

Today we celebrate Whole Earth Sunday. It's the day when we take the time, as a community, to recall our collective commitment to this world that we believe is God's world—and to reaffirm our collective belief that we are not ultimately separate from the rest of creation. The scripture you heard was the story of Doubting Thomas; it's the lectionary text for today, and I hope you don't mind too much if I completely ignore it. Instead, I want to think about the places in the bible where it talks about God creating the world—the first and second chapters of Genesis, the 38<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> chapters of Job, many of the Psalms—the places where God is portrayed as making or shaping or caring for this world we live in. So as much as I want to talk about the earth, the planet, and our responsibilities to it, I also want to talk about God's place in all of it—I want to talk about God's creativity.

One of the things most Christians believe is that God is somehow responsible for us being here. Some of us believe in a literal six-day creation, and some of us believe in some version or another of the scientific account of expanding energy and cooling matter and so on, and many of us believe something in between. But it seems to me that the very definition of something that could be called a "god" would be that God is somehow the starting point for everything else. So I care less about how it happened—although I read the

press releases about CERN and the Hubble Space Telescope just like most of you do—and I care **more** about why it happened, about why we're here.

That's the big question of philosophy. Why is there something rather than nothing? It seems like it would have been easier for there to be nothing. But there's something. Here we are. Why is that the case?

Well, if you think I'm going to answer that, you're probably going to be disappointed. But I do have some hunches. And one of my hunches is that we are here because God is creative; the very nature of God is to be creative. And so this world we live in is neither a byproduct of various principles of physics, like a remainder in an equation, as so many scientific theories seem to say, nor is it a waiting room for the apocalypse, one that we can mistreat and ignore as temporary, as so many Christians seem to think. No, I believe that this world, and whatever other worlds there may be at the end of those Hubble Space Telescope shots, but this world—I believe is an expression of God's creativity—of God's very nature. I believe that the earth is God's personality made physical.

I have spent a lot of time around creative people. My wife, Jessa, who will be helping me with this sermon today, is a potter. So in college, she and I spent a

lot of days and nights in the pottery studio, doing a lot of flirting but also figuring out how to turn ideas into teapots. When I was working on my Master's degree, we both took community pottery classes at the university to keep our hands in clay, and when I graduated, Jessa enrolled in a MFA in ceramics. So for a few years I hung out all the time with young artistic people—potters and sculptors and metal workers and jewelers and even a few painters. I learned something about the creative process—how it can be messy, and full of angst, and joy, and very often full of failure. And as I thought about this day—this day when we remember the earth, which the first page of our bibles claims is the direct product of God's creativity—I thought that one way to tell the story of the earth was through the story of a piece of pottery. So in your bulletin, you'll see that I have divided the process of making a pot --OR a the world--into seven parts. And so we start where Genesis starts—at the beginning.

### Beginning

In pottery, you start with clay. These days you can go to a store and buy clay, but in the past of course you had to go and dig it yourself. We knew a potter once who mined her own clay. She would go to the places where clay had been deposited over time, usually near a river or a stream, and dig it out. This kind

of clay of course usually needs some work. It's too wet or too dry; it has rocks in it or too much organic matter. It might be lacking certain minerals that make it strong, or might have too much of something, that makes it brittle. Even when you buy processed clay from a store, the kind of clay you buy has a tremendous impact on the thing that comes out at the end of the process. The raw materials are a starting point, and anything inherent in the clay— inclusions of minerals, tiny pockets of air, small stones—anything already inherent in the clay will express itself in the finished product. Sometimes these inclusions add to the beauty of the finished work, and sometimes— sometimes they destroy it. A stone, unnoticed in the raw materials, will press against the shrinking clay as the pot is fired, and the pot will shatter in the kiln. But this danger, that can come from the raw materials, is also what makes every new work unique—no two pots are ever quite the same, because no two pots ever come from exactly the same clay.

