

“Taking Calvary to Our Community: Parks”

Genesis 2:8-15

4th in a Nine Week Series by Brian Henderson and Anne Jernberg
Special Interview Guest: Ranger Mike Zieker, Cherry Creek State Park

Country singer Johnny Cash made *In the Garden* a recognizable song for folks outside of the church. When he sang it – some people thought it a sentimental song about having a spiritual experience in just any ‘ole garden. But Charles Austin Miles penned the words to this familiar hymn with a specific experience in mind.

Miles wrote the song after reading the account in John’s Gospel of Mary going to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning, only to find his tomb empty and the stone rolled away. Thinking Jesus was gone, she began to weep...and seeing a gardener she asked him, “*Where have you taken him?*” And we know the story. The person Mary mistook for a gardener spoke her name. And in the speaking of her name, Mary knew this man was Jesus.

Miles imagined that Mary would have wanted that moment to linger on...for Jesus to *tarry* with her awhile. Just the two of them in the garden...a surprising, yet sacred, moment after so much sadness...and a private and personal moment before all the chaos and confusion of having to explain a

risen Jesus to everyone else.

You know the refrain to *In the Garden*, I know. Sing it with me:

*And He walks with me,
and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share
as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.¹*

I asked Kevin play *In the Garden* to help us meditate on our text today. To help us actually “tarry” awhile in the garden...albeit a different garden...that of the Garden of Eden.

Our text today from Genesis is kind of an odd snippet – we usually hear the creation stories in Genesis 1 or 2 read in their entirety. But for this preaching series, Brian and I are excerpting our texts very deliberately, and today is no exception. The first verse we read, verse 8, has God *planting* a garden in Eden and *putting the man* that God had created *into* the garden. The last verse we read, verse 15, *repeats* the act of the Lord God plopping the man

¹ Charles Austin Miles, *In the Garden (Gospel Hymn)*, 1912. Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.egfellowship.org/hymns/487%20In%20the%20Garden.htm>.

down into the Garden, but expounds upon the reasoning – the man is *to till* and *to keep* the garden – in other words, *God expands the man’s responsibility*. The man’s enjoyment of the garden comes only because he is tilling it and keeping it. It’s a give and take.

The Hebrew verb here, *‘abad*, means “to labour, to work” but in a very specific sense...it means “to make oneself a servant of.”² Another translation of this verb is “to cultivate and to care.” In other words, we are to be good stewards of our earth. This is nothing new, right? We know this.

The Bible contains 26 explicit references to “the steward” or “stewardship.” In the Old Testament the term is used in a technical fashion to denote a specific office or a vocation in society. According to theologian Douglas Hall, “*the steward is one who has been given the responsibility for the management and service of something belonging to another, and his office presupposes a particular kind of trust on the part of the owner or master.*”³ In the Old Testament, the term “steward” became linked with Israel’s king, who ruled the chosen people as God’s steward and so was accountable to

God. This royal interpretation of stewardship helps us to understand Genesis.⁴

But too often we only look at Genesis chapter one and read, “*God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over...every living thing...’*” (1:28) – and we use this to justify whatever we want to do with creation. The Hebrew word for “*dominion*” does not mean “*to dominate*” or “*to exploit*.” Rather, it means “*to take responsibility for*,” as a ruler would be responsible to assure the well-being of those in his realm.

Caring for creation is not just something “we should do” as Christians. It is not just for “social justice types” or as my brothers calls us, “hippie tree huggers.” Caring for creation represents our proper human relationship to Earth. And when it comes to caring for our creation, apathy is just as harmful as overt destruction. At this point in history, if we’re not proactive in our environmental stewardship...then we are not being proper stewards.

The second creation story - in Genesis 2 - goes even further in stressing this responsibility (Gen 2:5-15). In this

² Blue Letter Bible Hebrew Lexicon. Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H5647&t=NIV>.

³ Douglas John Hall, *The Steward*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), p32.

⁴Russel A. Butkus, “The Stewardship of Creation,” *The Center for Christian Ethics*, Baylor University, 2002. Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.baylor.edu/christianethics/Creationarticle/Butkus.pdf>.

story, God put Adam and Eve in the garden in order “to till and *to keep*” the land. The Hebrew word for “keep” means “*to preserve for future generations.*” Hence, the mandate “to serve and to preserve” the land places human beings not in a hierarchical position over creation but in a position of service to it.⁵

Our own American Baptist Policy Statement on Ecology (1989) states, “*Our responsibility as stewards is one of the most basic relationships we have with God. It implies a great degree of caring for God’s creation and all God’s creatures.*”⁶

