

24 January 2020  
Colossians 1:15-20;  
Romans 8:18-25  
Reconciliation with  
Creation  
First Mennonite  
Church

When I was 7 years old, my family moved out of Winkler to an acreage outside of town, near to where both of my sets of grandparents lived. My grandparents were farmers and

so were our neighbours. Our neighbours, who had a mixed farm, lived down the road, about 300 metres away. I spent a lot of time on farms, spent a lot of time being close to the earth, so you could say that I grew up caring for creation. As we had no good source of water, my dad had to haul water. As water was precious, I remember bathing in a tub of water my brother had already used. Water was also rationed for brushing teeth. We had a huge garden producing local food so that we didn't have to rely on the system to being in vegetables from half-way across the world. Every fall our family and relatives slaughtered pigs which gave us meat throughout the rest of the year. I remember helping my grandparents clean out the barn and spreading the waste on to the fields. At home, we collected all kitchen scraps and either fed them to the pigs or buried them in the garden. I helped my grandparents feed the farm animals, and at times, helped plant and harvest the crop. Given all of those experiences, you could say that I grew up caring for creation.

With a lot more life under my belt, ongoing conversations with my children and others, books and articles read, and some reflection on different biblical texts, I'm less certain that **caring for creation** is exactly the right term to use when thinking about how I lived when I was younger.



So, I want to share with you, some of the main influences that have led me to say this.

My first influence on caring for creation came from my reading and reflection on the Bible.

For example, in Genesis 1, we are told about humans being created in the image of God. Human beings are then called to *“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.”* We are to have dominion! Dominion is a power word, isn't it? In English, dominion is part of a family of words like, domineering, domination, dominant, dominate. Dominion implies mastery, power and control.

In the last few hundred years, humans have understood dominion in a violent way. We are at war with nature. Nature is wild and out of control and so we have to order it, control it, and tame it.

In our current economic system, the air, water, soil, plants, and animals **are resources** that we extract a living from, something with an economic value. Today, people still talk about land as being developed or undeveloped. When you look at



this photo, what do you see? A home for all sorts of insects, birds, and creatures? Do you see land that is undeveloped? In our current economic system this land is undeveloped; land is only developed once there are buildings, roads, and asphalt.

The Bible assumes that being in the image of God means representing

God in God's world. **To exercise dominion, then, means exercising power as God exercises power.** To have dominion means to act as God acts. A Christian understanding of dominion must be rooted in the way of Jesus. This is what Jesus

said to the disciples after their argument over who was the greatest.

*“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (Mark 10: 43-44).*

The one who rules is the one who serves. Dominion does not mean doing whatever to make a profit, but it does mean that we are to nurture and care for creation so that it flourishes.

Reflecting on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has also shaped my understanding of caring for creation. I grew up understanding salvation in a narrow way. I was taught—maybe we all were—that Christ died for me, and that if I wanted to go to heaven, then I needed to be saved so that when I died, my soul would go to heaven. My soul would leave this sinful world.

But, when I read Romans and Colossians, I understand salvation in incredibly wide and cosmic terms. You see, in Jesus Christ we have seen who God is and what God is up to in the world. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we are reconciled to God. Not only have we been reconciled to God, but God is working to reconcile, that is restore “all things”, as Colossians puts it. **Not just some things, but all things.** In other words, God’s work of reconciliation does not end with just my soul. Rather, God plans to liberate, save, reconcile “all things”, renewing the earth itself. Creation will be liberated from its bondage to destruction and its subjection to futility at the resurrection of humanity.

Now that we know what God’s ultimate goal for creation is, that is, the restoration of creation, a new heaven and a new earth—as followers of God, we have direction in how we live today. We live and act as God’s caretakers of the earth as we are part of the web of life.

Not only did the Bible shape my understanding of caring for creation, but so have decades of experiences. I have many examples, but will mention only two—and they are in no particular order of importance.

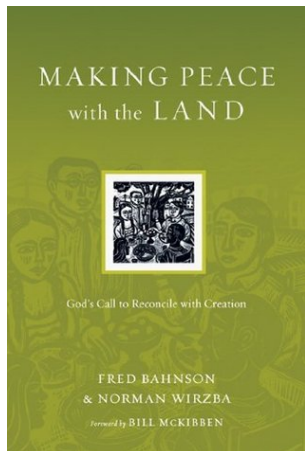


*Photo shows same view of the city, one where air pollution is bad, and the other where there is little air pollution.*

- For 16 years, I lived in Beijing (see above), one of the most polluted cities in the world. Countless days the air was so thick with pollution that it was difficult to see further than 3-400 metres. Government weather forecasts said it was fog. It wasn't. Fog doesn't stink. Fog doesn't make your nose burn and hurt your lungs. Fog doesn't kill people. This is what happens when we rely on fossil fuels, especially coal, for power generation. How can we care for creation when we fill it with poison?
- Living in such a polluted place certainly prompted a great deal of conversation around the Suderman dinner table over the environment, how our global economic system makes this possible, how our lifestyle and our daily choices in how we live contribute to increased pollution or help decrease it. Several years ago, my daughter decided to become vegan. A vegan is someone who doesn't eat any meat or animal products like milk, cheese, or eggs. She did so mainly because of environmental concerns, wanting to lighten her footprint on the planet. My oldest son works in Information Technology for an environmental organisation, because he wants to do what he can to mitigate the negative impact of climate change. Parents often assume that children learn from us. While that's true they do, it's also true that parents learn from our children. My children have made me think much more about how am I caring for creation.

