

Rogation Sunday

Today is the Sixth Sunday of Easter—a day that, in some branches of the Anglican tradition, is subtitled “Rogation Sunday.” The Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday following today are the Rogation Days, and in Old Europe the custom for Rogation Days was to go out into the farm fields and pray for a good growing season. It’s the springtime equivalent of the fall Harvest Thanksgiving: in the springtime the people would pray that God would send good weather and gentle rains and healthy crops and bountiful growth all through the summer season. Over time, the Rogation observance evolved into a celebration, not just of the fertility of the farm, but of all sorts of creativity: the creativity of the earth in causing growth, and human creativity in tending the crops, and taking the raw produce and making food, and building up the relationships that make communities, and inventing things that bring fullness and well-being to life. Today, Rogation Sunday is a celebration of all Creation: natural creation, human creation, God’s creation—Rogation is a celebration of how we are called to be created co-creators with God.

And there is a special significance that this celebration of Creativity comes in the Easter Season. Creation and Resurrection are linked themes. As we say in Eucharistic Prayer D, which we’ve been using during Easter Season, when Jesus rose from the grave he “destroyed death, and made the whole creation new.” The Good News of Easter is not just that we human beings will be raised up and taken out of this sorry world with all its violence and waste and pollution and death—the Good News of Easter is that the whole world will be transformed, that God’s love will gather in the entire Universe and raise it up as the new Body of Christ, that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made. Easter is for everybody; Easter is for every creature; and when we celebrate Rogation in the midst of Eastertide, we celebrate that we are God’s created co-creators to help the Body of Christ take shape in our world even now.

Our Scriptures this morning tell us something about that renewing, re-creating love we share in God. The Psalm tells us that our praise of God is just one part of an immense chorus of praise that fills the entire universe. “Sing to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the voice of song,” the Psalmist tells the people—and in that singing, the Psalmist says, we join with the sea that makes a noise, and the land and all its dwellers, and the rivers that clap their hands, and the hills that ring out with joy. According to the Psalm, the whole world praises God for his righteousness and mercy and faithfulness and the marvelous things God has done—according to the Psalm the song of praise the whole world sings is the very fabric of Creation—and we, we human beings, have the immense privilege of being part of that song, too.

The Psalmist tells us that we humans are woven into God’s song in all creation—and the Gospel tells us that we humans have a special role to play in God’s song. Jesus says to his disciples, “You are my friends. I do not call you servants anymore, because the servant does not know what the master is doing. But I have made known to you everything I have from my Father,” Jesus says, “and so you are my friends. And because you are my friends,” Jesus says, “you are able to keep my commandment: you are able to love one another as I have loved you—you are able to love one another as *God* has loved you.” According to the Gospel, we can be God’s friends, because we are not only woven into God’s love, but we *know* we are woven into God’s love—we can intentionally give our love and thanks our praise to God, we can consciously take up our part in the song of God, we can willingly bear fruit for God—and God can take up our fruit and use it to build up the Body of Christ in our world. We can add our love to God’s love, and that increases the total loving-kindness in the Universe, and that brings us one step closer to the raising-up of all things in the risen life of Christ. We are friends with God when we co-create with God the New Creation.

Now usually in a sermon about creation theology, this is the point where we talk about how being co-creators with God means practicing environmental ethics: it means recycling our garbage, and being careful what we flush into the watershed, and working for laws and regulations to limit industrial pollution, and advocating for farm policies that sustain the land, and a whole host of other environmentally friendly things as well. All of those are important, and I believe that as good stewards of Creation we Christians should support all of them.

But today, for Rogation Sunday, I want us to think about something a little deeper, a little more *primary* than environmental ethics. Because I believe that we are called to be not only good *stewards* of Creation, but we are called to be good *friends* of Creation—we are called not only to “look after” our neighbors in nature, but to *love* our nature-neighbors, even to love our nature-neighbors as Jesus has loved us. Love of course means doing good for the beloved—but at a deeper level it also means paying attention to the beloved, enjoying the beloved, appreciating the beloved, being responsive to the beloved, *loving* the beloved. And we can love Creation—as our Collect today says, loving God in all things, and, loving God above all things, loving all things for God’s sake—we can love Creation as we appreciate it and enjoy it and pay attention to the creatures in our neighborhood. That kind of paying-attention is the first step, the foundation step, that leads to earth-keeping and environmental ethics and eco-social action and all the rest. The action items are important, and we should do them—but the importance *begins* with love.

So that is my spiritual assignment for you today: sometime today, sometime this week, sometime over Memorial Day weekend, but sometime soon, I want you to choose one other creature, choose some portion of God’s creation, choose something out in nature, choose some bit of the environment—choose some creature and *love* it. Begin by paying attention to it—not just by giving it a glance or a notice, but really *attend* to it. Watch the line of a bird’s flight across the sky; feel the scaliness of a tree’s bark; listen to the lapping of the wavelets on the shore of the lake; watch as the clouds gather above the mountaintops; work in the garden and feel the soil around your hands; notice the squirrels, or the deer, or the woodchucks, or the cardinals, or the bears, that share this neighborhood with us. Take some time to pay attention to the creatures—and as you do, think of them as neighbors, think of them as members with you of this community God creates, think about what is good for them and good for you and good for the whole neighborhood we share. And as you think about them, *love* them, love them as Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, love them as Jesus himself loves us. Love God in these things; and, loving God above all things, love these things for God’s sake. That’s your prayer assignment for this week.

And you shouldn’t have a hard time doing it. One of the things I love about living in the Shenandoah Valley is that there are so *many* opportunities to love our nature-neighbors around us. I was riding my bicycle not long ago, out on Shutterlee Mill Road, climbing a long hill with a big curve at the top of the hill; and when I reached the top of that curve I had to stop, I had to pull over to the side of the road and just sit there for a minute. And it wasn’t just because I was huffing and puffing for breath—which, believe me, I do a lot of, coming from biking the gently rolling prairies of Minnesota to the ridges and hills you have around here!—but I had to stop because from that curve, from the top of that hill, I could look out to the west and see the Alleghanies all spread out all over the western horizon. There was Great North Mountain and Buffalo Gap and Elliot Knob (I think), and peaks and ridges I don’t even know the names of yet. It was all there, and I had to stop for a moment and just absorb it, just take it all in, just let it dwell in my perception—and to let myself know and feel that this is my neighborhood, these are my neighbors, these are the fellow creatures God is giving me to love. Sitting there on that curve on that hill I loved this valley. And that love made me understand in a deeper way why it is that issues of conservation and development, land use and sustainability, finding a balance for residence and industry and agriculture—love made me understand in a deeper way why these things matter so much here, why they are not just abstract matters of politics and governance, but why they are concrete questions about what actions we will take to love our neighbors, *all* our neighbors, human and non-human neighbors, all this neighborhood God calls us to love. On my bike ride, on Shutterlee Mill Road, I came to know more deeply what it means to love my nature-neighbors in this valley as Jesus himself loves me.

That’s how all of us can love Creation. That’s how we can be friends of Creation. And that’s how we can be part of God’s Re-Creation, part of God’s work of love that even now is raising all things up and making all things whole in Christ. That is the gift of Easter Resurrection. That is the gift of Rogation celebration. That is the gift of Creativity, that God gives us to make us created co-creators to make the whole Creation new. Let it be so with us, on Rogation Sunday, and on every day in this world. Amen.