

Creation Spirit, Creation Care
The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
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I want to tell you a story this morning. I like stories, don't you? This is what I call a mostly-true story. That means that it takes some all-the-way true stories, and some other bits, and kind of weaves them together. It's the story-tellers license. So this is a mostly true story.

Once upon a time, in a land like this one, more or less, there was a little girl named Justine. Justine was a precocious little girl, and very curious. She liked to learn about the world, and she loved to play. She especially loved to play in the dirt. The dirt, the messy earth, that was one of her favorite things. It just felt so good in her hands, under her toes - she'd take off her shoes and curl up her feet into the earth. She loved the dirt when it was wet and muddy and you could make shapes with it; and when it was dry and dusty, and you could take some in your hand and blow - poof - and it would fly out.

There is no other earth, she thought, this is our earth, and we rejoice in it.

Justine, her parents had their concerns. First and foremost, they kept saying "stop tracking that dirt in the house!" They did not like it when it was muddy, or when it was dry; they did not like it at all. They would say, "Justine, clean that dirt off yourself! We don't want that earth in this house!"

She found them perplexing. But it did not dampen her enthusiasm for the earth itself, or, in particular, for the dirt thereof.

One day, Justine was walking home from school. It was a spring day, kind of like today, and two doors down from her own house was Mrs. Schultz. She was outside in the front yard wearing old jeans and holding a shovel.

Around her were a whole set of potted plants: some green and some with colors - purple and yellow and pink. Justine asked, "What are you doing?"

"Planting," said Mrs. Schultz.

"Can I help?" asked Justine.

"Go ask your parents."

Justine's dad thought this was brilliant.

"Go for it, kiddo, just wash up before you come back inside."

So they dug holes in that beautiful earth, and they put the plants in, and they watered, and it was good.

All spring, Justine would go to Mrs. Schultz's house and help in the garden. She learned the names for those plants, and how much water was too much, and they had lemonade when they finished each day.

And Justine rejoiced. For the earth was good.

A few years went by like that. Eventually, Mrs. Schultz scaled back the garden, and one day, while they were spreading a little bark, Mrs. Schultz told Justine she was going to put the house on the market. It was time for something smaller. Justine wept that night, but she promised herself that she'd always plant in the dirt.

Time went on. Promises aren't always kept easily. Justine found herself, a young woman, in the big city, and nothing more than a pot of herbs on the windowsill. Even that in violation of the landlord's edict: No plants allowed!

And truth be told, something turned in her life. It wasn't just the oppressive concrete, but things kind of went south for her in a few ways.

School was hard, and the job market worse. The dating scene was a disaster, and one relationship was particularly damaging - emotionally abusive, and financially debilitating. Her partner would steal from her, then gaslight her, make her think it hadn't happened. A blow to her sense of self, her confidence. She got out of that, but still. Life was rough.

She put one foot in front of the other, and did the best she could. Yet, the world didn't seem so joyful.

One late fall day, when the grass, what there was, was brown, and the leaves had all fallen — yet there was not yet any snow to cover the litter on the sidewalk — one late fall day, she was feeling particularly blue. This broken and painful world.

She saw a sign in front of a church, a place she'd walked by before and never gone in. The sign said, "Sunday: Creation has Fallen. 8, 9:30, and 11."

So it was three days later that she showed up at 9:30, found a seat in the back, and heard the story. That God had made the world, and it was good, but then humans had screwed it up. There was something about a snake and a fruit, which Justine didn't quite follow, but the preacher said that was just a metaphor.

The point was that we human beings had inherited this mistake, that we all had in us original sin, that creation itself, what God had made that was good, had fallen. Become corrupted and twisted. And that our human nature was greedy and destructive. The preacher explained, too, that because of this we could not put our faith in the world or in the earth or even in other people but only in God.

Justine, walking along the sidewalk later, mulled it over. She didn't buy the mythology or the theology, but the anthropology and the ecology did make some sense to her. She thought about her abusive partner and she thought about all the crime and pain in the world. All the greed and the destruction. It was overwhelming. "There is something wrong with us," she thought. And she thought, too, about the world. Oh sure, there were pretty flowers, but there were also earthquakes and tsunamis, and there was the cancer that had killed her dad last year, and there was that virus on the news and there was climate change, which was the fault of human beings, but also seemed like the earth falling apart. Fallen indeed.