Sometimes, living in the city, we don’t realize that we have to care for creation. It feels like if we’re not in the outdoors – if we’re not out exploring in the mountains to our West – what is there to care for? Well, sadly, over 75% of Americans living in cities admitted to littering in the last 5 years.⁷ And sometimes, our city parks reflect this. From afar they all look clean, but if you care to pay attention up close, there is always trash we could pick up to help keep

them cleaner. If every [person] picked up just six pieces of trash every month, our cities would be completely litter-free.⁸ In 1986, the state of Texas began a campaign against litter that is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. Most people think “*Don’t Mess with Texas*” is something Texans say just to boast about how much bigger and better our state is than other states. But “*Don’t Mess with Texas*” is actually an anti-litter slogan that has celebrity endorsements and all kinds of media attention. And even though 50% of Texans still admit to having littered before,⁹ that is still better than the national average of 75%.

This morning, we heard Ranger Mike Zieker tell us about some of the responsibility it takes to “till and keep” Cherry Creek State Park – with its 2 million visitors a year! No small task, is it? We know that a park like that takes upkeep...we’re reminded of that when we buy our park pass so that we can enjoy all the beauty the park has to offer. In other words, we pay money to have fun and enjoy beauty...instead of taking on the physical labor ourselves of “tilling and keeping” the parks.

In fact – that’s the whole reason National Parks came about in our country. The national park concept is

⁵David Rhoads, “Stewardship of Creation” from *Web of Creation: Ecology Resources to Transform Faith Communities and Society*. Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.webofcreation.org/archive-of-resources/505-stewardship-of-creation>.

⁶ Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.abc-usa.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=WHOMY68VAQU%3d&tabid=199>.

⁷ Accessed on 23 July 2011 at http://www.knowledgegalaxy.net/littering_statistics/littering_statistics.html.

⁸ From “Trivia and Facts” page on *Don’t Mess With Texas* web page. Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://dontmesswithtexas.org/about/trivia-facts/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

generally credited to the artist George Catlin. On a trip to the Dakotas in 1832, he worried about the impact of America's westward expansion on Native American civilization, wildlife, and wilderness. He dreamed they might be preserved, "by some great protecting policy of government... in a magnificent park.... A nation's park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!"¹⁰ Kind of sounds like the Garden of Eden!

Writer and historian Wallace Stegner called national parks *"the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst."*

Others have said that the idea of National Parks is as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence and just as radical: that the most special places in the nation should be preserved, not for royalty or the rich, but for everyone.¹¹

With 58 national parks, and 333 national monuments and historic sites, the National Park Service has a presence in 49 of the 50 states (Delaware is the sole exception). The

¹⁰Barry Mackintosh, *The National Park Service: A Brief History*, 1999. Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/hisnps/NPShistory/briefhistory.htm>.

¹¹ From "About the Series" tab on the PBS website for the DVD series: *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, a film by Ken Burns. Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.pbs.org/nationalparks/about/>.

National Park website states, "*Like the idea of freedom itself, the national park idea has been constantly tested, is constantly evolving and is inherently full of contradictory tensions: between individual rights and the community, the local and the national; between preservation and exploitation, the sacred and the profitable; between one generation's immediate desires and the next generation's legacy.*"¹²

There's that stewardship concept again...not just to preserve creation for our own sake – but for our children's sakes too. When we care for creation, we are able to enjoy it in its fullest glory. Remember Genesis 2:15? God asked us to "till and keep" the Earth...and in doing so, as I spoke about a sermon last month, we continue to co-create it. And when creation is kept clean – it's like one big canvas of creativity...for fun, for play, for enjoyment.

In fact, on the Cherry Creek State Park's website it says, "*Close and convenient, Cherry Creek is Denver's big back yard. Welcome to Denver's natural and spacious backyard playground. There's so much to see and enjoy.*"¹³

And that's not just true of our state

¹²Ibid.

¹³Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.parks.state.co.us/parks/cherrycreek/Pages/CherryCreekHome.aspx>.

parks. The City of Denver provides over 200 city and mountain parks, and several more rivers and trail areas for the enjoyment of residents and visitors year round.¹⁴

I am very fortunate, because I live across the street from one of the most popular parks in Denver – Wash Park. Take it from me – there is never a dull moment in that park. And I’m sure it’s not the only park that’s constantly buzzing with activity...because listen to all the different stuff that Denver parks have to offer:

Paddle boats, walking/jogging trails, bike paths, off-leash dog parks, public art exhibits, interactive fountains, community gardens and greenhouses, sand volleyball courts, tennis courts, playgrounds, wildlife, horseshoe pits, softball fields, picnic tables, flower beds, soccer fields, football fields, skateparks, ponds, lawn bowling, recreation centers, swimming pools, basketball courts, public concerts and parades and races, gazebos, golf courses, fitness courses, park benches and grills, historical landmarks, and let’s not forget the most entertaining thing - people watching!¹⁵

Denver has over 250 urban parks and parkways, equaling over 4,300 acres of green space. It has over 285 athletic fields, 7 public golf courses, 4 skateparks, and even one urban

terrain park for skateboarding or snowboarding. Who knew? Snowboarding in the city?

