

Ash Wednesday Feb. 26, 2020  
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Extra Credit  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Always seek out the chance to earn some extra credit, because it might just lead to something extraordinary. When I was a freshman in high school, I came up with an idea to earn extra credit in my freshman biology class. I was rummaging through some of my mother's old books and I found a copy of a book by Charles Darwin; not his famous one. It was his account of his voyage on the *HMS Beagle*, and since we were studying Darwin and evolution in biology class at the time, I thought maybe my teacher, Mr. Gary Weir, would give me some extra credit if I read the book and wrote a book report. When I presented the idea to Mr. Weir after class, he looked at the book and said, "You could, but this book is going to be kind of dry. Come with me."

Startled by his response, I followed him to our high school's library, where he took me to the nature and environmental science section and pulled a big book with a pale blue cover off the shelf and handed it to me. "Read this instead," he said, "and give an oral report to the class and I'll give you extra credit." The book was *Sea of Slaughter* by Canadian author Farley Mowat. I do not exaggerate in any way when I say my life and its direction forever changed by reading this book.

Mowat's book opened up to me not a whole new world, but a powerful and tangible connection to the wider world. Growing up in the middle of rural Wisconsin, I had never experienced the sea or ocean, although there was and still is one of the cleanest and clearest rivers running through my parents' back yard I enjoyed exploring as a child. *Sea of Slaughter* is a book about the exploitation of the oceans and the creatures who live in them. And because Farley Mowat writes with both his head and his heart, I found myself falling in love with a part of the world he loves, and the creatures in it. This book made me realize that although I lived far from the ocean, I am nevertheless deeply connected to it. And therefore, I have a responsibility to make life choices that keep that connection in mind.

This is when I became what many call an environmentalist. My life changed I started an environmental awareness and advocacy group for students at my high school, and we participated in my town's Earth Day events, we volunteered for a local Energy Fair, and we convinced my high school to start recycling and

composting – this was back in the late 1980’s when all this was not as common as it is today. I convinced the people in my church to stop using Styrofoam cups and plates at coffee hour and use the china mugs and plates that had been sitting in the cupboards instead. And although it was a tougher sell, I convinced my parents to recycle and compost too. It is no exaggeration to say every decision I made, including to attend Northland College, one of the first environmental liberal arts private colleges, goes back to the influence Farley Mowat’s book had on me. Indeed, even standing here with all of you tonight on Ash Wednesday, even answering my call to ordained ministry is because I read that book.

Not because of the words, or the urgency of the situation, but because the book helped me realize my deep connection to the planet, to the animals and other people on this planet. Feeling that connection so deeply had a profound effect on me: on one hand it made pay attention to and accept some accountability for the exploitation of the earth and its creatures and makes me strive to live in ways that positively impact the world; in the church we call that repentance. On the other hand, it gave me a strong sense of hope, because it reminded me humanity was created to be part of the world, not some weird alien race separate from the world, and when we remember we are not a part from but a part of the world, each other and God, then, well, then all life will thrive, which the church also calls repentance.

Today I would call this pivotal moment in my life an Ash Wednesday kind of moment. Ash Wednesday is more than the start of the Church Season of Lent; it is when the Church is playing like it’s Mr. Weir, my biology teacher, looking at what we’ve been doing on our own and saying to us, “Well that’s a nice effort, and not too bad, it’s certainly not *wrong*, but there’s something a little more challenging and a lot more loving I’d like to offer you. Something that will remind you of your deep connection to the world, your neighbor, and God. It’s the reminder of what God created you for and it could just change your life forever. Are you up for it?”

The words of Ash Wednesday are all about the reminder that we human beings were never intended to alienate ourselves from the earth from which we were created. We are not separate from the soil and the trees and the birds and the bees and the flowers and the deer and the woodchucks and the hawks and the seals and the whales and plethora of life around us. And all life shares a common fate: none of us is immortal, we will all die one day. We remember we are dust, part of the earth, and to dust we shall return when we die. And yet that

is not the end of any story. For the words spoken on Ash Wednesday are spoken as a cross is traced on our foreheads with the very dusty ashes of burnt palm branches which remind us our connection is BOTH to the earth and to God, who hates nothing God has made, and God has made the world and everything in the world out of love and that love will renew us when we forget our connection and that same love will be the doorway to the resurrection life of Jesus we will experience in a new way when we die.

That's the power of connection, and that connection is called love. And it can change lives. God's love can make us pay attention to and accept accountability and responsibility for the exploitation of the earth and humanity, for our sins, and give us cause to change our ways, to strive to live in ways that make a positive impact on the earth and our community and at the same time practice hope that if more of us remember our connection to the earth and each other and God what a wonderful world it would be. Then we would be less greedy and more generous. Then we would be more forgiving and less judgmental. Then we, like the prophet Isaiah wrote, would remove the finger of accusation towards others and let that finger point toward our own hearts and do the work of Lent: self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial, reading and meditating on Scriptures.

So many people like to believe Lent is about giving up something. So many other people like to believe Lent is about taking on some discipline. And those practices are not bad, they certainly are not *wrong*, but if we only see them as the bare minimum we do before the celebration of Easter we have missed the opportunity for that deeper connection that can be disguised as extra credit.

In just a few moments, I will invite you to observe a holy Lent. I will read the words of invitation to come forward and receive a cross of ashes on your forehead and say the words of connection: to remember you are part of this earth, that you were made of love from love, and that while you live you embody that connection to the earth and God. Then we will begin our Lenten observance not with giving something up or taking something on, but by praying the Litany of Penitence. It's our opportunity to reflect on our accountability for the ways we have allowed sin to alienate us from God, from the earth, and each other. And I encourage you, as we pray this litany together to pay attention to each word and phrase and notice if one jumps out at you, if it grabs your attention. That could very well be the Holy Spirit whispering to you, offering you some extra credit opportunity, to further explore your life and remember a little more deeply your

connection to the world, each other, and God, and let that opportunity transform you. Are you up for it?