Christians like to think that the world started from nothing, that God just got bored one day and started reeling off “Let There Be’s,” and soon enough there was a world. But that’s not what it says in Genesis. The story in Genesis is a lot like the story of a piece of pottery. “In the beginning,” Genesis 1 says, “In the beginning the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the

deep.” So in the beginning there was a void and there was a deep; some people think of it as a primordial chaos—raw materials. And in Genesis 2, when God wants to create people, God doesn’t just do it with a wink and a nod, but God takes some dirt to make the man and a rib to make the woman. God has raw materials. In fact, in Hebrew, Adam’s name is kind of a play on words, a pun on the fact that he’s made out of dirt: adamah is the word for earth or dirt, and Adam is the name God gives the man. So his name means something like “earth guy” or “earthling<sup>1</sup>”. Adam from the adamah.

I wonder sometimes if this doesn’t go a long way to explaining why things are the way they are. God is an artist who works with raw materials. What was in that dirt? What was in that adamah from which God made that Adam? Are the inclusions in that dirt, that clay, what make this world so terrifyingly fragile? I don’t know, but I have a very strong hunch that those inclusions are what make this world so incredibly beautiful.

## Preparing

Some of the variables can’t be controlled; that’s what makes it art. But the artist still does her best to make the clay ready. There’s a process called

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Amy-Jill Levine for the “earthling” translation.

wedging that potters use. It looks a lot like kneading a lump of bread dough, and the main thing it does is to squeeze out any pockets of air that might be trapped in the clay. Air pockets work sort of like the stones work: when the pottery is heated up, the clay and the air expand and contract at different rates, causing cracks. So wedging the clay is an act of foresight; you do it at the beginning of the process, but you don't see the results until the end.

Foresight is often what is missing in our thinking about the world. It seems like a major characteristic of modern people—and maybe especially modern Christian people—is that we don't think very carefully about the consequences of our actions. We think, we need cars to take us to work and to the grocery store, so we need to mine iron and drill for oil and manufacture plastics. We think, we need air conditioning in the summer, so we burn coal to produce electricity, and we think, we need parking lots to park our cars while we go to church, so we need asphalt that disrupts drainage systems and puts chemicals into groundwater. I don't think very many people actively hate the environment; I just think we lack the foresight to look beyond the next thing we think we need.

I think God works differently. I think God works more like an artist, who knows that for her work to be successful next week she has to plan today. I think this about God because that seems to be the way the world is put together. Think about that hymn, *In the Bulb There Is A Flower*, the one we're going to sing at the end of this service. Those lines are true, aren't they? Bulbs hold flowers, seeds hold apple trees. I love a line from a Wendell Berry poem, where he asks us to put our ears close to carrion, and "hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come." Nature, like an artist, has an idea of what will come next; God has made this world pregnant with possibilities, already humming the tunes that will be sung tomorrow.

## Centering

The most important thing a potter does is center. It's also one of the most difficult things to learn for beginning potters. In order for the wheel to help you form the contours of a cup or a bowl or a teapot or whatever it is you want to make, you must first have the clay absolutely centered on the wheel. This is non-negotiable; any person who has ever tried to throw a pot with the clay uncentered will tell you that it ended in failure and very likely a pretty big mess. Centering is so difficult because you can't do it by brute strength and

you can't do it by sheer artistry. It's a lot like riding a bicycle; one minute you can't do it, and the next you somehow have it figured it out. And once you've centered the clay, everything else that comes after it is made possible.

When George heard this was going to be Whole Earth Sunday, he told me that I had to know about a project First Plymouth member Jim Rogers helped to put into place in Peru. There was a community in Peru, a village, where the people were radically de-centered with regard to their environment. The water that was nearby was dirty and unusable, so the people—which most of the time meant the women—had to walk about 5 miles a day to get to clean water. Jim and some other folks organized the drilling of a well and the construction of a wellhouse with a solar-powered pump to help that community obtain clean drinking water. You see, it's not just God who has the responsibility for this world. We have the responsibility for the way we inhabit this place. There is a community in Peru whose lives are more healthy and equitable now because their community and folks like Jim Rogers found a way for the people to coexist with the environment in a healthy and sustainable way. I'm not a water engineer, but I imagine that there were other ways to solve the problem. Build a road and truck in the water. Pump it from a long way away using diesel powered pumps. Divert rivers and streams. But

these people found a way to re-center their lives around a solar-powered well, and now Jim tells me that the community is thriving and healthy.

