

WHY WE GATHER
Caring for Others Through Social Transformation

“Sustainability”
(Genesis 1-3, Revelation 21)

Dan Collison
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Introduction

1. We are nearing the end of the third segment of the “Why We Gather” teaching series called, “Caring for Others Through Social Transformation, Pursuing compassion, mercy and justice in the world through the creation of networks for good.” Our points of emphasis have ranged from violence and incarceration to race and human sexuality. Today, we turn to the topic of sustainability for several reasons, but not the least because there is a significant gap between what a majority of people believe about environmental concerns and its impact on vulnerable populations, and how that is prioritized in our daily lives.

Fasten your seat belt as we move quickly through the “belief and action” gap.

American Sustainability Belief and Action Gap

WHAT WE BELIEVE		WHO WE ARE
7 in 10 say they experience a connection to all of life.	OK. BUT.	1 in 10 say climate change and similar issues are a serious problem.
6 in 10 believe that we need to address matters like climate change.		3 in 10 believe that they will be impacted by climate change.
5 in 10 believe that people living in poorer countries will experience a great deal of harm due to climate change.		The US comprises 4% of the world’s population and consumes 25% of the global energy supply.

2. Seven in ten Americans say they “experience a connection to all life.” More than six in ten believe that we need to address matters like climate change now to avoid more serious economic problems in the future. And, five in ten believe that people living in poorer countries will experience a great deal of harm due to climate change.¹ Yet, less than one in ten of Americans say climate change is the most important issues facing us today and less than three in ten Americans feel they will be personally impacted by climate change. It is also no secret that Americans comprise only 4% of the world’s population and yet operate 1/3 of the world’s automobiles and consume one quarter of the world’s global energy supply.²

¹ <http://www.ppri.org/research/believers-sympathizers-skeptics-americans-conflicted-climate-change-environmental-policy-science/> (accessed 3-18-17)

² <http://www.cnn.com/US/9910/12/population.cosumption/> (accessed 3-18-17)

3. These gaps are reason enough for Americans to work on sustainability for ourselves and future generations of people coming after us. This should be reason enough for Christ followers to be leveraging what we believe from Christ's teachings that speak to, at a minimum, how our government's and corporate policies and personal lifestyles might be negatively impacting vulnerable populations here and around the world.³ And, it's just smart to protect and leverage the earth's ecosystems that provide us food, water, oxygen, beauty, peacefulness, and splendor.
4. It is also our practice, as Protestant Christians, to frame a theological understanding for everything that we do, and sustainability is no exception. There are many transferable archetypes in Scripture that speak to sustainability. And, by transferable archetype, I mean a broad conceptual idea that has relevance in every age. Jesus' teachings fit the sustainability theme because he commanded us to love our neighbors, do unto others as we would have them do to us, and be good stewards of all that we have been given, which of course means all living things and the planet itself.

More generally, the Biblical narrative speaks to sustainability in that it is provocatively book ended by transferable archetypes with human origins beginning in a garden and ending in a city. And, in-between the books of Genesis and Revelation we see that, across the sweep of Scripture and in addition to the famous Scriptural imperative to love God and love neighbor, there is a third love: *the love of all living things*. There is a word for that, by the way.

5. Edward Olson is an American biologist, naturalist, and author who wrote the book *Biophilia*⁴ in the 1980s bringing forward the idea that humans are innately drawn to connections with nature and should nurture the urge to affiliate with other living forms of life.⁵ The focus of this sermon is to develop a theological framework that helps us see the love of all living things as important as loving God and loving neighbor, and find simple every day ways to live more joyfully sustainable lives.

Let's look at the Genesis archetype first.

A. Origins and Cursed Soil (Genesis 1-3)

1. Genesis chapters one through three speak poetically about the origins of all things in a layering kind of way. First void, then darkness, then God hovering over the waters. Then, light, then night and day. And, then vegetation, creatures, and then humans. In every case, the ancient Hebrew oral tradition carried forward through generations until Moses recorded it, punctuated the fact that, "*God saw every created things and said that it was good.*" Moses wrote that phrase seven times in chapter one alone and the last time wrote: "*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*"⁶

Genesis chapter two is a beautiful and metaphoric telling of the origins of humans and their co-creating companionship with one another. And, chapter three frames a sort of entrance of the human experience into the reality that being made in the image of God comes with some huge

³ Jesus' commands to love our neighbors (Mk. 12:30-31), do unto others as we would have them do unto us (Lk. 6:31), care for "the least of these" (Mt. 25:40, 45), and be proper stewards of His creation (Lk. 12:42-48; Col. 1:16).

⁴ <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674074422&content=reviews> (accessed 3-18-17)

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biophilia_hypothesis (accessed 3-18-17)

⁶ Genesis 1:31.

down sides. The gift of human consciousness combined with freedom makes possible our ability to warp knowledge into oppression.

