

**Exploring the Jesus Path**  
**Mayflower-- MF January 7, 2024**  
**Rev Dwight Wagenius**

Would you please join me in prayer.

Loving and gracious God, just this week I heard a prophet say that telling the truth inspires hope, because facing reality is a pre-condition of hope. May we have the courage to honestly face the reality of the harm we have inflicted on creation;

May we be up to the task of embracing the promise found in your gift of creation and the blessing it offers to all who are to come;

May we lead lives that testify to the fact that love fuels hope, and that hope is kept alive by action. Amen.

I grew up in Holmes City, a small town in central Minnesota in the lakes region. The town was so small that I lived both in town and on a working farm. Across the road in front of our house was the two-room elementary school that I attended. On the south side of the school was a grocery store. That, along with a post office, was our downtown. A schoolhouse, post office, and grocery store.

The grocery store was on the north shore of Grant Lake, a deep lake about a mile long and half a mile wide.

At least a couple times a week during the summer the guys and I would gather by the store to go swimming. We walked along the shore to the feed and lumber mill where my cousin Danny Hjelm lived. Danny's father ran the mill that my grampa Hjelm built. We would pick up Danny and head down the path to the swimming hole. The path went past grandma and grampa Hjelm's pump—great cold water on the way to and from swimming, past Doc Oliver's summer place, then down the hill to the "beach."

The swimming area had a sandy bottom and dropped off pretty quickly. Thirty feet out from shore the water was 10 feet deep—and we could see clearly individual rocks, stones, and fish on the bottom.

And today . . . . Today the water is not clear. Today on a good day you can maybe see the bottom, rocks and fish in a foot or two of water.

So today when I hear people saying that we need to protect our clean water I hear the Pharisees speaking. Many of our waters are not clean. You wouldn't want to swim in most southern Minnesota lakes or streams. A large but unknown number of well owners—and their children—drink water that is unsafe. Our Department of Natural Resources turned a blind eye when the big potato grower for McDonald's French fries cut down forests over the pristine Pineland Sands aquifer to expand his chemically intensive farming of perfect potatoes. The water in that central sands area of Minnesota is some of the most polluted in the state.

Jesus talked a lot about Pharisees, criticizing them for hypocrisy and perjury, pointing out that they presented an appearance of righteousness when in fact they were full of wickedness. People who talk about protecting Minnesota's clean waters when the waters aren't clean are Pharisees! People who will not admit there's a problem, so there's no problem to solve are Pharisees!

Who are the Pharisees? --To find them we follow the money.

The agricultural chemical industry profits when chemicals including nitrogen are over applied and get into drinking water, lakes, rivers and streams. It's not farmers who are profiting. Over application costs them.

The ag-chem industry and its allies strictly adhere to these talking points: Farmers are stewards of the land, farmers are increasing their emphasis on soil health, farmers won't spend more money on inputs than absolutely necessary, etc. etc. The industry hides behind farmers while NEVER acknowledging that there is a problem with chemical water pollution.

This "protecting clean waters" myth has been repeated so many times that we use it while lakes, rivers and streams all over the state carry a chemical pollutant load that was not there 50 years ago—some from direct runoff, some carried by the air and rain. [SIGH]

These are God's waters...given to us to sustain us...and for baptizing. Remember the words of Leviticus about the transitory nature of human land ownership. God says: "the land is mine; with me you are but aliens

and tenants.” This scripture reminds us that We humans occupy the earth only for our lifetime. God remains; the land is God’s.

That leaves no doubt about what is required of us, to care for God’s earth while it is in our temporary tenancy. So we need to listen to what science is telling us about God’s waters, this water so sacred that the sacrament of baptism, entry into the body of Christ, relies on it.

For Minnesota Native Americans also water is sacred. They believe and teach that “water is life,” an understanding of water that is consistent with the words of Leviticus. That understanding supported our becoming strong and determined allies fighting line 3, a pipeline with an ever-present danger to waters sacred to indigenous folks. And to us!

Jesus identified the bad actors—the Pharisees and scribes with their hypocrisy and perjury. He also identified the good among us. The good, Jesus says, are the light of the world, those letting their light shine before others, so other people may see their good deeds, and glorify God and God’s creation, the earth and all its living things.

Doing good deeds that glorify God and God’s creation so others may see them is, in today’s words, role modeling. Jesus wants us to be role models.

The Washington Post agrees with Jesus about role modeling. A recent piece by the Post climate advice columnist looks at the science behind role modeling as published in the nation’s leading science journal. Scientists looked at the data from 430 individual studies to see what factors influenced people’s environment-related behaviors. Providing data or facts or a financial incentive all ranked well behind what scientists called “social comparisons”—people’s ability to observe the behavior of others and compare it with their own, taking cues from others.

It’s all about being a messenger, a role model—that’s you and me.

We, following Jesus and science, know what God requires of us regarding the care of God’s earth while it is in our temporary tenancy. We need to

listen to what science is telling us about God's earth including its waters. Then do good deeds, be the light, be the role model.

What science is telling us is that using—overusing—nitrogen to grow corn is one of our biggest water pollution problems. Too many Minnesotans are drinking water that is over the health risk limit for nitrogen. And too much nitrogen is toxic to aquatic life.

Science also tells us that where there is nitrogen there will be pesticides and the more nitrogen, the more pesticides.

Science tells us that the nitrogen for growing corn is also a major source of nitrous oxide, a potent greenhouse gas. Europe reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by reducing its water pollution.

\*Most corn grown in Minnesota is processed and used for ethanol, feed for livestock, and as a base ingredient for highly processed food.

Corn— the way it is grown— is a big thing we consumers need to think about as we commit to healing God's earth. Who would have guessed?

Before we bought our EV when I tried to drive our gas car less, I thought only about burning less fossil fuel gasoline. But science weighs in again and tells us that the corn-based ethanol that by law goes along with the gasoline is just as environmentally bad as gasoline, and likely worse. That's another reason for us to plan for electric vehicles and be grateful for the option.

I know that I never thought much about corn as feed for livestock or for use in highly processed foods until I began to understand the nitrogen problem. Now I seem to see corn everywhere in highly processed foods. For me avoiding them is a lot easier since science tells us again and again that highly processed foods are not good for us. But it is a new challenge, asking for a new commitment.

What we remember and honor this Sunday is Jesus's baptism by John in the Jordan River. John baptized others in the Jordan so Jesus's decision to come from Nazareth to John in Galilee ensured that his baptism was

public—for all to see. That decision to be baptized by John in the Jordan also made Jesus’s commitment to God and the task God set out for him very public. And God’s response to Jesus was also public; as reported by Mark God’s voice rang through clearly to Jesus— "you are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.”

Hearing about Jesus’s baptism and his commitment as told by Mark, reminds us of our commitments and offers us an opportunity to think about those commitments.

This morning we took another step along the Jesus path of commitment when we pledged, as a community and in exercise of our deep caring for the child being baptized, “to do everything in our power to heal and protect God’s earth and its waters for this child and future generations.”

In this time, on this day, when God’s earth needs healing, it is we who can commit and recommit to God and God’s creation and all its living things

To be the light....  
The messenger....  
The role model....

May it be so.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/12/05/improve-sustainability-help-climate-change/>