

Oh my gosh, the readings this morning! Every three years we get to these readings and I think to myself: again?! The Romans are bickering and Peter is being snarky. Nobody has time for this. There is so much going on all around them to learn and experience and grow from, but all they seem to be able to do is rat each other out. One wonders if there's a redacted scroll tucked away in some Vatican archive where the Sons of Thunder, James and John are quoted saying, “he's touching me!” “He started it!”

Every three years we come to these unflattering moments in the early years of discipleship, and while we may collectively hold our noses, right under our noses are perhaps the most vivid examples of what living in the kingdom of heaven looks like in the here and now. It's not about disciples demonstrating bad behaviour. It's about Jesus and Paul showing patience and careful leadership for their communities. Some might point to these lectionary passages and consider forgiveness or reconciliation or forbearance. I see them as examples of moving forward, toward healthy relationships and pathways to the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. For me, that's what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about.

Both Jesus and Paul demonstrate the importance of maintaining focus on what's really important, the bigger picture, the parts of our lives together that keep us in right relationship with one another and not the things that sabotage those relationships. We were created by God to be in long-term relationships based on healthy boundaries, mutual respect, and interdependent support. Anything less than that will eventually erode what God has created and all will suffer for it. Above all, we were meant to make this earthly pilgrimage together, as a community, in partnerships with one another. In order to do that effectively, we must allow each member of our partnerships to live fully into the gifts God has given them. Not only does that promote healthy relationships, it pays big returns back to the community.

The Church has begun to recognize these few weeks as The Season of Creation; a time to turn our attention to the world God created, in which we live, and the one God calls us to serve as stewards. How do we read these scripture lessons - which are so clearly about people - through the lenses of the created world? I think the crossover is there if we consider the interpersonal actions described in the scriptures as a reflection of the ways human activities interact with the natural world. There is a relationship there as well. These lessons for today give us an opportunity to understand our place in the created world through a different framework.

The Season of Creation draws our attention to the natural world around us and the ways we inhabit our surroundings. We might reframe this as our relationship with the environment. We have interests and priorities, and so does the environment. A question we might ask ourselves is, are we living in a collaboration or a partnership with the sea and the river, the forests and the mountains? There are things we humans like to do and want to do; and at the same time there are things our environment also likes to do and wants to do. Are humans living in a relationship based on healthy boundaries, mutual respect, and interdependent support with the sea and the river and the forests and the mountains? At this point in time the consensus is no, we're not. Our planet is out of balance because we are not living in a healthy partnership with our ecology.

We know that when it comes to people in relationships, damage is done when one partner chooses to dominate the other. The other cannot fully express all that God created them to be and to do when they're prevented from being fully themselves. The peace which surpasses all understanding is the same kind of peace that frees us from feeling like we must dominate our planet. It's a peace that allows us to see that the planet wants to be in balance, works hard to try to keep it there, and would get there better without us trying to dominate everything.

I'll tell you a story. This spring, at the vicarage gardens, we focused our efforts on developing the front yard next to the driveway. The grass had successfully been removed the previous year, but for the longest time, nothing new would grow down by the sidewalk.

Upon closer inspection we realized that the driveway apron extended well past the edge of the driveway - about halfway to the walkway. At some point, the driveway was at least an additional car width wider than it is now. The ground we were trying to use to expand the pollinator garden was very likely compacted long ago by vehicle weight, and it never recovered.

No matter what we did, the soil had been too pushed down to be able to support new life and new growth. Rather than try to force the soil to do what we wanted it to do, we gave it what it needed: layers of organic matter to feed soil microorganisms. The area will soon be able to support new plants and retain water better. The pollinator garden did end up expanding a little further as this season progressed, but it's going to need more time to become healthy enough to do what soil does best: grow lots of stuff.

Healthy relationships between people are best described as those where one partner isn't trying to dominate the other or coerce the other into behaving in ways that aren't authentic to that person, or preventing natural growth and development. If you've ever had to distort or suppress yourself to try to fit someone else's desire for you, you know it's exhausting, and all the good gifts God gave you that make you YOU go unfulfilled. No one benefits. It's not a sustainable way of being.

The same is true for the planet. God has created it to be naturally sustainable. Of course it's capable of handling stresses from increased human activity, but only for so long. At some point it decompensates and that's when things really go badly. We're at that decompensated point now. Weather patterns tell us so. Wildfires tell us so. The extinction of not only animals, but plant food sources tell us so.

Like the pollinator garden at the vicarage, a planetary environment that's been crushed and neglected eventually loses the ability to produce good things. Recovery isn't something that can be rushed. There are no shortcuts. It's going to take time to mend this relationship we have with our planet. Human beings will have to relearn how to live on this planet in ways that promote healthy boundaries, mutual respect, and interdependent support. The planet is happy to give us everything we need, and it does this best when we work in partnership rather than dominance. We can restore the balance of the planet, but only if we work together.

The communities that Paul worked with certainly weren't shy about exposing their conflicts and power struggles. The same goes for Jesus' disciples. Today's readings aren't the first examples of this, and they aren't the last. Whatever else we might come across in our reading, one thing is clear: we're still here. Successful forward motion requires us to stay focused on the big picture, carefully shifting away from destructive behaviors, toward strengthening relationship patterns that promote health and growth for all.

Somehow we've managed to work our way through those times when we didn't support one another, eroded our own boundaries, or tried to dominate one another. It wasn't easy to correct our behaviors and attitudes. It never is. It takes time, and the active decision to choose to work toward health and sustainability. Because of the careful stewardship of the generations that came before us, Christian churches continue to this day.

When it comes to continuing to exist on this planet, it will take all of us, making the same active decision to choose to correct our unhealthy, unsustainable relationship with the environment. It will take time, but it's worth it. Our planet is capable of producing everything we need, and doing so with abundance, but it needs a reliable partner in the relationship. It's up to us. We can do it.

Way back at the beginning of creation - the original Season of Creation if you will - God made this beautiful planet, and placed us here to be good stewards of it. Of all the creatures God made, only human beings were given the job of taking care of everything. Clearly God believes we can do it. God believes in us!

And that's good news.