally, one of the children said, "If God has a good purpose for everything, then why did He create poison ivy?"

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The discussion leader gulped and, as he struggled with the question, one of the other children came to his rescue, saying, “The reason God made poison ivy is that He wanted us to know there are certain things we should keep our cotton-pickin’ hands off of.”<sup>5</sup>

I think that child’s response contains a lot of wisdom. There *are* some things in God’s world that we should keep our hands off of. When Paul and Silas in the Book of Acts confronted those who captured a girl for their money-making schemes, Paul essentially said, “Hands off. She’s not your captive. Set her free.”

When we encounter those abusing God’s natural resources, we need to shout, “Hands off. God’s world is not something you can take captive for your own benefits.”

I suggest that rather than taking God’s world or one another *captive*, that instead we be *captivated* and amazed by what God has created. Treat everything and everyone with respect. The trees. Flowing streams. Birds that sing. Flowers that bloom. Squirrels that frolic in the grass. And, of course, one another.

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<sup>1</sup> “Sense of Place,” [www.creationjustice.org](http://www.creationjustice.org), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Leah D. Schade, “Let’s make Earth Day about the Earth martyrs,” [www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/lets-make-earth-day-about-earth-martyrs](http://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/lets-make-earth-day-about-earth-martyrs), April 18, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Carol Devine, “All Creation Joins to Sing,” [www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Green-Chalice-Sample-Sermon-and-Scripture.pdf](http://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Green-Chalice-Sample-Sermon-and-Scripture.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 1255-1260). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #108.