

This sermon is connected to the Earth Day theme that we celebrate and are challenged by in our worship today. But it may seem like it takes a little while for this sermon to get around to what actually sounds like having anything to do with Earth Day – so stick with me – and I’ll try to point out a few guideposts long the way.

Where this sermon path starts is with the Pope – I’m sure many of you have heard the news this past week of Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the United States – it is a big deal when the head of the worldwide Catholic Church visits the United States. And today Pope Benedict’s visit concludes with a visit to Ground Zero in NYC and then a worship service in Yankee Stadium – which is quite a setting for a worship service, since many people call baseball a form of religion in America too! I wonder if you’ve noticed that our denomination, the RCA, does not have a Pope?! You probably have noticed that! – we do have various leaders, at local and regional and national levels – we even have a President – the President of General Synod – and that is Rev. Carol Bechtel who is a member of Hope Church – which is quite exciting, for her and for us. But she is not the Pope! – not even Pope for a year; I doubt she wanted to be the Pope – and she isn’t – we don’t have a Pope.

So did you ever wonder why we don’t have a Pope? Well, in the Catholic Church there is the priesthood, which is in charge of the church – the priests are the clergy and the church members are the laity; and there are bishops and archbishops in charge of the priests, and there are cardinals in charge of them, and then there is the Pope in charge of it all – it is a hierarchical system, with the power at the top. The Reformed Church is different – and if we were to get technical about things, I think it’s accurate to say that in the RCA there is actually no such thing as clergy and laity. Even though as a minister, I am often referred to as “clergy” – and even though those who are not ministers are often referred to as “laity”...really in the Reformed Church we simply have members – and some of those members are ordained to be office holders – and the ordained offices are Minister of Word and Sacrament, and Deacon, and Elder; and none of those offices is above any

other (+ Professor of Theology)!; and none of the office holders are above the members. We don't have clergy or laity: we are all members – and some have the role of holding an ordained office – that's our structure.

I like our RCA structure – and if it seems to you that I am critiquing the structure of the Catholic Church – I am; and if that seems ungenerous of me especially while the Pope is visiting, then please know that I do not intend it to be – I have Christian love and respect for our Catholic brothers and sisters, and for the Pope as their leader. And within that relationship we can talk about our differences as well – but just to balance things out, I want you to know that later I'm going to criticize the Reformed Church and compliment the Catholics.

And for even more balance I want to point out that according to the Epistle lesson today, you could say that the Apostle Peter disagrees with both of us, Reformed and Catholic alike. The Catholic Church has some people who are priests – we don't have any priests, but office-holders instead; but Peter writes to the church and says 'you are a holy priesthood' – 'you are a royal priesthood' - everyone in the church is a priest, Peter says; so on the one hand that seems to me to be a critique of the current Catholic structure; and on the other hand, in the Reformed Church we don't use that term of priesthood much at all, which doesn't seem to be following what Peter says either. So perhaps the place to start is to realize just what a radical thing it was that Peter was saying when he writes to the church: 'you are a holy priesthood' – all of you - 'you are a royal priesthood.' The early Christians knew about priests – most of them because they were Jewish, but I imagine Gentiles also knew of priests from other religions. And what they knew was that the function of a priest was to be an intermediary between the people and God, the Divine. If you wanted to get to God, or appease God, or please God, then ordinary people needed a priest; that gave priests a lot of power –importance – influence. Without a priest, you are cut off from God – priests are set apart and above to make this special connection to God.

Peter says something very different: Peter says that now in the risen life and light of Jesus Christ, things have changed. Because God has come close to us in a new way in Jesus Christ, we do not need someone else to get us close to God – everyone is a priest – not dependent on a special intermediary...and all who follow Jesus Christ are a part of this special priesthood. ...which perhaps brings up the question: if everyone, all of us, are priests – is it actually special any more? Well, Peter seems to think so – he says it is a HOLY priesthood – ROYAL –special language; and what we can hear in that is that the importance does not come from being set above others, it comes in the gift of God being revealed to us, made known to us in Jesus Christ. And so what we ARE set apart for – specially called to do – is to make that gift known to others: as Peter says ‘to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light’ – that is the work of this priesthood – and this is everyone’s calling, Peter says – and this is a radical concept.