- After some research our family decided that one of the only cleaning products we will use in our home, is vinegar.

A final influence that has shaped my understanding of caring for creation, has been nature videos, books, and articles. More recently, I've come across a term that I think describes how my thinking has evolved over the years. The term is **ecological amnesia**. Ecological amnesia is a phrase coined by Norman Wirzba's book, and then expanded on by Fred Bahson in a book that they co-wrote called,



*Making Peace with the Land*. As they define it, **ecological amnesia is when humans forget the fundamental fact that we are bodies bound to each other through webs of food and water, and breath, and energy, inspiration, pleasure, and delight.**

It's an inability for us as humans to see the rest of the created order that Jesus has already reconciled to himself, and an inability to see the harm that we are causing to it. So even though I grew up very close to the land, I was overlooking something. I was forgetting what Paul tells the church in

Colossians 1:19-20:

*“that in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through Jesus, God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all things** whether on Earth or in heaven.”*

I also like how Eugene Peterson translates it in The Message this way:

*“that all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe people and things animals and atoms get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of Christ's work of reconciliation.”*

Even though I grew up living in a specific place on a particular piece of land, I didn't see it as a place that Jesus loved, just as much as Jesus loves me. I, and most everyone else, saw land as something to be managed for our benefit. I saw land as something that my family extracted a living from, something with an economic value. I had overlooked or forgotten or not learned or had been willfully blind to the fact that God's gift of creation is not measured by economic standards.

You see, God is ultimately concerned with how well we as humans are doing at the work of reconciliation with creation, the reconciliation of **all things**. Except, my ecological amnesia kept me from asking some hard questions, like:

- what if God cares more about **the source** of the energy flowing through my light bulbs than about what happens with the stock market?
- Or, what if God is more concerned with **how we use the fuel** that's already in our vehicles than with who wins political elections?
- Or, what if God is more concerned that the person who harvested my food is **treated fairly** then whether or not I think I have gotten a good deal for a meal?

And when we can't ask these kinds of questions, I think we reveal how much we suffer from ecological amnesia.

The more I reflect on our theme, reconciliation with creation, the more I realize what an enormous and complicated topic it is. Rather than being overwhelmed by its sheer size and complexity, let me ask you this: what is the one thing about creation that you find infinitely enjoyable and fascinating? I want you to consider



that your interest, your fascination is God calling you to pay close attention to it. Maybe it's paying attention to soil, because soil is not dirt. Soil is the source of life. It's a source of health. Soil is a living substance that just can't wait to give life to anything it touches. Soil is also a place of reconciliation

and transformation in the way that it receives death and decay and then turns it back into something that brings new life. Pay attention to the soil as it is teaching you about identifying your ecological amnesia. Pay attention to what you put into the soil—does it contribute to God's work of the reconciliation of all things?

Or maybe you are fascinated with flowers, or bees, or trees. Pay attention to them. Learn about them. What is God trying to say to you through these things?



I'm not a birder, but maybe some of you are. Maybe, on your daily walk you keep your eye out, hoping to see an owl, a cedar waxwing, or some other unique and interesting bird. Since moving back to Canada in 2014, I've sensed that the prairies are **much quieter** than when I was a child. Have you noticed this too?



No song epitomizes the open spaces of the prairies than the meadowlark. I think its song is the musical theme song of the prairies—or, at least it should be! When I was a kid, I remember hearing and seeing meadowlarks on every fence post. That is an exaggeration. These days meadowlarks are increasingly rare. Why is that?

Or what about barn swallows? They seemed to be everywhere when I was a child. I loved watching them swoop low over the dugout, drinking water as they went. I rarely see them today. I realize that I spend most of my time in the city, but when I go out into rural areas, I don't see them like I used to. Why is that?



Dr. Christy Morrissey, an avian toxicologist at the University of Saskatchewan, said that some songbird populations have seen a 70% drop in the last 40 years.<sup>1</sup> Can you believe that? A 70% drop in songbird population! What will the prairies sound like in another 40 years? There are many reasons why this is the case; they have to do with loss of habitat, use of chemicals, just to name two. Dr. Morrissey gives one example in her study. Over the last number of years, the farming industry has begun using seed that's already coated with an insecticide. She says this is one of



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/are-the-prairies-getting-quieter-songbirds-are-declining-in-number-1.3002029>

the main reasons why there has been such a decline in the number of songbirds.<sup>2</sup> Birds eat these seeds and the insecticide negatively impacts them.

I'm not a farmer, so I have no idea how farmers practically deal with this. Because the issue is wrapped up in government policy and regulation, current farming practice, the influence of companies like Monsanto, and a farmer's livelihood. It's complicated!

But, what's your one thing? What is that part of creation that just calls to you? Consider that it is God calling you to pay attention to the incredible beauty that we inhabit and call home. Is it the trees, grass, air, crickets, snow, birds, stars, dogs, ladybugs, flowers, microbes, fossils, other human beings?

What is your one thing? Pay attention to it. Watch it. Learn from it. Learn how it interacts with other things, with other living beings, and do what you can to make that one thing, that one part of creation, flourish! Because this is our Christian calling. This is the joyful purpose of life that God has given to us as caretakers, as reconcilers within creation. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://news.usask.ca/articles/research/2019/usask-led-study-shows-insecticides-threaten-survival-of-wild-birds.php>