

**Two Bible Studies on Climate Change ©
Prepared for the Rural Ministry Conference¹
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa U.S.A.**

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**“Love Your People, Love Your Place”
Bible Study One on Genesis 1: 24-31**

“Love your people!” In a phrase or proverb, this is what I was taught at Wartburg Theological Seminary (WTS) about the heart of pastoral ministry: “Love your people!” Especially I remember the wisdom of Prof. William Streng in his classes on Christian Education and Church Administration. When I was installed into the Streng Chair at WTS, I went back and listened to his lectures recorded on cassette tapes. Pastor Streng continued to serve St. John’s Lutheran Church at Bliedorn, Iowa, while serving on the seminary faculty. His teaching was informed by his pastoral ministry both there and at Immanuel Lutheran Church at Rock Falls, Illinois.

Prof. Streng shared many stories of life together in congregations, both the privilege of being entrusted to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the people and the challenges of staying faithful to that calling. There was one *cantus firmus* throughout his teaching: “Love the people!” Visit the people, listen to them, learn from them, care for them, and love them! This pastoral wisdom has served me and many others extremely well in ministry over the years.

On Loving Your Place

“Love the people” condenses the Gospel of Jesus Christ into a mantra for ministry. It gives focus and clarity to the pastoral vocation, the meaning of the stole and the collar. It gives reason to keep getting up in the morning, the heart of the message we have to proclaim at worship and to share in pastoral care. Loving the people is the basis for trust, without which no ministry is possible. Loving the people is what will be remembered after we leave. Yes, love your people!

It was at the Rural Ministry Conference that I came to the recognition, however, that this truth has a necessary corollary that we ignore at a price: “Love your place!” The very name of this conference attends to the reality that there is something peculiar and particular about rural places.² While much has changed about rural places in recent decades—especially due to inexorable economic shifts that have exerted immeasurable stress and caused enormous loss and

¹ These Bible studies are dedicated to Prof. Ann Fritschel, Director of the Center for Theology and Land, and Prof. Gwen Sayler, collaborator in teaching Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Theological Seminary. ©Craig L. Nesson, March 2022.

² See Mark L. Yackel-Juleen, *Everyone Must Eat: Food, Sustainability, and Ministry*, Word & World, 9 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021), esp. Chapter Two on “People and Place, Land and Community: Sociological Connections,” 41-72.

grief—people in rural contexts remain connected to the land in ways those of us in urban contexts may know only in part.

Whether in urban, suburban, ex-urban, small town, or open country settings, however, we err when we fail to recognize how loving the people inextricably involves loving the place. To fail to enter with love into the place where people dwell is to hold back on fully expressing love for the people, who finally are not separable from that place where their lives are embedded and incarnated.³ My contention is that loving the people is inseparable from loving the place—or at least from the desire to learn about in order to love that place.

Genesis 1: 24-31

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

*So God created humankind in his
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and 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.” God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Genesis 1: 24-31

This song celebrating the six days of creation is punctuated by the refrain: “And God saw that it was good!” Day and Night—Good! Dome of the sky—Good! Dry land and vegetation—Good! Sun, moon, and stars—Good! Swarms of water and sky creatures—Good! And on the sixth day: living creatures of every kind with humankind among them, created in God’s image—Very good!

Also in the text, however, at the creation of humankind there appears the fissure: “have dominion” and “fill the earth and subdue it.” As much as I would prefer to translate the two

³ We have heard the lament about having to serve internship or call in a particular place that affects the capacity to love the people in that place.

Hebrew words, *kabash* and *radah*, as “be stewards” or “take care of,” the fissure between the human and the good creation cannot be erased by this sleight of hand. Among the meanings of *kabash*: assault, bring into subjection, enslave, force, subdue, subjugate, tread down, and tread under foot. Among the meanings of *radah*: dominion exercise authority, exercise dominion, lead, rule, take, and tread.

Here in this beloved creation text, loving the people becomes severed from loving the place with all its flora and fauna. This fissure involves the instrumentalization of earth, waters, sky, and all their creatures for human use. God says: “I have given you...” This fissure—the separation or alienation of the human from creation—relentlessly gives rise to an anthropocentrism that values the people at a great cost to the places, even though we are entirely interconnected to and dependent on the health of our places.

