

THE LIVING AND ABIDING WORD

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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I Peter 1:23: "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God"

Do you know what next Sunday is? It is the beginning of Soil Stewardship Week. I don't suppose Pilgrim Church is accustomed to making much of a celebration out of that. There aren't many farmers in this congregation. But every year I get material in the mail from the county agent reminding me that this great event is on the way.

This year that mailing reminded me of something else. It reminded me of a man named Harold. He was director of a soil conservation district on the western fringe of the cornbelt. Harold was the son of a Lutheran minister who rebelled somewhat against his upbringing. Yet he went to the Congregational church in the county seat town where he lived until the minister was asked to leave. Harold was always impatient with the meanness of churches. However, when a new young minister arrived there right out of the big city, Harold took pity and was persuaded not only to go back to church, but to join.

The following spring Harold approached this new minister about a new program promoted by the soil conservation service called Soil Stewardship Sunday. It fell on the third Sunday of May, a date traditionally observed as Rogation Day or Rural Life Sunday. Harold and the minister planned a sermon demonstration in which the minister would illustrate the effects of water erosion on different kinds of soil. In the meantime, Harold invited all the ministers in the county to a meeting. He took them on a tour on which he pointed out the effects of air and water erosion and some of the techniques adopted for preventing them.

One minister declined to come to the meeting. Instead he sent a postcard which read:

"My job is to preach the Word of God, not to talk about soil conservation."

Harold read the postcard aloud at the meeting. One could tell that it irritated him. It irritated his minister too, I think. I suspect that postcard had something to do with the way he constructed his sermon. I would like to read that sermon to you now. You will have to make allowances for the preacher's extreme immaturity. Fortunately the sermon is very short.

BIBLE AND SOD

"And God said, 'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.'" Genesis 1:29.

My job as a preacher is to take what is here in this book, and to take what is there in those pews, and to bring the two together so that what is in this book, makes itself felt in what is in those pews, in everything and

anything that is thought, or done or owned by you. That too is the job of our Sunday School teachers. In fact it is the job of every Christian.

Now one of the basic ideas in this book is that the world and everything in it belongs to God. Even we are not our own, "For it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves."

Another basic idea in this book is that God in creating us gave us dominion or rule over all the other earthly creatures that belong to God. God endowed us with special powers to grow crops, to domesticate animals, to harness the winds and the tides, to mine minerals. But though we are given the rule over God's earth, it is still God's earth. God is the owner. Man is the tenant. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof."

From these facts the Bible repeatedly draws two conclusions: First, we are responsible to God for the way we use everything over which we have dominion. We are so to speak stewards or trustees of God's earth. We are stewards of our bodies, our talents, our wealth, our land. For what we do with these things and for many others we are held accountable by God.

Second, we are responsible to one another. For the riches in our power are shared among us. If one man abuses what is his to use, he abuses his neighbor, and so violates the trust bestowed on him by the God who created us all.

That is what the Bible has to say. Now let us see what the pew has to say. By the pew I mean you and me, the property we own and everything that pertains to our lives in this world. Let us lay down a simple proposition about us and our world, namely, that everybody eats. Everybody eats. And from this proposition we may conclude that the man who lives in a twenty-story apartment house on the barren rocks of Manhattan, and who never so much as planted a geranium in the window box, has just as much stake in the soil as the man farming a half-section of land up on The Willow. We are all dependent on the soil because not only does it supply our food, but also thousands of other products essential to civilization.

Again we may conclude that the church has a stake in that half-section of land up on The Willow. For the church is made up of people, and everybody eats. Even saints eat. Moreover, when people don't eat well they don't support their churches well. And when the farmers can't get anything out of their land not only do the churches suffer from lack of support, but because those farmers eventually give up and move away, the churches they leave behind die. And that is the story of hundreds of once thriving churches all over America.

So bringing the message of this book about responsibility to the fact that everybody in the pew must eat, we draw the final conclusion that the way in which we deal with the land is of the utmost importance to us, to the church and to God.

Now when people first began to arrive at these shores there was plenty of land for them to farm. Labor was scarce, but land was plentiful. So it was that while labor was expensive, land was cheap. Per acre they might not produce so much as in the old country, but per man they could produce a lot more; for the land was for the taking. It did not always seem practical then to apply even what soil conservation methods were then available.