...Now perhaps we should pause here for a moment – and realize that it may sound like this sermon has still not said anything that sounds at all connected to Earth Day – and that is correct. We’re getting closer – but first, let’s keep score. I have said that what Peter says about the priesthood sounds a bit different than either Catholic or Reformed language and practice today – but you may have noticed that what I then said about it sounds a lot more like our Reformed Church structure; I think in the RCA we really do seek to live out a priesthood of all believers in a way that values all members equally – no one is set above, but all are set apart for the same purpose of witnessing to the light of God. So that means the score is 1 for us and 0 for the Catholics.

But what is it, then, for us as this holy, royal, priesthood that we are to be witnessing about...?...I know, it says: ‘to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light’ – but what does that look like? – where do we find the content of living out the light of our priesthood? And for that, this day, we need to turn to our Catholic brothers and sisters – because there is a strand present in

Catholic theology that is largely absent from Reformed theology...it is a theme that says that part of how God reveals God's self to us is through nature – through God's Creation – and mainly what that has been about in Catholic theology is that through our reason, our intellect, we can look at Creation and know something of the existence of and the goodness of God. For various reasons, the Reformers were a bit suspicious about this – they said we should listen only to God's revelation in scripture, and were less inclined to revelation in nature. Well – I happen to believe our Catholic friends have something to teach us and correct us on in this strand of creation revelation – which evens the score at 1 for Reformed and 1 for Catholic – and which turns us at last to Earth Day.

As priests – a holy, royal priesthood – we are to listen to God; so as good Reformed Christians we turn to Scripture. But, it turns out, there is another place and way that God is speaking to us today – and that is through Creation. And it is not just in the goodness and beauty of creation, it is through the brokenness and destruction of creation. As Christians it has taken us too long to listen to the cry of creation as the voice of God calling us – and perhaps that is because we haven't believed God speaks there; but if we are to be a people, a priesthood, called 'to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light' – then certainly part of the darkness of our world is the misuse and abuse of creation. And part of the call God speaks to us is through the voice of creation and the witness there to what is broken in the world.

This idea Peter gives of a royal, holy priesthood is no romantic, glamorous notion – Peter describes it as being in the midst of a world turned from God and unable to recognize the light of Christ; when Christ is not seen, people are destined to stumble, he says – it comes as no surprise to us to see a world not caring well for the gift of God's creation. But is it a surprise to know that we are complicit with our world in that misuse? – to know that our confession and witness has not recognized that destruction or seen the need to address it? It is sad – sobering – but not surprising if we know that we too understand ourselves to

often be turned from God; that we are special not because we are better than others, but because we are entrusted with a gift that is for all.

...and not surprising if we are willing to be humbled by the truth that it is in fact through many who do not confess the name of Christ that the Church has been led to see God's light calling us to care for creation – they have listened to God's voice in the torn fabric of creation – God has used them to reform this priesthood; the cry of creation and those who seek its wholeness re-forming in us that the good news of life in Christ is about care and renewal for creation as well. As priests, not only is it true that we are not above one others – we are also not above God's creation – we are a servant: in all things, with all people, and in all creation, our call is the same: to witness to the light and life God brings – and to live and serve in a way that is life-giving.

In planning for this service with the Caring for Creation task force, I shared with them that my first impulse for preaching on this Earth Day Sunday was to find a passage that was obviously creation-connected. But then what I felt called to do instead was to use the lectionary texts- because part of what we are being called to do in this time as followers of Jesus Christ is to connect all things, all of our faith, to what God is speaking to us in creation; part of what we can do is to see that a scripture about our royal priesthood, is connected to creation - the ordinary, daily call to reveal God's light of grace to the darkness of a broken creation – and that we know something of both the darkness and the light.

And as we do that – seek to connect our faith in renewed ways to the care of creation – it strikes me that even as God has used other people and creation itself to reveal that to us; we as a priesthood in Christ are set apart with a special witness that our world needs to hear and see as well. The truth that we are not on our own, and cannot do this on our own – as a priesthood, the light we share is the grace of God – and it is the grace of God that we know has given creation to us; it is the grace of God in Jesus Christ that we know will turn human hearts from the darkness of destruction to the light of restoration – will turn our hearts to listen to God in the broken creation around us. These, after all, are the

first words of God's creation: "let there be light" – and it is to this priesthood – not someone else, but to all of us – that God speaks now to be a healing light to creation. Amen