2. The mystical exchange between the first people, both female and male, and a speaking serpent, unfurl the tragic spiral of deceit that leads to violence that leads to more deceit that leads to more violence. And, the net result of Genesis chapter three is broken trust between God and humans, humans and humans, and humans and the soil.

Genesis 3:17b-19:

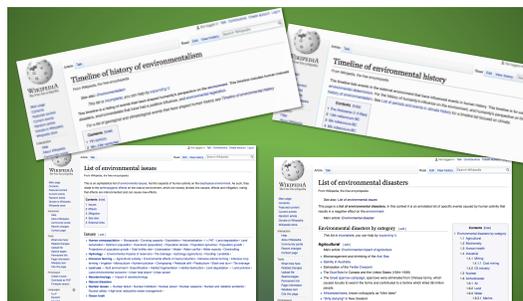
“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.
¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”

Genesis 3:17b-19. NIV

This text is an important reminder that just as there is a breach between God and one another exists, so is there a broken relationship between us and the ground, or more holistically framed, us and the entire ecosystems of our planet.

3. If you are interested in learning more about the trials and errors, successes and failures of these breaches and brokenness, I have a very simple exercise for you to do. Go to Wikipedia and scroll through the following four web pages:

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_environmental_history

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_history_of_environmentalism

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_environmental_issues

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_environmental_disasters

Wikipedia, it is the largest free encyclopedia that anyone can edit, so it's important to pay attention to citations and footnotes. But, these web pages will bring you into the depth and width of how humans get at sustainability in the constantly colliding and evolving environmental realities of our planet. The innovations over time are astonishing. Renewable energy collected from renewable resources such as sunlight, wind, rain, tides, waves, and geothermal heat are now providing nearly 20% of all energy needs worldwide.⁷ Locally, initiatives such as the Hennepin County Energy Recovery Center next to Target Field processes one million tons of waste a year, and the HERC burns that waste while generating enough electricity to power 25,000 homes annually.

And, I am inspired by local companies such as Izzie's Ice Cream only a few blocks from our building and just off Gold Medal Park. This company acknowledges the environmental cost to manufacture ice cream from transporting dairy and product in trucks, to the electricity it takes to operate refrigeration compressors. So, they designed their building to be more than 90% heated from a combination of solar windows and placing the freezer compressors at the bottom of the building such that the heat they generate can circulate throughout the building. And, they use specially designed packing materials that do not require their delivery trucks to operate chillers while making deliveries.

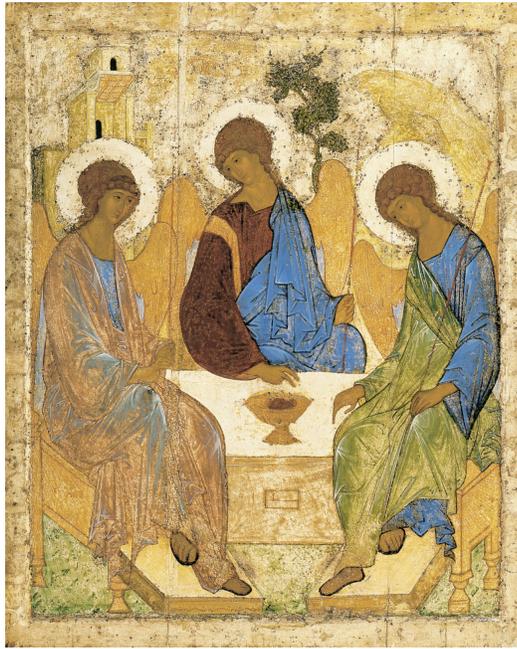
4. The Wikipedia timelines and list of environmental issues will also tell of avoidable disasters that have and are continuing to devastate ecosystems around the world. The lists cover agricultural manipulation gone wrong, failed biodiversity experiments, industrial toxic waste sites, nuclear melt downs, and marine kills with such things as dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico because of fertilizer run off drained from the Mississippi River.

The invitation to Christ followers is to enter into the innovation and failures such that we struggle to bring renewal and reconciliation between us and the soil that is in synchronized with renewal and reconciliation between us and God and us and one another. Its all connected and kind of like being in a circle dance not too different than that of the Christian concept of God as Trinity.