Denver also has over 1,700 acres of urban native areas including a weed-eating goat herd, 24 lakes that offer fishing and some boating activities, and over 85 miles of multi-purpose urban trails.

30 recreation centers offer affordable programs and activities to residents and visitors. Over 1,000 organized classes and activities are going on at any given time - aquatics, arts & crafts, cultural & social activities, fitness & sports, health, special events & historic tours and more. There are 961 youth and adult sports teams in leagues happening on these 285 athletic fields throughout the city.

The greater Denver area has over 14,000 acres of mountain parks including: Red Rock's Amphitheater, The Buffalo Bill Museum, Genesee Ropes Challenge Course, A Braille trail, and lookouts to see elk and bison herds.¹⁶

Clearly I’m never gone run out of “Adventure with Anne” options.

And even more – talk about “tilling and keeping” the land - patches of 7 Denver parks have become vegetable gardens this summer courtesy of 6

¹⁴ “Welcome to Denver Parks” on *Parks and Recreation* webpage on *Denver: The Mile High City* government website. Accessed on 23 July 2011 at <http://www.denvergov.org/parks/Welcome/tabid/433973/Default.aspx>.

¹⁵ Collected from www.denvergov.org/parks webpages on 23 July 2011.

¹⁶ Ibid.

organizations, including Grow Local Colorado, Chipotle and the Peace Corps. The city is supplying the water. Seeds have been donated. When the harvest is complete, the fresh produce will go to *The Gathering Place*, a daytime drop-in center for poor and homeless women and children. Throughout the summer, about 1,000 volunteer hours of tending, weeding and all the other services humans can provide will be donated. Ultimately, they hope to harvest about 1,500 pounds of produce.¹⁷

Wow! Our parks provide us with opportunities to learn, to play, and to serve. So whether you go out to Lake Appreciation Day this weekend to help volunteer at Cherry Creek, or whether you come to Bible Park on August 7th to play softball with your church family, or whether you knock on my door to take a walk around Wash Park with me...get out and play! Enjoy these parks!

There was an editorial printed in yesterday's *Denver Post* called "Over the Top and Out of Touch." It was about parents who spend insane amounts of money on extravagant "play houses" for their kids...as in

¹⁷ Karen Auge, "Denver parks will sprout veggies this summer for homeless shelter" in *Denver and the West* section of The Denver Post (27 May 2011). Accessed on 23 July 2011 at http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_18151208?source=mng_fulltext#ixzz1Sz9Et3ZN.

anywhere from \$52,000 - \$248,000. The point of the article was to highlight the sad irony that while many people can't even afford a home during this economic recession and others have lost their homes because of fires or flooding or tornadoes, some parents are paying loads of money for "play or pretend homes" for their kids.

One playhouse builder, Barbara Butler said, "*Childhood is a precious thing. And a special playhouse is not the sort of thing you can put off until the economy gets better.*" But what really got me was this quote from a father who spent \$250,000 on a "Tarzan Jungle Playhouse" for his 2 year old son: "*I wanted to [build something that would] attract other kids so my son could learn to socialize.*"¹⁸

Don't get me wrong – I loved to play pretend when I was a kid. What kid doesn't? And play houses are fun to have. (Mine were generally made of cardboard boxes or sofa cushions.) But I'd like to think that most kids will be far better "socialized" by going to a public park and playing with other kids – that they know and don't know - rather than playing with a few selected friends inside an

¹⁸Ruth Marcus (Washington Post Writers Group), "Over the top and out of touch" in *Denver and the West* Section of The Denver Post (23 July 2011) pg9B. Also accessed 23 July 2011 at http://www.denverpost.com/search/ci_18532366.

extravagant play house that just further isolates them from the outside world and from their community.

Playing is important. It's part of the life of faith...it's part of life. Sometimes it's good to play indoors. But that doesn't connect us to our community does it?

I think we have to be careful in the church, to not make this building our own "playhouse" where we only invite folks in to socialize with us. That's why we are meeting friends from our community in this preaching series. Yes we are bringing them *inside* – but it's in hopes that more of us will *get outside* and will get to know the folks that make our community what it is.

So - this week – get outside and play. Go to a city or state or national park and have fun. Try a new activity, have a picnic with your family or friends, walk your dog – and pick up some litter while you're at it.

Calvary, let's care for the creation in our city and let's connect with our community. And if you "tarry" long enough out there...as you connect with others, you'll connect with God too. Doesn't get much better than that.

Amen.