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With Humble Heart
A sermon for Earth Day
Psalm 104, Luke 12:6-7
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Have you ever watched an artist at work? Have you ever seen the look of concentration on an artist's face as he makes his brushstrokes on the canvas? Have you watched a dedicated gardener as she squats down in the dirt, clipping branches and pulling weeds and pinching off dead blossoms? Have you marveled at the way the conductor of an orchestra cues the musicians at just the right time and gets them to make music so moving that it actually lifts you out of yourself for a little while?

Have you ever watched someone who loves to fix things get in there with all their tools and fiddle with that car, or that appliance, or whatever it was that was making that noise that you couldn't figure out, and somehow they had the magic touch that made it run again? They're doing you a favor, but you get the sense that they're also having the time of their lives?

Have you ever visited someone, and they invite you down into their basement to show you their elaborate model railroad? Their face lights up as they show you all the different trains they've collected. They know every detail of every train car, every building, every tree in their landscapes. Many a happy hour, and many a dollar have they spent, creating and tinkering with their miniature worlds.

Have you ever watched one of those shows on HGTV like Fixer Upper, or Flip or Flop, and watched as the designer skillfully creates a plan, and chooses colors and textures and arranges the items in a room to make it look just right?

Have you ever been in the kitchen with someone who loves to cook? Chopping, and stirring, and seasoning, making everything smell amazing, and making it all look so easy? The

really good ones can do all of that and still participate in a conversation with you. [I can promise, you don't want to talk to me while I'm cooking, unless you have no appetite whatsoever.]

If you've ever seen someone do any of these things, or if you yourself have ever got caught up in the process of making or fixing something . . . then you can relate to the image of God in our reading of Psalm 104. Like a woodworker who personally sands every inch of the cabinets she has built, so God's hands are all over planet earth. Did you catch some of those wonderful images? God WATERS the mountains? God feeds animals and people from God's own hand? God rides on the wind? And God covers the earth with the water, like a Grandma pulls up the blankets and tucks in her grandchildren at night . . .

A couple of times a year in a sermon, I'll ask this question: "What is the chief end of man?" Or to put it more inclusively, "What is the point of humankind, what are we here for?" This is question number one in the Westminster Catechism, written in the 1600's and included in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions. Anybody remember the answer? That's right: to glorify God and enjoy God forever. I never get tired of hearing that.

If we take this to heart, if we really want to glorify God and enjoy God forever, it's probably a good idea to know our place. One of the striking things about Psalm 104 is the way that humankind is listed without a lot of fanfare alongside the other living things that God has made and cares about. Wild donkeys, birds, cattle, trees, storks, goats, coneys, lions, people, then the sea creatures. In THIS scripture passage, humans are important, but so are the animals and the plants. The animals are precious in and of themselves, not just as resources for people. Our place as humans is as one among many other species that are precious in God's sight.

It's true that in the ancient Genesis creation story, God tells the humans, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it." It's an interesting word, subdue. It means to overcome, to quiet, or to bring under control. The first humans wouldn't have had ready made garden plots or farmland—they would have had to clear away trees and shrubs and rocks and bring all of that growth under control so that they could grow some grain. They had to subdue it. If you want to subdue a screaming baby, if you want to quiet that child, you need meet the needs of that child—you have to feed him, and clean him, and cuddle him and sing to him. In that light, it is an incredible privilege to be charged with subduing the earth. It means we have a sacred responsibility to look out for the needs of all the creatures with whom we share this planet earth.

I've always loved the passage from the Gospel of Luke that we heard earlier: Five sparrows are sold for two pennies. I will confess to you that in over 40 years of reading the Bible, it never occurred to me to ask WHY anybody would want five sparrows for two pennies. I guess I had it in my mind that maybe people would want them for pets or something. Then I read in the notes of my new Contemporary English Study Bible that sparrows were the cheap fast food of that time, so buying five for two pennies was kind of like us buying lunch off the dollar menu at McDonald's. And not even one sparrow, is forgotten in God's sight. Not even one of the hundreds of thousands of chickens that are raised for the sole purpose of being sold to Chick-Fil-A is forgotten. Yes, we are worth more than many sparrows, and more than many chickens. BUT. Not one of them is forgotten. Not one.

Creation matters to God. We matter to God. Even the littlest, most insignificant, most seemingly disposable of creatures MATTERS to God.

Today is Earth Day. I was doing my online research for this sermon, and read about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. I think I might have mentioned in my sermon last Earth Day. That there's a floating patch of garbage in the Pacific ocean the size of Texas. Well, scientists have sampled and measured and surveyed, and since October 2016, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch has doubled. It is now TWICE the size of Texas, and three times the size of France. In that patch is at least 79,000 tons of plastic. Not only do sea creatures get trapped in this thing, but even worse is that eventually the plastic will break down and be ingested by marine life. In fact, this past year a sperm whale was found washed up on the southern coast of Spain with 64 pounds of plastic in its stomach.

Now, nobody buys plastic water bottles or uses plastic grocery bags with the intent of hurting animals. We're all just trying to get through life as best we can. But just as little creatures matter to God, so do the little decisions and choices we make each day add up. The choice to recycle a single aluminum can will save enough energy to power a TV for up to three hours. And since the average individual creates around 4 pounds of trash per day, for a total of nearly 1500 pounds sent to the landfill per person each year, even one person's efforts to recycle truly make a difference. Since plastic grocery bags are so hard to recycle, even using reusable grocery bags at the grocery store can make a big impact over time. It's not too much of a stretch to say that caring for the earth is a part of keeping the promise we make to children at their baptism, as we will today when Pierson Giessel receives the sacrament of baptism. Part of nurturing our children is teaching them their place in creation, and leaving the planet better than we found it.

Last Sunday, we launched a Year of Gratitude here at First Presbyterian Church. A great way to practice gratitude this week? Every day, thank God for something different in creation.

Thank God we get to live in it. Thank God for all the things we can do to take care of it. Thank God that every creature, from whales to people to sparrows, is precious in God's sight.