This same creation text that affirms that every human is created in God’s image—and thus deserving inherent dignity and worth, which is the foundation for human rights as articulated in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948)—also discloses the fissure that divides people from places.⁴

Eco-Challenges and Eco-Wonders in the Anthropocene

Citing trends from the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, Larry Rasmussen writes:

When scientists compared these [trends] to knowledge of earlier planetary conditions, they come to this conclusion: “Evidence from several millennia shows that the magnitude and rates of human-driving changes to the global environment are in many cases unprecedented. There is no previous analogue for the current operation of the Earth system.” They go so far as to announce a new era in the geological history of the earth, “the Anthropocene.” “The planet is now dominated by human activities.”⁵

One pervasive consequence of the Anthropocene is climate change.

In a course on Ecojustice at WTS, we explored the consequences for the planet, our home, resulting from this fissure between people and place.⁶

- How can we view creatures and creation itself as neighbors, whom we are called upon to love by the Great Commandment?
- How might we understand plants and creatures as “persons,” those who wear masks of God, to whom we relate as deserving inherent dignity?

⁴ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> 14 April 2022.

⁵ Larry Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55, that cites the work of W.L. Steffen et al., *Global Change and the Earth System* (Berlin and New York: Springer, 2004), v and 81.

⁶ Cf. Shannon Jung, *We Are Home: A Spirituality of the Environment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993).

- How should we relate to created beings as “Thou” rather than instrumentalizing their existence as “It”?⁷
- How could we reimagine what it means to be “image of God” in order to respect the intrinsic worth of earth, sea, and sky with all their inhabitants?

Students in the class developed presentations based on paying attention to their own local places to notice the eco-challenges faced there but also the eco-wonders near to them that astonish. In the most recent offering, while each place clearly has eco-challenges, the center of gravity gave focus to the eco-wonders. Together we asked whether the way forward for addressing the eco-challenges begins with our awe and gratitude for the eco-wonders that amaze us.

This exercise has given rise to my own reflections on WTS as sacred place. We begin with Land Acknowledgement. We live in a land haunted by the traces of indigenous people: place names, historical sites, mounds, reservations. Not only are these reminders of a tragic history but a call for us to engage tribal people today on their own terms. In Iowa we pay respect to the Illini, Ioway, Otoe, Missouriia, and Dakota people, and to the federally recognized Meskwaki (Sac and Fox/Sauk) tribes of the Mississippi. We acknowledge the tragic history of the displacement of the indigenous people by the European immigrants and their descendants.

The campus of WTS is located on the bluff in the driftless region, an area not covered by ice during the last ice age and bereft of glacial deposits. Its landscape is marked by hills, forested ridges, and distinctive river valleys. The main campus rests above geological layers of limestone outcrop exposed in the descent to Catfish Creek, a tributary leading to the Mississippi River. I recall delivering newspapers on the route of my children in this neighborhood early in the morning the wildlife encounters with deer, turkey, groundhogs, squirrels, and songbirds. A small field for activities rests under the sky near tress, where volleyball, softball, kite flying, and cricket have been enjoyed. The playground for children is named Kinder Castle with memories also of sledding in winter on the slope. Geothermal wells underlie the parking lot to power heating and cooling technology for the seminary. Other green spaces include a labyrinth for prayer and occasion for picnics and concerts. Day lilies bloom on campus together with a flowering pear tree (paired with another in the Luther Garden in Wittenberg, Germany) alongside a peace pole.

The WTS campus is an eco-wonder to many. I invite you to reflect on the convergence between loving the people and loving the place where you dwell. How can we address locally the fissure dividing the interests of humans from the well-being of the water, land, and sky with all their creatures? How can small town and rural communities remind those in other places of the symbiotic relationships upon which all life depends?

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you understand and explain the relationship between loving the people and loving the place?

⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, prolog and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970).

2. What concrete steps can you take to repair the fissure between human actions and exploitation of places?
3. How would we have to act differently if we are called to love creation and creatures as neighbors according to the Great Commandment (Matthew 22: 37-39)?
4. What are the eco-wonders in the place where you live that can motivate you to respond to the eco-challenges in that place?

