

Reclaiming the Gospel of the Earth

Sermon at Edgewood United Church on June 3, 2018

By Jim Detjen

Good morning. I'll start today with something a little bit different. It's known as a land acknowledgement.

“We honor and thank the Anishinaabe (ah-neesh-a-nab-e) people and our Native American ancestors for their wise stewardship of the land on which Edgewood United Church was built.”

In Canada, Australia and parts of the United States land acknowledgments are becoming increasingly common. It's a way to recognize our ancestors. And since Edgewood is deeply engaged in racial justice issues, it's a way to remember and honor the Native American people upon whose land this church was built.

We know them in Michigan as the Ottawa, Potawatomi and Ojibwa (Oh-jib-way). Their cultures were in harmony with the land. They fished, harvested wild rice, made maple syrup, grew corn and hunted deer.

Our Native American ancestors believed that every being in the world had an “unseen power or spirit,” known as Manitou. Life depended upon keeping this spirit in balance. The natural world was treated not as an object to be dominated, but as a realm to be treated with great respect. Our indigenous ancestors were deeply connected to the natural world.

One of their core beliefs is in the sacredness of the Earth. “Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and every humming insect is sacred in the memory and experience of my people,” said Chief Seattle. “Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

Because our Native American ancestors were dependent upon the cycles of nature, they were closely attuned to the land. We have lost much of that direct connection. But many of us still have in our lives a “sacred place,” where we connect with the natural world.

What makes a place sacred?

Some sacred sites are deeply rooted in indigenous culture, such as Uluru, a massive red rock in central Australia, which has been considered holy by Aboriginal people for 40,000 years. Or the Black Hills in South Dakota, which are central to the creation story of the Lakota. We visit the Lakota people every two years when we drive out to work on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

Some sites are connected to major world religions. Examples include the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem where Jesus was born and Mt. Sinai in Egypt where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

Others include famous worship sites such as the Great Mosque in Mecca or the Notre Dame Cathedral in France.

Some sacred sites are said to have mystical healing powers, such as Glastonbury Tor in Somerset, England. Celtic pilgrims seek out its spiritual energy and say they feel more hopeful and positive after walking on its sacred hills.

For many of us, however, our sites are sacred because of their special connections to our families and to nature.

They may be vacation spots “Up North” where your family gathers each summer. Or Lake Lansing where you taught your children to fish. Or a park in Grand Ledge where you study birds. Or a garden where you grow tomatoes. Or a woodland trail where you walk your dog.

These are special places that provide you with relaxation, spiritual growth and healing. They are places you love with all your heart and soul.

Flashing (slowly) next to me on the screen are some of the sacred places where Edgewood members have found special meaning. There are images of sunsets, the Great Lakes, rivers, forests, gardens and your own backyards.

We need these sacred places to recharge our batteries, to find inner peace, to make sense of the world, to get closer to God. These are our “thin places” where we feel a divine presence. These are the places where we connect with nature and the awe-inspiring beauty of the Earth.

Let me tell you about two places that are sacred to me.

The first is Nordhouse Dunes, the only U.S. wilderness area in the lower peninsula. It's located near Manistee, about 110 miles northwest of here.

I first visited Nordhouse Dunes in 2004. I was teaching environmental journalism classes at Michigan State University. I was surprised to discover that some of my students had never camped out or visited the wilderness. They lacked a personal connection to nature.

We drove one Friday to Nordhouse Dunes in the Huron-Manistee forest. It's a remote, beautiful place with magnificent sand dunes, jack pine and juniper trees, rare plants and animals and spectacular views of Lake Michigan.

We pitched our tents in a rustic area, built a fire and cooked lasagna and cherry pie in Dutch ovens. I instructed my students to slow down, observe nature and to be creative. They kept nature

journals, wrote essays, shot photos and created videos in the weeks to come.

The class became incredibly popular. Some referred to it as “camping with Jim.”

“This class was an inspiration,” one student wrote. “I had no required lecture to attend, no pages in a textbook to read, no fear of the next exam. I learned more in a weekend than in a full semester in the classroom. I was reminded of how good it feels to laugh and meet new people, to see how beautiful dew-covered trees are in the morning and most importantly I was reminded again of why I am so passionate about caring for the Earth.”

For me, going to Nordhous Dunes each fall was a labor of love. The pressures of academic life melted away. I was recharged. I loved lying in a tent at night listening to the waves lapping on Lake Michigan, feeling the wind stirring in the trees, hearing the rain dance on my tent. I loved gazing at stars sparkling in the night sky.

I felt serene and at peace, surrounded by the presence of God.

My second sacred place is the Sea of Galilee. My wife, Connie, and I visited Israel, Jordan and the West Bank a few weeks ago. We traveled through this region as part of an “In the footsteps of Jesus” tour offered by a Disciples of Christ pastor and his wife. We packed a lot into our 15-day trip and visited many holy sites, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Jesus was crucified, laid in a tomb and resurrected.

The trip was intense. We saw first hand the strife of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We passed through military checkpoints and sweated in 100-degree temperatures on a hike in the Judaeen wilderness.