It was simpler to get the most they could out of this cheap land. When at the same time the pressure of a growing population mounted and the land began to fail, they could move on to some more land. So they moved, and moved again, into what seemed an inexhaustible supply of fertile soil to the West. Until one day - and that's right now - they found themselves facing the Pacific Ocean. Practically speaking, there wasn't any new land to move to so far as the U.S.A. was concerned. The only thing left to do was to make the best use of the old land. The only problem was the old land wasn't what it used to be. The old hit and run method of farming that once seemed so practical from the point of view of the individual farmer didn't seem so practical in retrospect to a nation of a hundred and sixty million eaters.

What had been happening to that old land? Here is a clump of rich, fertile, almost black, virgin topsoil. I'll immerse it partly in this water. You see how clear the water stays. The soil falls through very slowly in little specks. Yet, despite its resistance to water erosion there isn't as much of this around as there once was. Already more than fifty per cent of it has been lost through poor farming methods. In fact, on some farms it's all gone, and the men on those farms are tilling soil like this lump of yellow subsoil. Unfortunately this subsoil doesn't resist erosion like the topsoil. I'll immerse some of this in the same way. You see how the water clouds. In a few minutes it will be all gone. What you see here is going on in the Elkhorn River at this moment.

Now I'm not a farmer, and I don't know anything about farming. But even I can drive out of this town five miles in any direction and find evidence that this is changing over into this. In fact for the last month all I had to do was stick my head out of the window and breathe in to observe where tons of fertile soil are going. No, I'm no farmer, but I eat. Therefore, I'm interested in what's happening to God's earth. I'm not a farmer, but I'm a churchman, and I know that the church has a stake in what happens to God's earth. I'm not a farmer, but I'm a preacher and therefore I'm concerned with bringing the Word here to those two clumps of sod so that all of us whether we be farmers or not will do our share to preserve, defend and restore the soil and its abundance.

As I say, this minister was very young and didn't have much understanding of what he was talking about. But I think he had the right idea about connecting Bible and sod, word and pew. There is a basic principle here that has to do with just about everything. The word comes to life among us only as it links to the practical affairs of our lives. And the link is always a summons to responsibility. Much of what was said in 1955 about the care of the soil might be said today about the whole range of environmental concern. Some of it might be said too about high finance, Little League games, the State Legislature, or how people behave on dates. It might even be said about motherhood.

On the other hand, how devastating it would be if all church people operated on the principle of that minister on the postcard: "My job is to preach the Word of God, not to talk about soil conservation!" That kind of separation is so fatal.

Of course, there is a danger of churches and preachers losing sight of the Word that comes to us from beyond our own concerns. There is a danger in the church turning into a mere social service agency, a mere propaganda machine for this or that cause, and of losing touch with its spiritual source. It is easy to forget that man does not live by bread alone. Such dangers have appeared in the church and in sermons. Harold's young minister was aware of these dangers. He had seen them at work and he had attacked them. Having some knowledge of his theological orientation at the time, I suspect he experienced some misgivings about giving a sermon on soil conservation. But I think he recognized that one could hardly preach the Word of God and ignore the punch line in that crucial parable:

"I was hungry and you fed me."

Somehow after all these years, this seems to be the chief issue in the church: whether we think of the Word of God as some rarefied thing that has no connection with anything else, or whether we think of it as something that lives and abides in the midst of everything that pertains to us and our world.

Still, it is not sermons, but rather people, in whom the connections come to life. Harold was such a person. He was a rather gruff fellow who was used to dealing with a lot of stubborn characters. He had few illusions about people and none at all about churches. Yet Harold saw in his work a Christian vocation. Whether it was planting trees, designing signs advertising his district, testing soil samples or advising a farmer on how to contour his field, Harold brought great expertise, great care and great devotion to his work. He was a dedicated family man. He had a gentle wife and four young children to whom he was wholly devoted. He was at the center of all the family events in the church.

Harold was about thirty-five years of age on that day he carefully instructed his minister on how to do the demonstration with the two clumps of sod. Not many years afterwards he got cancer and died. Like the grass in those two clumps, "The flesh withers and falls." But the living Word abides. Paradoxically we see that abiding most clearly in the flesh which though it withers brings the Word to life in practical terms among us. We see it in people in whom the Word connects, people whose soil, whose work, whose families are the locus of responsible stewardship and tender care.

May we always listen and may we always believe.