“Eden Beckons”
Bible Study Two on Genesis 2: 4b-15 and Revelation 22: 1-5

In her memorable song, Woodstock, Joni Mitchell sang this refrain:

We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the Garden.⁸

The garden of Eden is not in the past and the fall into sin was not an historical event. We err when we think backwards and talk about paradise as somewhere in the distant past at human origins that once was intact but now no longer. When we speak this way, we unnecessarily place a stumbling block between faith and science.

Eden is instead a lure, a strange attractor, a magnet, an act of daring imagination. Eden beckons to us not from the past but into the future. Eden is a call from God to become what we not yet are. Eden is a summons, an invitation, an insistence that we conform human existence to God's life-giving purpose for all creation.⁹ Eden summons us to restrain our overreaching of human desires and excavation of earth, waters, and sky. Eden beckons us to honor the existence and dwelling of other creatures and flora in God's Garden.

Genesis 2: 4b-15

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

⁸ © October 22, 1969; Siquomb Publishing Corporation.

⁹ Cf. John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 24-38.

A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Genesis 2: 4b-15

The second creation story begins with a garden. Before there were humans, there was earth and a stream to water the face of the ground. Adám was fashioned from the *adamah* (dust): “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” And God breathed [*ruach, pneuma*, spirit] into our nostrils the breath of life. Likewise, Eva [Eve: *chavah*—to breathe, *chayah*—to live] is brought to life from the rib of Adám: “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.” Both earth creatures arise from the soil.

And, behold, God planted a garden in Eden—in the east—and from the ground made to grow every tree: trees of life, trees of knowledge of good and evil. And rivers flowed out of Eden to water the garden: the Rishon, the Gihon, the Tigris, and Euphrates. Then out of the ground God formed every animal of the field, every bird of the air, every living creature: earth creatures!

And God gave to Adám the Original Commandment: “to till and keep the Garden of Eden. To till [*abad*—to work, serve, tend] and to keep [*shamar*—to take care of, guard, protect]! The Original Commandment remains in effect; it has never been revoked or abrogated. It is as binding as the Great Commandment: to love God and your neighbor as yourself. The creatures of Eden are our original neighbors, given us to love by God.

Revelation 22: 1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. Revelation 22: 1-5

As the Scripture begin with an Eden story, the dream of Eden recurs again at Scripture’s end. This is another reason why it is more fitting for us to look forward to Eden than to look backwards.

Here again the water of life continues to flow. And the tree of life flourishes, offering twelve kinds of fruit for nourishment. And the leaves of this tree are named for the healing of the nations. Eden is now depicted as a cityscape, whose construction is in harmony with all creation.

God again, as in Genesis, and here the Lamb dwell in the midst of Eden reimagined, the New Jerusalem, *Jeru-shalom*: an urban garden of life-giving relationships among God, human-*[humus]* kind, and all creatures. No more curse among them and no more exile from Eden (Genesis 3: 14-24); all servants worshipping God and the sign of the Lamb (a cross!) on their foreheads. And night is no more, for the Lord God reigns forever and ever as their Light.

Local Congregations Anticipating Eden

While there is no road back to Eden somewhere in the mythical past, there is a path forward. Eden beckons to us as members and leaders of faith communities to entice the church of Jesus Christ, our people and places with their buildings and property, to become outposts of Eden in our local communities.

Willis Jenkins avers:

Integrating the moral humanities into science-based management of sustainability problems and forging practical collaborations across alienating borders, I argue, needs a mode of ethical engagement that begins from concrete problems.¹⁰

More plainly, Wendell Berry writes eloquently about paying attention to one's local place:

And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our feet, and learn to be at home.¹¹

We are invited by God's Word—from Genesis to Revelation—into an act of prophetic imagination (Brueggemann).¹² How might local Christian communities serve as “anticipatory communities” (Rasmussen) that practice sustainability and model sustainable practices for others?¹³ How might we till and keep little gardens of Eden in the midst of the communities where we live? How might we model for others glimpses of Eden through our worship practices, education practices, organizational practices, green space practices, and energy practices?

