

**“Communion with the Whole World”  
by Rev’d. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen  
The Congregational Church of Hollis  
4 October, 2015  
Proper 23B  
Genesis 2:18-24  
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12**

This is a richly-textured day for most of us here at The Congregational Church of Hollis. For starters, it’s the first Sunday in what I understand is everyone’s favourite month of the year here: it’s Stewardship month! Across the coming weeks, we’ll be hearing from various people about how any contributions you make—financial, as well as the time you give in order to help with various ministries of caring for the church and the world; the ideas you offer; your prayers; your presence in worship and fellowship, which strengthens the sense of community—all of these contributions and more make this house of meeting and worship, a spiritual home in the center of the Hollis community.

Next, it’s Apple Festival Sunday. I’m looking forward to experiencing it, especially as the photos and description of the festival attached to the church profile I looked at over a year ago were part of what captured my attention and imagination about this church and community. In the U.K., they have an annual harvest festival around this time each year—just as communities and cultures across the globe hold annual harvest celebrations or festivals, as human beings have done since the beginning of time. The Hollis Apple Festival is—in its essence—a harvest festival, and so we’ll be joining with people around the world and across the span of time when we go out and enjoy the fruits of the Hollis harvest.

Finally, also drawing us together with people across time and space, today is World Communion Sunday. Churches from numerous denominations around the world will celebrate the Lord’s Supper with a particular mindfulness about our connection in Christ, and will seek to promote greater Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation.

That’s a lot of texture for a Sunday morning—it’s a lot to weave together in a single service. On these sorts of occasions, it’s a particularly delightful thing when the Revised Common Lectionary texts (which also tie us together with other churches around the world who are also reading from these same texts) lend themselves perfectly to casting the divine dimension upon our mundane preoccupations. What do our ancient scriptures have to say to this particular moment, to The Congregational Church of Hollis, on October 4, 2015?

We begin at the beginning. On the subject of stewardship, the Bible is clear: stewardship is more than just a once-a-year proposition. Faithful stewardship is our life’s calling, and it is what we’ve been created and entrusted by God to do in this world. All of the gifts this world has to offer: the fruit of the land, the animals of the fields, the beauty and splendour of flora and fauna, mountains and seas, the heavens and the earth—all of these things have been bestowed upon us for safe keeping and watchful care as God’s chosen stewards.

We obviously can't do it alone, which is at least one reason why we've been given the gift of human partnership. For as long as human beings have known how to think, we've wondered how we got here, and why we're here. The Ancient Near and Middle East is known to have had several myths or narratives to explain the origins of life and the universe. The most famous are probably included in Book of Genesis (which, of course, means "beginning"). But there are others.

Did you know that there are two creation stories in Genesis? As is the case with so many stories, the ancient narrative of creation was told and re-told countless times before it was actually written down. And by then, there were multiple accounts. When the Jewish story was eventually committed to writing, they included two of the versions because each one conveyed something of the truth and mystery of human experience.

In the first version, comprising the chapter of Genesis, God's creating is divided into seven discrete days, and it has a cosmic scope. Animals are created prior to human beings, and no names are given to them. Only God speaks in the first version. The final thing God creates (on day Six) is humankind, and when that happens, man and woman are created simultaneously. Genesis 1:26 reads, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'"

Man and woman are created completely equal, both at the same time, and both thoroughly in the image of God. On Day Seven, God rests—which is where we derive our concept of Sabbath from: sabbat means "seven", and also a holy, restorative rest-taking.

But in the second version, which is contained in Chapters 2-3 and is where our first scripture lesson was taken from this morning, there are no days or periods of time mentioned. Creation only has to do with earth (there's no cosmic dimension); man is created out of the dust of the ground (the Jewish word *ha-Adam* literally means, "ground" or "dirt"), and is placed in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Several characters in this version speak, including an animal (the serpent). As he's placed in the garden, God gives the man permission to eat from every tree of the garden, except one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's immediately after that moment, where our first scripture reading this morning picked up. Verse 18 says, "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'" And God goes on a creating frenzy and makes every animal of the field and every bird of air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them—but none of the helpers were suitable partners, or *companions*.

And that's when, according to this version, God causes the man to fall into a deep sleep and takes one of his ribs and fashions woman. ("Eve" [*hawa*] in Hebrew literally means "life", or "to live".) This text has unfortunately been misinterpreted and used in at least a couple unhelpful ways over the years to justify patriarchy or male supremacy, and more recently to argue against same-sex relationships. But most contemporary literary biblical scholars contend that neither of those considerations were pertinent to the point of

the story. The point is that God recognized that human beings need suitable partners in tending to the well-being of creation. We need each other, not least because we help each other to see and recognize God, but when we're doing it well, we help to encourage and hold one another accountable as we tend to our privileged responsibility of stewarding creation.

The thing is, we often fail at that. Unlike the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, who echoed the Psalmist's marvelling sentiments, "What are human beings, that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?", we forget that God has made us "for a little while lower than the angels", remembering only the part that says, "you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet." And it's because of this—because human beings have so long got it wrong and consistently mismanaged our relationships with those given to us as partners, as well as with the rest of creation—because of this, God revealed the divine will and Way to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus, who himself "for a little while was made lower than the angels", showed us how it's meant to be done: how the richest life of all is the life of sacrificial giving, a sort of stewardship willing to give anything, everything—including life itself—in order for the world to know God's love and presence more completely. It's radical, all right.

And so is the symbolism of the meal he entrusted to us: the everyday stuff of bread and wine. Who would think that something so ordinary should come to represent the essence of the divine? We call it the sacrament of Holy Communion. When that meal was first instituted, much of the original audience would have been more agrarian than we are today—they would at least be far more familiar with the human toil involved in threshing and grinding wheat to make bread, and crushing grapes to make a pleasant drink.

When we think of the origins of bread and wine, we're back in the garden with Adam and Eve, and every other human being who has ever helped to till the earth and tender the harvest. With God's blessing, the humans had used and managed well the gifts of the earth, and bring forth a new creation. Historically, the harvest festival was an occasion to give thanks for the co-operation we've been invited to engage with, with God. Ours is a holy communion with God.

So, in the celebration at Christ's table, there is an element of remembering our very beginning as human beings. But, as the bread is broken and the wine is poured, we also remember the ways that the body and blood of Jesus—Son of God, God's own flesh and blood—were broken and poured out on account of our human inability or refusal to rise above our self-seeking; our inability or refusal to be good and faithful caretakers of each other, and of all creation.

Today, we join with Christians across the globe on World Communion Sunday and pledge to be more faithful stewards, tending more thoughtfully to God's whole creation as we pay more careful attention to one another—and to the presence of God in each one. We pray and promise to be better caretakers of all that's entrusted to us, so that we might produce a more bountiful harvest of the fruits of the Spirit (which, according to the New Testament, include "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" Galatians 5:22-23).

Finally, we give thanks and glory to God, because without the power and persistence of love expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we would not be gathered in this place, or drawing near to this table. May our communion with God and with the world bear witness to the redeeming communion between God and our brother & Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.