

Sermon 11.1.20  
Healing the Earth, Healing Ourselves  
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I learned something gruesome but compelling the other day. When we cut our skin, eventually the skin heals, and there's a scar for a while. A lot of the time the scars totally disappear. We forget that they were ever there. But the truth is they are always still there, under the skin. And if we have really bad nutrition, specifically a lack of vitamin C, those scars, even if they have been healed for a long time, will open again. This would happen to sailors back in the age of discovery when they couldn't eat any fruit and got scurvy.

This little factoid got me thinking about the scars we all carry. We may not be able to see them anymore, and yet, they're still there. And if we don't give ourselves the right kind of diet, the continued healing, they can return to the surface and need to heal all over again.

How do we give ourselves the right nutrition to keep our emotional scars healed? For a lot of people in this congregation, the answer is time in nature. Whether it's a serious backpack trip into a remote region or just a walk or roll around the block, our time outside in the company of nature heals us.

I had the chance to see a wonderful documentary recently and I want to thank Jerilyn Bowen for recommending it. It's called *My Octopus Teacher*, and you can watch it on Netflix. It's the story of a man who is a nature videographer who becomes very successful, works too hard and burns out. He realizes that he's neglected his family, and that he's neglected himself. So he goes back to his roots. He grew up swimming in the tide pools near Cape Town South Africa. He stops working, and he makes a vow to go swimming in those pools every day for a year. There are these extraordinary kelp forests in the water there and in those days he begins to form a powerful connection with an octopus that he meets. I won't say any more about the plot so you can enjoy it for yourself. But I was so moved by the way that his time getting deeply in touch with nature healed him and returned him to his whole self. I strongly recommend this documentary. It's beautiful and it's so compelling I promise you that you'll forget about current events for 90 minutes.

I used to lead outdoor trips for young men coming out of the juvenile detention system in Massachusetts. For 28 days, they'd get the benefit of being in nature, seeing things that are beautiful, enjoying the feeling of relaxation after a long hike, and facing challenges. I remember, we had a little ropes course which was made up a series of stations linked by different rope exercises. There was one with two platforms: one was about 4 feet by 4 feet and the other about 10 by 10. The idea was that you had to swing by a rope from one to the other. So I led the way, swinging from the little platform to the big platform, then I asked for a volunteer to go next. I had a favorite kid in that group, Jose, a 14 year old who was 6 foot 3 and probably carried 300 pounds. He was a lovable, pear-shaped guy, always eager to please. He was very nervous but he went first. Well, as he stepped off the platform and began to swing

towards me for me to catch him, my mind caught up with the physics of the situation. I saw him accelerating towards me and realized that it was a nooooooo situation. Before I had a chance to move, he came barreling into me and knocked me clean off that platform. I fell six feet to the ground and got the air knocked out of me. Jose just hung on to the rope and ended up dangling in the middle between the platforms. And the rest of the kids and the instructors just about busted a gut laughing at us. No one was seriously injured, and it was kind of joyous to see those normally sullen youths laugh so hard.

So time in nature can be very healing for humans, but how do we humans reciprocate? Any healthy relationship has a balance of give and take. We humans take a lot of healing from nature, like that reading about dirt tells us. And we're doing a terrible job of offering healing to nature in return. And like Jose swinging towards me on a rope, nature will not be denied. Nature will knock us right off our platform onto the ground. We see that now in the hurricanes in the gulf coast, and the wildfires just to the north of us, and a serious drought right here in New Mexico that is making our rivers run dry. As the saying goes, nature bats last.

How can we change this imbalance?

To be real, we need to acknowledge that we must have systemic changes that are beyond the power of individuals to make happen. So here's once last reminder to vote this week. Governments and corporations need to make radical adjustments if we're going to save the planet, and we can never stop making noise to make those happen.

But one way that we can bring balance and mutual healing back to our relationship with nature is for us to practice being really conscious of nature as much as possible. That means noting and appreciating the beauty that is right in front of us. That means seeing these gorgeous places all around us and understanding what we'll lose if we don't offer healing back to nature.

During the storm last week, I took a walk through the Bosque. It was wild out, the wind lashing the snow into my face. But the Bosque was stunning. The ground was white, and the leaves on the cottonwoods were gold and the red grape leaves offered these exquisite splashes of color. I saw so many crows wheeling about in the wind, black birds seemingly at home in a white and orange landscape. I walked through the areas where the invasive species like Russian Olives had been cleared out, and I could see how healthy they looked, even in winter. And I felt so much gratitude for that place. And I saw how nature and humans could heal each other.

A couple months ago I took a trip up to Dixon to camp in the apple orchard of a friend. The orchard backs up against Embudo Creek, a 20 foot wide stream that runs into the Rio Grande. It was still hot then, so I was excited to have a place to splash and cool down right next to my tent. I walked down to the creek and was stunned to find that it was bone dry. The river rocks were baked white in the sun. I saw the drought in action and I thought with a heavy heart "this creek is dead now". The next morning I went back down there to gather some firewood, and I looked east, up the creek. I was shocked to see a front of water rolling slowly down the creek. I

stood there, baffled, and within ten minutes there was a foot of water in the creek and it flowed steadily.

I told my host about it and she told me that the previous day the farmers upstream had been allowed to open their irrigation gates. That was enough to drain the creek dry. The following day it was the turn of the farmers farther downstream. I like food, and I like farmers, but it broke my heart to think that they had to kill the creek and everything that lived in it so that they could grow their crops. Is this the trade-off that we have to make?

Paying attention to nature, taking note, appreciating makes us not just think, but feel. All the things I saw in the Bosque and at Embudo Creek gave me emotions of gratitude and loss and frustration and confusion. Thinking helps us to understand, but the feelings we have move us into action. I can't unsee what I saw on those days. And I can't unfeel those feelings. They stay with me and move me to pay more attention in general, and to pay more attention to the people making decisions that affect those beautiful places. Our emotions in these things aren't a distraction; they're a source of energy and power.

UUs have a stereotype of being too much in their heads. Stereotypes can be dangerous, but I have seen us resisting the call to feel something in a situation rather than just analyze it. Feelings can make us vulnerable. Who wants to spend time being terrified at the destruction of the planet? I sure don't.

But feelings can do things that thinking can't. Feelings give us energy. Feelings point us towards the things that really matter for us. Feelings can cross the gap between people, and between people and places. Our feelings make us uncomfortable, but I also think that they will save us. Truly, the greatest things that have ever been done have been done out of a feeling: the emotion of love.

I hope that nature is offering the feeling of healing for everyone here. And I hope that we can pay attention and feel the feelings that spur us to action. May it be so.