As a concluding exercise in the Ecojustice course, students were asked to imagine congregations as “local places” and “anticipatory communities” that practice sustainability and model sustainable practices for others. The Appendix lists 63 practices to stimulate your imagination and invite moral deliberation in your local places. No congregation can practice all, although every congregation can practice some. Consider the following:

- Native plants in worship space rather than cut flowers and poinsettias.

¹⁰ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2013), 69.

¹¹ Wendell Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness: Kentucky's Red River Gorge* (Louisville: University of Kentucky, 1991), 43.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination. 40th Anniversary Edition*, foreword Davis Hankins (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).

¹³ Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith*, 364-365.

- Introduce Eco-vangelism or Eco-Testimony at worship.
- Increase awareness of indigenous cultures.
- Organize eco-encounter excursions to explore eco-wonders and eco-challenges in your local place.
- Form an Ecojustice Task Force whose members serve on all the other committees as advocates for ecojustice.
- Train naturalists, like we train community organizers.
- No chemical dumping on lawns.
- Develop habitat for wildlife.
- Solar panels on the church buildings.
- Chargers for electric vehicles in the parking lot.

What if in the next two decades Christian congregations became known in their local communities for re-presenting and anticipating the garden and cityscape of Eden? How would young people notice and resonate with these commitments? How would future generations remember and be grateful that we cared so much for them?

I conclude with another lyric from Joni Mitchell:

They paved paradise and put up a parking lot
 With a pink hotel, a boutique, and a swinging hot spot
 Don't it always seem to go
 That you don't know what you got 'til it's gone
 They paved paradise and put up a parking lot

They took all the trees, and put 'em in a tree museum
 And they charged the people a dollar and a half to see them
 Don't it always seem to go
 That you don't know what you got 'til it's gone
 They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot

Hey farmer, farmer, put away your DDT
 I don't care about spots on my apples
 Leave me the birds and the bees
 Please
 Don't it always seem to go
 That you don't know what you got 'til it's gone
 They paved paradise and put up a parking lot

Late last night, I heard the screen door slam
 And a big yellow taxi took my girl away
 Don't it always seem to go
 That you don't know what you got 'till it's gone
 They paved paradise and put up a parking lot
 Hey now, now, don't it always seem to go
 That you don't know what you got 'til it's gone

They paved paradise to put up a parking lot¹⁴

Let's write the next verse and sing it!

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How does your thinking change when imagining Eden as place that beckons to us from the future rather than a lost paradise from the past?
2. What does the Original Commandment—"to till and keep the garden"—mean for your life practices and the practices of your congregation?
3. Discuss the list of 62 sustainability practices in the Appendix. Which practices would you like to learn more about?
4. How might your congregation practice sustainability and model sustainable practices for others? What are the practices you are already doing and what are the next steps?

¹⁴ © January 7, 1970; Siquomb Publishing Corporation

Appendix

Local Congregations Anticipating Eden

Craig L. Nesson, Wartburg Theological Seminary
With Appreciation to Students from the Ecojustice January Term Courses

Key Question: How do we imagine congregations as “local places” and “anticipatory communities” (Larry Rasmussen) that 1) practice sustainability and 2) model sustainable practices for others?

Worship Practices

1. Move worship outdoors.
2. Move worship offsite. There are many natural wild spaces we could use.
3. Hold baptisms and affirmations of baptism with natural waters.
4. Name creation as dimension of the assembly: creation as a “thou.”
5. Create a Sacred Space Team to attend to creation at worship.
6. All natural materials in the worship space.
7. Native plants in worship space rather than cut flowers and poinsettias.
8. Use art, slides, banners, or photos of creation in worship. Sacred art reflecting God in nature.
9. Preaching references to eco-wonders and eco-challenges.
10. Public confession to include sins against creation.
11. Include creation in intercessions, for example, for local crops, farmers, environmental issues, and natural disasters.
12. Introduce Eco-vangelism or Eco-Testimony at worship: personal witness to the love for places in creation. Tell faith stories from national or state park experiences, hunting, or fishing.
13. Use creation care liturgies, music, and eucharistic prayers. Use liturgies and songs from *All Creation Sings*.
14. Offer sacred space blessings. Expand pet blessings to include plants, wildlife, trees, etc.
15. Provide natural burial alternative.
16. Be explicit and consistent in sharing what the Gospel means for the whole Earth.