### Opening and Forming

If you're following along in your bulletin, you'll see that we're on our fourth and fifth steps, and only now are we to the point where we will begin to see something that looks like a piece of pottery. This is the part that looks like magic. This is the part that, the first time you see it, makes you stop breathing for a moment. You won't really be able to see it well from where you are, but the next time you have a chance to see a potter working, pay attention to this part. Once a piece of clay is well-centered and ready to go, it takes only the slightest suggestion on the part of the potter to open the vessel into what it will become. This is the point when it starts to take shape. Whatever it is that the clay will become is decided at this moment; you can't start now to make a pitcher and go back later to make it into a platter.

There is a branch of theology that was born out of the 20<sup>th</sup> century called Process Theology. The very basic gist of Process Theology is that God is always creating, always forming, always working in our world. In Process thought, God does not make the world, call it good, and then go off to do

something else for a while. And God does not wind the world up like a clock, its every movement pre-ordained and pre-determined, so that we are all robots with no free will. Process Theology, rather, sees this world in a constant conversation of creation with God. God provides an infinity of possibilities for any moment; I choose one of those possibilities, and in the next moment God is there again to present me with an infinity or more of possibilities. So creation is not something that God did once upon a time. In this way of thinking, we co-create the world with God, all the time, at every instant and in every choice and action. God is the one who makes so much lemonade from our lifetimes full of lemons, our lifetimes of less than perfect choices. When I think of this, I think of the gorgeous, unbelievable sunsets in cities like Calcutta and Beijing and Cairo and Los Angeles. The most wretchedly polluted air in our cities produces the most stunning sunsets, because the light from the sun is scattered and diffused by the particles of pollution in the air. I like to think that God makes it that way—that even when the choices we make are harmful to ourselves and to this world, God takes them and makes them into something beautiful.

Every piece of pottery that's thrown on a wheel is different from every other piece of pottery that's thrown on a wheel. In my academic life I often find

myself faced with archaeological reports from the excavation of some ancient place. Pottery is one of the most important ways of understanding and analyzing an archaeological site, and it's often the case that even two or three thousand years later, we can still tell which pots were made by which potters. Small details can differ between one artist and another; one might form the neck of a vase in a particular way, or finish the bottom in some unusual fashion. We can tell if the potter was left-handed, or where he might have dug the clay, or what kind of fuel was used to fire the kiln. Each piece of pottery, even those that look a lot like other pieces of pottery, is uniquely the product of its own creator.

How could this be any less true of our world? If the Process Theologians are right, then this is our world, and this is God's world, because we have made it together. Its shape and texture are uniquely ours, its color and form are found here and nowhere else. I'm not saying that there are not other pots from the same potter; the answer to that is above my pay grade. But I am saying that we share this world with God, and that because of that we are inextricably bound up together in this place. Those of us Christians who think that this world is unimportant to God and therefore should be unimportant to us are woefully, woefully mistaken. If we believe, as I do, that God is like the artist

who always has her hand on the clay, and that we too have a part to play in the constant creation of this world, then how could we fail to think of this place as anything other than utterly sacred?

## Finishing

Christians have long understood our world as fallen, mired in the consequences of original sin and hopelessly entangled in a morass of iniquity and unrighteousness. Things are so bad, we like to say, that someday God will just have to come back and end the whole thing—put a stop to it all, like dad finally making good on his promise to pull this car over on a long road trip. This world and all that is in it, for many Christians, is just a temporary thing—it's just the car we travel down the highway in, until we make dad mad enough. Christians are not optimistic about this world and its chances long-term; this world, we like to say, will pass away.

To which I say: just because something isn't finished doesn't make it broken. This piece in front of you right now is not finished. It's beautiful in its own way, of course, but truth be told it's a glorified pile of mud, indescribably fragile and seemingly very temporary. But it's unfair to judge it on those

terms, because it's also unfinished. There is work yet to do. For this piece of pottery to be fully realized, it would need to sit here for a while to dry out just a bit. Then it would need to be cut from its base, dried a bit more, and have some of the excess clay trimmed from it. During this time the slightest bump will send the whole thing into fragments, but if the artist is careful, the next stage is the kiln for the first time, turning the mud into a kind of artificial stone. After that comes the glaze, where the colors and flourishes are put on. And then it's back to the kiln a final time, this time fired to temperatures of over two thousand degrees for hours and hours on end, until all the water and much of the oxygen is driven out of the clay and it becomes permanently pottery. And only then it will be finished.