5. Russian Artist Andrei Rublev (pronounced "An-dre-aay Ru-blee-ov") painted a picture titled "Trinity" that describes the Trinity of God. And, the painting's timeless appeal has intersectionality with today's topic. Rublev lived in the late 1300's and early 1400's and is considered to be the greatest medieval Russian painter of Orthodox icons and frescoes.⁸ "Trinity" is his most famous painting and is rich with theological meaning.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renewable_energy (accessed 3-19-17)

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei_Rublev (accessed 4-16-10)



The painting does not try to create a single metaphor, but rather uses a biblical account to create a conversation about the way God in three persons interacts as a unity.⁹ It takes as its subject the mysterious story in the Hebrew book of Genesis where Abraham receives three visitors as he camps by the oak of Mamre. He serves them a meal. As the conversation progresses he seems to be talking straight to God, as if these 'angels' were in some way a metaphor for the three persons of the Trinity.

6. The composition is a great circle around the table, focusing the attention on the chalice-bowl at the center, which reminds the viewer of an altar at communion. On one level this picture shows three angels seated under Abraham's tree, but on another level it is a visual expression of what the Trinity means, what is the nature of God, and how we approach God. Reading the picture from left to right, we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Notice that Rublev gives each person of the Trinity different clothing.

On the right, the Holy Spirit has a garment of the clear blue of the sky, wrapped over with a robe of a fragile green. This tells us that the *Spirit* of creation moves in sky and water, breathes in heaven and earth. All living things owe their freshness to the Spirit's touch.

The Son in the middle has the deepest colors; notice the thick heavy garment of the reddish-brown like earth, and a cloak like the blue of heaven. In his person he unites heaven and earth, the two natures are present in him, and over his right shoulder ("the Government shall be upon his shoulder" said a Hebrew Prophet¹⁰) there is a band of gold shot through the earthly garment, as his divinity suffuses and transfigures his earthly being.

⁹ The following description of "Trinity" is based on content from the website <http://www.stjohnscamberwell.org.au/Sermons/ExplanationofTheTrinityIcon.htm> (accessed on 4-16-10)

¹⁰ Isaiah 9:6.

On the left the Father seems to wear all the colors in a kind of fabric that changes with the light, that seems transparent, that cannot be described or confined in words. And this is how it should be. No one has seen the Father, in fact the gender reference to Father is completely inadequate because the vision of God the Creator fills the universe beyond even our most profound comprehensions.

7. Most interestingly and importantly, these three exist not in a hierarchical scheme like a corporate organizational chart. Rather, there is a circular motion indicating perfect community. The life flows clockwise around the circle like a beautiful participative circle dance: Three in One, One in Three. And, here is a kicker: In front of the table there appears to be a little rectangular hole. Some art historians believe the remaining glue in the original icon indicates there was perhaps once a mirror glued to the front of the table, making room for us in the circle dance of God.¹¹

Rublev's visualization of the paradox of the Trinity is richly layered. And, while being more than 600 years old, it remains as one of the best visual guides the Christian tradition has to help us ponder the triune understanding of God, a bedrock aspect of the Christian faith. And, as we ponder what it means to be reconciled to God, one another, and the earth, the Trinitarian framework helps us see that everything really is connected. And, as we will now turn in looking at the end of the Bible, our work, alongside the work of the Creator, is to "make all things become new."

B. Final Things as Mirror of Renewal Now (Revelation 21)

1. The book of Revelation is considered "apocalyptic" literature and thus comes with the label "handle with caution and care." Christian history is burdened by a historical landscape of misinterpretations and misapplications of the book of Revelation that has brought great harm to the Christian religion and to our world. Not the least is when people interpret Revelation to mean the world is coming to an end very soon and that the environment has little need for our care or concern because it's all going to be destroyed anyway. I call this the "why polish the brass on the Titanic" approach to the soil. And, for reference, this kind of thinking has appeared in every generation since Revelation was first written and was amidst controversy included in the biblical canon centuries ago.
2. It is appropriate and necessary to set aside fanciful time bound interpretations of this book in exchange for its deeper power and beauty. Like in chapter 21, for instance. In this chapter the author has a vision of God's dwelling coming down to earth like a city. And, the city has gates that never close, water without cost, and beauty fashioned out of earthly materials such as jewels and gold. And, the voice of God says, "I am making everything new!"
3. Looking across Revelation broadly, many biblical scholars and pastors alike see the Revelation images such as throngs of diverse people from every nation before God, and the notion of heaven descending down to a new earth, as closely tied ideas to the archetype in the Lord's Prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples, "may your kingdom come, and will be done on earth as it is in heaven."¹² And, *that* it is the role of the Christ follower--to be a part of ushering in the generous grace filled values of Christ's kingdom in our time, and with and through, our love of all living things.

¹¹ <https://cac.org/take-place-table-2016-09-13/> (accessed 3-18-17)

¹² Matthew 6.