And so it went. Life had its ups and downs. She got a better job; finding a better lover was more of a struggle, but she made some good friends. Justine moved out of that apartment into a better one, one with a little porch. She put a chair out there, and she could see the sunset between the buildings. One day, she picked up a couple of plants in pots from the grocery store, and she thought about Mrs. Schultz, and the shovel, and the dirt, and smiled. She put the plants on the porch, and they grew well. She hadn't lost her touch.

But creation as a whole? She wasn't sure. It seemed a mix of both: beautiful, yes, but also fallen and broken, at once. And the problems seemed so large.

She worried about everything.

Sometimes she thought, "everything is fallen, everything is broken, so you just do what you can and try to get by." Sometimes she thought, "everything is a mess, so I should try to help clean it up." Sometimes she thought, "it's just all too much. I'm going to rent a movie and eat popcorn." There are days like that.

Sure, this is our only earth, but she didn't know if it was worth rejoicing in or not.

Acedia. The lack of energy to try new things.

Don't get me wrong, there were days when she was fired up with passion. She had a friend who was a real climate change activist, and she went to a rally with her. They marched and chanted and sang a song.

She replaced her light bulbs and cut back on her meat consumption, and she even sent some money to the Arbor Day foundation so they could plant a tree.

"Got to save this world," she thought, and she did her part, but then it seemed like, so what?

The political forces seemed so overwhelming; the denial, the special interests, the regular interests - people didn't want to pay more for gas and heat and electricity, they didn't want to eat less meat, so it was going to be hard to change things, our fallen nature, she thought.

The fallen earth and our fallen nature.

Original sin. Creation gone wrong.

So she lived there, in between. The occasional moment of grace and beauty but an overall sense of not-quite-despair. Cynicism.

She grew older, and time went by. Life, with its ups and downs. Perhaps it was years that went by, and perhaps it was decades.

But there came a day: it was a spring day not unlike today. The flowers were starting to make their way up and out, reaching for the sun, and the breeze was a little more warm than it was cold.

Justine was walking to her house, walking along the sidewalk after a little stroll in the neighborhood. She lived in a house now, and two doors down she saw, there in the front yard, a little girl, playing in the dirt. She'd pick up the rich soil, and let it drop through her fingers. She'd make a little hill, and roll a pebble down the slope. Meanwhile, the little girl's father stood there, shovel in hand, surveying the yard. They had just moved in, Justine knew, and the dad looked a little befuddled. He had some plants by his feet, purple and yellow and pink, but he seemed unsure about what to do next.

Justine smiled. She walked up the path. "Good morning. I'm your neighbor." Not 10 minutes later, Justine had changed into her old jeans and she and the little girl were digging holes while the dad unrolled the hose so they could water. They laid out the flowers in patterns, and Justine smelt the dirt on her hands. When all was done, she went home and walked around her house without washing her hands first, and she threw back her head and laughed out loud.

How did I forget?

How did I forget?

The earth is a blessing. The dirt is a blessing.
Creation isn't fallen, it just is –
and look, see, taste, smell, touch -
you want to love the earth
and you want the earth to love you back?
You have to get your hands dirty.
You don't have to be a gardener, but you have to get
your hands dirty.

She threw her head back and laughed. She remembered.
Before the original sin, the original blessing. Not that
things are perfect or ever will be, but that life is a
blessing, the earth is a blessing, the stars in the heavens
and the ground under your feet, the wind and the water
and the flowers in purple and yellow and pink.

She said to herself,
I'm done.
I'm done with misery and sin.
I will not wallow in regret or victimhood
I will rejoice, sing, thank, praise.

And if I have praised deeply enough, then the warrior in
me who is called to defend the earth and even to change
my ways of living on the earth, can and will emerge. . . .

That day, Justine remembered, and she learned:
you start with gratitude.
You start with thanks.
The earth is here, and you are here,
and you rejoice; start there.
You want to make the world better?
You want to do something about climate change
or poverty or pain or war or racism or anything?

You start with gratitude. You start with joy.
Nothing else is sustainable. All the other meals are
empty, and you will starve.
But when you start with joy,
you are held in the embrace of blessing;
you see all that is good in creation —
and then you love it more deeply, you want everyone to
have it. You fight for it, for yourself —
because it is you, and you are it,
and we are one with all that is.

We sing for peace because we begin and end in praise
for the blue green hills of earth, for sound and sight and
touch and all that is our life.
Because creation is beauty, and love,
and plants need gardeners
and children need dirt
and the world needs peacemakers
and love needs lovers
and the earth needs those who sing with joy.

Justine threw back her head and she laughed.
How did I forget? And she saw the dirt on her hands,
and she gave thanks. She rejoiced.