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Love, Creation, Virtue as Models for Environmental Education

Abstract

A look at how love, creation, and virtue should shape our conversations about the environment and environmental education.

Keywords

Christianity, creation, environmental education

Disciplines

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Comments

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Love, Creation, Virtue as Models for Environmental Education

BY JEFF PLOEGSTRA

Too many conversations about the environment and environmental education start off on the wrong foot. “What good is a prairie?” “Fracking is going to poison our water supply.” “We need to cap CO₂ emissions.” Questions are raised about our values, priorities, and lifestyles—the many things tied intimately to our identities and the things we love. These are important conversations to have, but are often doomed before they even begin.

Where *should* we start?

Love

The question of calling is a central question woven throughout a student’s development. From kindergarten on we try to plot a student’s trajectory. Will she become a doctor? A writer? A statistician? Even at Dordt College, the first class that every student takes is Core 100: Kingdom, Identity, and Calling.

We spend a lot of time talking about something that is really quite simple. We have one calling in two parts. If your activity is aimed at these two things, you are in your calling. If you are preparing for a career and you cannot see how it is going to do these things, you had best be careful. Even if you enjoy it, are good at it, or see doors opening for you, it is not truly your calling until you see Christ and your neighbor clearly.

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt 22:37–39).

This is where a conversation about the environment and environmental education in Christian communities should start. A healthy relationship with the rest of creation both grows out of and also increases our love for our Creator God. The purpose of all of creation is to glorify God and bring God pleasure. As his image-bearers, we should love creation for the simple reason that God loves it. As Fred Van Dyke says in his book, *Between Heaven and Earth*:

In [Genesis], the judgments of the goodness of living and nonliving elements of nature are all made before humans are created. The goodness of these created things is not made with reference to any human use that man will find for them. This does not mean they have no utilitarian value, but that such utility is not the basis of their being good. They are good in their own right, in and of themselves . . . God declares [them] good and does not invite debate (51).

And Understanding

When we truly see creation in this way, we are more likely to direct our activity appropriately. And conversely, it is harder to see God and serve him when everything we surround ourselves with is filled with our human purpose, which may or may not reflect God’s purpose. It

is easy to justify our way of seeing the world when we seem to have control of our surroundings. It is hard to be humble.

In natural areas, *human* purpose is minimized, God's creativity is revealed, and we can praise the Creator with the rest of creation. When we truly see and understand the enormity of what God created, sustains, and loves, we can join all creation in overflowing praise; we can sing the doxology with great conviction. Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Praise him all creatures here below! Praise him above ye heavenly host! Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

This is why I have come to appreciate more deeply that our investigation of the natural world is an act of worship as we ascribe glory to God. This is a critical disposition to develop in our students. Increasing my understanding of God's providence, creativity, and power increases my love for God.

But ask the animals, and
they will teach you,

or the birds in the sky, and
they will tell you;

or speak to the earth, and it
will teach you,

or let the fish in the sea
inform you.

Which of all these does not
know

that the hand of
the Lord has done this?

In his hand is the life of
every creature

and the breath of all mankind (Job 12:7–10).

We understand better God's providence when we see directly the interplay of the components of creation. Unfortunately, we are good at separating ourselves from that interplay and the effects of our lifestyle choices.

Our new model for environmental education needs to address the widening gap in our relationship with other creatures.

Landfills, sewage treatment plants, oil refineries, and power plants all supply many benefits that we experience directly, but they are often out of our sight. This allows us to miss the effects of our actions on other creatures, including our neighbors.

And Virtue

The environment is a medium through which we communicate with and relate to other people. That communication can be done intentionally, with care, or with neglect and carelessness. As Wendell Berry puts it in his essay, "The Gift of Good Land":

How can you love your neighbor if you don't know how to build or mend a fence, how to keep your filth out of his water supply and your poison out of his air; or if you do not produce anything and so have nothing to offer, or do not take care of yourself and so become a burden? How can you be a neighbor without applying principle—without

bringing virtue to a practical issue? How will you practice virtue without skill? (274–75)

Knowing creation and loving creation, including your neighbor, requires more than feeling. It requires knowledge, skill, and intent. You might be tempted here to use the word *stewardship*. I am not. I would prefer to stick with *love*. The meaning of stewardship has been distorted, watered down, and misapplied. Even within Christian circles, it is frequently

understood to refer to the wise use of resources. But *use* is not the central idea of stewardship and the rest of creation should not be understood primarily as a resource for us to use. The biblical image of stewardship actually has a much deeper sense of service and nurture to help all that God called "good" to flourish.