Education Practices

1. Increase awareness of indigenous cultures. Initiate connections and conversations. Learn the history of indigenous tribes and engage past history to seek greater harmony with our neighbors which includes all of creation. Take time to research and publicize the history of your owned property.
2. Foster conversation through intergenerational programs.
3. Confirmation programs include teaching ecology as part of First Article instruction.
4. Telling stories that bring climate change into focus for others
5. Partner with local, regional, or national nature and/or ecological organizations.
6. Bible studies on creation care.
7. Creation crafts from natural materials.

8. Education on local grown food. Build relationships with local growers and small farmers.
9. Use fair trade coffee and other products, including explanations why.
10. Organize eco-encounter excursions to explore eco-wonders and eco-challenges in your local place.
11. Advocate for ecojustice with judicatory leaders and at judicatory meetings.
12. Take an active role in advocating for policies that support creation care at the local, state, national, and global level.
13. Service projects for litter removal and beautification.
14. Form a society of walkers or bikers.

Organizational Practices

1. Intentionally hold meetings outside at the church building and other locations.
2. Draw on the gifts of members who are creation conscious and advocates.
3. Build partnership with area camping ministries.
4. Develop a budget that incorporates a green fund that prioritizes clean energy and carbon offsets.
5. Utilize space in your building for re-purposing materials (a 'stuff' swap).
6. Local food cooked together for church meals.
7. Form an Ecojustice Task Force whose members serve on all the other committees as advocates for ecojustice.
8. Invite prayer circles and prayer teams to pray for creation and creatures.
9. Open your building to support the efforts of ecojustice and conservation groups.
10. Committees and task forces always consider decisions through the lens of ecology.
11. Long range planning, building projects need to consider ecologically sound alternatives.
12. Eco-friendly practices
 - a. Recycle bins next to garbage containers.
 - b. Avoid packaging and plastic, etc.
 - c. Mugs instead of disposable cups.
 - d. Creation crafts from natural materials.
 - e. Reusable materials: bulletins, funerals, meals, communion cups, etc.
 - f. Use natural, biodegradable cleaning supplies.
 - g. Nothing goes to the landfill.
 - h. Compost.
13. Divest from fossil fuels and eco-damaging investments.
14. Train naturalists, like we train community organizers.
15. Hire and honor storytellers who can share creation stories in different media.
16. Care for local land, plants, and animals. Become water protectors and land rehabilitators.
17. During heat waves, open the church as a cooling center for those who need relief.
18. Gifting trees.
19. Improve the local habitat through bee colonies.

Green Space Practices

1. Use church property for a community garden that creates opportunities for youth and others to learn skills, appreciate nature, and care for the earth.
2. No chemical dumping on lawns.
3. Develop habitat for wildlife.
4. Install a rain barrel as a water source.
5. Prairie grass instead of lawns.
6. Develop a community park or playground.
7. Multiuse for parking lots: host an outdoor market for local produce and crafts, install a basketball or volleyball court, organize community meal, offer concerts by local artists, etc.
8. Construct a prayer labyrinth open to the public.

Energy Practices

1. Recycle, LED bulbs, programmable thermostats, paper bulletins, switch from styrofoam materials to natural.
2. Renew with energy efficient windows, heating, and cooling systems. Insulate all areas well.
3. Solar panels on the church buildings. Wind turbines in partnership with others depending on context. Where property allows, use green space for a solar garden.
4. Install geothermal for heating and cooling efficiency.
5. Chargers for electric vehicles in the parking lot.
6. Improve your church's waste management practices.

As we imagine local congregations as “local places” and “anticipatory communities” that practice sustainability and model sustainable practices for others, building community among congregation members is foundational. Sustainability is best practiced in community with members collaborating with each other. As the relationships in community become stronger and people listen to each other, they become more aware of one another's needs and begin caring more deeply for each other and for creation. Take comfort from Matthew 19:26 where Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”