4. The Bible's movement from beginning in a garden and ending with the Revelation 21 image of a city is very intriguing. Not the least because of the massive population shifts to urban centers in our time, bringing important environmental concerns to the built environment in our city centers in particular. The United Nations predicts that by 2050 about 64% of the developing world and 86% of the developed world will be urbanized.¹³ So, how we design and build density in our cities is a matter of critical importance for people of faith who want people and the environment to flourish.
5. For instance, the term "heat island" describes built up areas that are hotter than nearby rural areas. The annual air temperature of a city with 1 million people or more can be 1.8–5.4°F warmer than its surroundings. In the evening, the difference can be as high as 22°F than rural areas. Heat islands can affect communities by increasing summertime peak energy demand, air conditioning costs, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, heat-related illness and mortality, and water quality.¹⁴ Interesting fact: each additional Celsius degree in temperature can cost 3-4% more in energy costs.
6. This is part of the reason why we, in a downtown setting are committed to being environmentally responsible. That is actually one of our communities stated values alongside being biblically inspired, prayer designed, intellectually informed, artistically infused, mission minded, socially aware, culturally engaged, and grace filled. This is why we are thrilled to have the new affordable housing project on our site have what's called a "white roof" instead of the standard black top roof.



First Covenant Church Minneapolis

A roof covered with solar-reflective white paint reflects up to 90% of sunlight as opposed to the 20% reflected by a traditional black roof. On a 90°F day, a black roof can be up to 180°F while a white roof stays at 100°F reducing cooling costs up to 40 percent. And lower cooling costs means more affordability to those who are living here.

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¹³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbanization> (accessed 3-18-17)

¹⁴ <https://www.epa.gov/heat-islands> (accessed 3-18-17)



 Covenant Church Minneapolis



 Covenant Church Minneapolis



 Covenant Church Minneapolis

We are also getting a new waste water management system, building a bike hub and total of 180 bike stalls, a shared recycling storage area, new trees and landscaping around the interior of the surface parking lot and exterior of the housing and street. And, I feel like saying along with a Ginsu knife sales person: “But, wait, there’s more!” We have already been able to install 98% high efficiency boilers that gave us a \$12,000 energy rebate and a reduction in our heating cost by an astonishing 40-50%.

7. “Awesome” you might say. “But, what about the rest of the planet, and what am I supposed to do in my personal life and in light of the fact that the Executive Branch of the federal government is proposing huge and unprecedented cuts in environmental and urban programs impacting the poorest of our society.¹⁵ Its overwhelming, I know. There is much work to be done and we need to stay engaged with our lawmakers. But, regardless of what happens on the highest levels of our societies governmental decisions, we still have control of our own lives. Our own uses of water. Our own energy and food choices. Our transportation choices. And, what we do with our garbage!

I remember a time where we threw EVERYTHING in the garbage. And, I mean everything. Like back when I was nick named “Dumpster Dan”...



...by my family because in 1978 because I loved to take out all of the cardboard from our family’s small town grocery store and crush it down into the trash that went straight into landfills. Yep, we threw EVERYTHING away.

Now, the City of Minneapolis gives us several more sustainable options including these three beautiful bins...

¹⁵ <http://www.startribune.com/trump-s-budget-proposal/416371343/> (accessed 3-18-17)

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...designed to take away organic, regular, and recyclable garbage. Less than a decade ago the regular garbage bin was the largest, now the largest is the big blue recycling bin. Sorting helps send the least amount of materials to a land fill and the most to energy and material recycling centers.

Conclusion

Some here or those listening online may be skeptical that there is a close connection between recycling, white roofs, high efficiency water heaters, and the Christian work of reconciling with the soil and loving all living things. And, all I have to say is “try it...you will love it, and in doing so, you will probably become a believer over time.” And, like the mirror in Rublev’s painting you will know a joy that even this or that small thing places you in the circle dance of “making all things new.”

It feels good to live more sustainably. Its like losing your fear of dancing and leaving the place of being a wall flower and getting out on the floor and busting some moves.

- Walking and biking to church. (bust a move)
- Buying a subscription to a conservation or preservation themed periodical. (Bust a move)
- Sharing our building with 8 other organizations 7 days a week. (bust a move)
- Live smaller and simpler. (bust a move)
- How about you? What are some other small and big things we can do? Just shout it out? (more ‘moves’)

(IDEAS: Farmer’s Markets and supporting local economy, CSA’s, composting, reusable grocery bags.)

Christ followers living sustainable lives! Try it. You’ll love it. It works.

Prayer

God of all created things, grow within us a respect and love for all living things, not just because we are given water, food, and joy in it, but because you are in it all with your sustaining Spirit. It is our prayer to have increased vision for what it means to “make all things new” even while some people and institutions bring harm to that which we love. Jesus, help us to remain true to what you taught us, and God, Creator, Son and Spirit, Three in one, may we love you, our neighbor and all living things.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

Benediction

As our new week begins, may we see the love of all living things as important as loving God and neighbor and find simple everyday ways to live more joyfully sustainable lives.