A more appropriate but similarly misunderstood term is *economy*. Economy brings to mind images of financial exchange, Wall Street, GDP, charts, and graphs. However, this image is extremely flawed, or at least limited. Economy actually comes from the Greek words *oikos* ("home") and *nemein* ("to manage"). This begs the questions, whose home are we managing, and to what purpose?

In my lifetime, there has been much talk of stimulating the economy by increasing consumption, as though consumption were inherently morally good. There is no consideration for what we are consuming, or, to use that ugly economic term,

externalities. The fiscal aspect of economy is a very important part of the picture of our relationship with the rest of creation, but it is a limited part, and frequently lacks the careful, knowledgeable, skillful love we should bring to all of our activity.

The infrastructure of our lives, culture, the media, and our educational system, has distorted our sense of stewardship and *oikonomia*. Rapid change in so many aspects of our lives has intensified the need for greater intentionality and better strategy in our education regarding the environment and our lives within it. Knowledge of food webs and practicing the three R's (reduce, reuse, recycle) is all well and good, but the level of abstraction in our current education is so great that we should never expect students to develop the kind of love discussed above.

The population of the world is growing rapidly and is increasingly urban and mobile. This means that land continues to be converted from its natural state at alarming rates and that people will have less contact with minimally modified environments and will feel less connected to the places they live. In 150 years, 99.9 percent of the prairie in Iowa was transformed (Samson and Knopf, 1994) and very few people know or understand what had been there before. This is both a cause and symptom of our distorted *oikonomia*.

In Action

Our new model for environmental education needs to address the widening gap in our

relationship with other creatures. We must highlight God's love for all of creation, explain that all of creation is included in the covenantal story (Gen 1:30, 3:17, 9:8–11; Col 1:19–20; Mark 16:15; 2 Pet 3:12; and others), and teach that part of our universal calling to love God and our neighbor requires love of the rest of creation. The new model requires this more complete theology, an intimate knowledge of creation, an action orientation, and a deep love of God's very good creation. As James K. A. Smith states in his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, "[E]ducation is a holistic endeavor that involves the whole person, including our bodies, in a process of formation that aims our desires, primes our imagination, and orients us to the world—all before we ever start thinking about it" (39–40).

If we look to individuals who embody the goals we have for environmental education, they report a very consistent set of factors have influenced their development (Chawla and Flanders Cushing, 2007). They uniformly had significant, positive experiences in minimally modified environments; they had positive role models who demonstrated care for the creation; and they were brought into contact with the negative aspects of destruction of native ecosystems. This is unsurprising. I would suggest several more specific behaviors that can help us and our students transform our view of the creation from one of "resource to be consumed" to "expression of God's creative genius to be nurtured and celebrated."

Recommendation 1: Look for opportunities for students

to honor God by understanding and nurturing the creation. Examples could be:

- Learning to identify the plants, birds, and insects native to your community
- Planting native plants around your school and homes
- Building birdhouses and birdfeeders
- Volunteering for restoration efforts at national, state, and county parks

Recommendation 2: Draw out creational themes in other contexts and classes. Theology, economics, geography, history, art are all enriched by discussions of the larger creation and the values we should associate with it.

Recommendation 3: Help students stay connected to resource use. Raise awareness of waste production and corporately celebrate reduction in resource consumption, recycling, and better end use of products. Dress, eat, build homes, and use resources appropriately for your local environment. Does your school building look different because you live in Minnesota rather than California? It should.

Recommendation 4: Surround yourself with God's creativity. Reconsider aesthetic sensibilities for your school and home. Is a well-manicured lawn more beautiful than native plants that require little input in terms of water, labor, fertilizers, or pesticides?

Recommendation 5: Most importantly, spend time with

your students in minimally modified environments. As noted Iowa naturalist Sylvan Runkel was wont to say, "If we get acquainted with natural communities, we feel at home. And any place we feel at home, we feel like protecting."

Standing at the top of a hill in Sylvan Runkel State Park, my students are silent for a long time as they look across the Little Sioux River. The contrast is striking between the rich diversity and beauty of the Loess Hills prairie rising in isolated mounds from a seemingly endless expanse of post-harvest cornfields. "I don't have a problem with farming," says one student, "but that seems . . . extreme. I never thought about what used to be here."

The world is changing, as is our collective experience of it.

We need to help students and families to understand humanity as part of the community of creation; to help them to understand that building a bird feeder can be a song of praise to the Creator, that restoration work can be a prayer of thanksgiving spoken with the hands, and that a prairie is a fitting sanctuary to worship God.

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