So we cannot look at our world and say that it is irrevocably broken and that it must therefore be temporary. We cannot think that it doesn't matter what we spill on the car seats because dad is going to pull the car over any minute now anyway. We cannot look at the art that God is still creating at every moment and with our every choice and say that because it is unfinished that it is of no value. And we cannot pretend that this place has nothing to do with us. As people of faith, as a community of faith, as a city, state, nation, world, whatever group you want to put yourself into, it is our responsibility to take

care of this place. Not because your political party has this position or another on the matter, and not because it makes you feel good to have a hybrid sticker on your car, and not even because you want to leave the world a better place for your kids, although those are all very good reasons. It is our responsibility to take care of this place because this is God's place and it is our place. God made this world; as Christians, that's on the first page of our bibles, God made this place, and on the second page the next thing God did was enlist us to tend the garden.

## Collecting

This section is kind of a coda to the whole process. After everything is said and done in the creation of a piece of pottery, after all the throwing and trimming and cutting and finishing and firing and glazing and firing again—after all of that, there is a finished piece. And some of those finished pieces end up beautiful and graceful and coveted by buyers and galleries, and some of those pieces end up with cracks. This is a simple and predictable part of creating art. I haven't counted, but I'm guessing we have something like a hundred different pieces of pottery in our house, and I bet half of them are cracked. The pottery surrounding Jessa's wheel here are all pieces from our home that have

some flaw in them. Cracks are not necessarily a sign of bad work; sometimes when you take some dirt and water and make something out of it and burn it at two thousand degrees for a while, things don't go exactly how you hope, and you get cracks. When you first start making pottery, every crack is a dagger to the heart. After you've been doing it a while, you hardly notice anymore. Cracks happen. But you can't sell the cracked pieces. So guess where they end up?

That's right. They end up in the potter's house. Often they're still perfectly good pieces of pottery. They're just not good enough to sell. But they're too good to throw away. They're still useful; they're still worth something as a bowl or a pitcher or a ladle or a teacup. But your choices at that point are to throw them away or keep them for yourself. We end up keeping a lot of them.

There has been a controversy lately in evangelical Christianity. Rob Bell, an evangelical leader, recently published a book in which he suggested ever so gently that maybe God is more interested in reconciling with us than sending us to hell—that maybe, and this is what sent a lot of people into a tizzy—maybe there are a lot fewer people in hell than we might think. Some people

read Rob Bell to say, perish the thought, that there is no hell at all, EVERYBODY goes to heaven. This makes a lot of people very angry.

But it's also a notion that's been around Christianity for a very long time, and has been held by some very smart and influential Christians. There's a fancy word for this as a theological concept, so I want you to remember this for the next time you find yourself in a conversational lull at a dinner party—it's called apokatastasis. Apokatastasis is from a trio of Greek words that together mean something like "all things that go away come back again." You see, over the years, a lot of Christians have considered the nature of God, this creator God who took the time to hover over the deep and to call the world into being and who bent over to take some dirt to fashion the first man and breathe life into his nostrils—they've looked at that creator God and come to the conclusion that God cares about God's creation and is not willing to see any of it tossed aside, forgotten, or worst of all, damned. Apokatastasis is the idea that in the end, all things will return to God. As in the beginning, so it will be again.

I tend to believe this, if only because my house is filled with cracked pottery. The creations of an artist always find a place in her own house, not just the

beautiful creations, but especially the ones with cracks. If this is God's world, cracked as it may be, and if this is our world, then I cannot believe that God has anything in mind other than being here forever. I cannot imagine any agenda on the part of God other than making this place whole, moment by moment, choice by choice, hand in hand with us as we strive to do better and better and more rightly by this place. And so this summer when our smoggy air makes for beautiful sunsets, I will take it as a sign that God is still here working with us, still beckoning us to better things, and I will take it as a call, and I hope you will too, to take care of this world which God has made, to tend this garden well, and to keep our hands on the clay right there with God's hands, making this work of art we call earth as whole and as beautiful as God intends it to be. Amen.