But *then* we came to the Sea of Galilee -- a harp-shaped lake – in northern Israel. It is an oasis of green amidst an arid landscape. The lake is small – only 13 miles long – but its religious significance is extraordinary. This is where Jesus walked on water and performed many miracles. This is where Jesus met his disciples and gave the Sermon on the Mount. This is where Jesus taught his followers to say the Lord’s Prayer.

We stayed at a German hotel known as the Pilgrimhaus overlooking the lake and the hills surrounding it. I was overwhelmed by the lake's beauty. I felt serenity and at peace with the world.

I thought of the Beatitudes which Jesus spoke there 2,000 years ago.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

The Sea of Galilee is just west of the Golan Heights, one of the most contested areas in the world. And less than 10 miles from where Jesus said, "Blessed are the Peacemakers," is the border of Syria. More than 450,000 people have died and 5,000,000 refugees have fled that country since Syria's civil war erupted seven years ago.

Syria is, of course, one of the world's most horrifying examples of violence.

Fortunately, the Sea of Galilee hasn't been bombed or damaged by this strife. But it's under threat in other ways.

Scientists -- who are in many ways our modern-day prophets -- say the lake's surface is dropping and that its salt concentration is increasing. This small lake provides 35 % of Israel's drinking water. And scientists forecast that conditions there will soon get worse.

That's because of climate change, caused by our society's reliance on fossil fuels. The buildup of carbon dioxide from burning coal, oil and gas is causing the Earth's atmosphere to heat up at rates not seen in thousands of years.

It's not just in Israel, of course. Michigan and other regions are also being affected by global warming.

Climate scientists say that unless we make major changes in our industries and lifestyles that Michigan will see hotter summers, altered forests and dramatic changes in its wildlife. The number

of heat waves will increase, affecting the poor and elderly the most. We'll see more extreme weather, such as intense rainstorms, and the populations of cold water fish, such as trout and whitefish, will decline. The cool summer temperatures of "Up North" Michigan will no longer be common.

But these scientific forecasts are not written in stone, like the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses.

The good news is that we can take steps to protect the sacred places in our lives. We can practice energy efficiency and conservation, put solar panels on our roofs, demand that our legislators support clean energy choices and make climate change a voting issue. A member of our congregation, Will Lawrence, is doing just that this summer through an effort known as the Sunrise Movement.

Jim Antal, a United Church of Christ pastor in Massachusetts, says we must re-purpose the church to deal with climate change. He says it's a challenge not unlike abolishing slavery, fighting for Civil Rights, giving women the right to vote or defeating Apartheid. It won't be easy. God is

calling us to re-orient our hearts, our lives and our laws so that we honor and respect all of God's creations.

One way to do this is to combine some of the wisdom of our Native American ancestors with the teachings of Jesus. We must proclaim a new gospel of the Earth.

A cornerstone of Christianity and all of the world's religions is the Golden rule – love our neighbors as ourselves.

But Antal argues that we need to expand our vision of our neighborhood to include future generations, too. Our grandchildren and their children are no less our neighbors than the people who live next door. We can think of this new version as the Golden Rule 2.0.

This idea is really not all that different from the teachings of our Native American ancestors. The Iroquois use as a moral compass a policy known as the seventh generation principle. It states that when we make decisions about how to care for the Earth we must consider how those decisions will affect seven generations into the future. Only by

doing so will we create a sustainable, life-giving world.

We must find ways to get back in touch with the cycles of the Earth.

It won't come by staring at our iPads or iPhones.

Indigenous people were in harmony with nature because their lives depended upon understanding its cycles and laws. We need to go outside again to get back to loving the Earth. We need to replace our iPhones with iNature.

That's why the Edgewood Green Team has launched Edgewood Outdoors this summer. We are working with the health ministry team to get people re-acquainted with the natural world.

We'll start with fishing at Lake Lansing on June 24. Bring along a picnic lunch and Ben Pineda will supply the instructions, bait and gear. On July 29 Pastor Liz will lead a bike ride. On August 19 Connie and I will organize an all-church celebration at Burchfield Park. Get outside after church that day and swim, fish, hike, bike and paddle with your family on the Grand River.

Let me remind you that the Poor People's Campaign is continuing this week with a special focus on the right to health and a healthy planet. There will be a rally tomorrow at 2 p.m. at the State Capitol. Its leaders will call for the transition to a green economy, the end to water shutoffs in Detroit, 100 percent renewable energy and the shutdown of the Line 5 oil pipeline under the Mackinac Straits.

Please join us in the social hall today after the service to celebrate the adoption of the environmental justice covenant, which the Edgewood congregation unanimously passed at our annual meeting in February. Copies of the covenant and steps you can take to live a more sustainable lifestyle will be distributed in the social hall.

Edgewood can be proud of the solar panels that were installed on its roof and the adoption of the new covenant. The panels have saved the church many thousands of dollars so far and prevented more than 23 tons of carbon dioxide from going into the air. That's the equivalent of planting 1,100 trees.

We are a congregation that is a leader on environmental issues in Michigan. But there is more that we can do – more that we *must* do – to protect Mother Earth.

Only by reconnecting to the Earth in a spiritual way -- not unlike our Native American ancestors -- will we find the passion and energy to protect God's creations and to save our sacred places.

Amen.