

# Soil, Soul, and Society

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

There are certain projects that feel good to be a part of, and some that don't. I'll give you an example of each. I've done construction and renovation work on and off over the years as a part-time job. I don't have a ton of skill really, but I can manage a hammer ok. Twice recently I was helping with excavation jobs to build and repair foundations. This involved digging out the earth underneath the house with shovels, and taking it in a wheelbarrow to a bin in the driveway. At one house we filled up 7 large dumpster bins to be hauled off and disposed of. At some point partway through the job, as I was pushing the wheelbarrow filled with clay, it hit me: We are literally throwing the earth in the garbage. No poetry, no metaphor: I am digging out Mother Earth, putting her in a huge garbage bin to be taken to a landfill, mixed with plastic, rotten wood, pieces of copper pipe, and chunks of white and green plastic. I found it hard to keep working, and had to stop thinking about it that way in order to continue. Especially because I had just been reading about cob, which is a traditional method of building houses out of clay, it felt like a cruel distortion of reality to be taking the clay to a dumpster to make way for a house. But that is what we do. And much as I'm tempted to go on a long tangent about traditional, earth-friendly building practices, I'll leave it at that for now.

And like I said, there are some projects that feel really good to be part of. A few times in Hamilton I've volunteered with "Depave Paradise," which I think I've talked about in this pulpit before. It's a community non-profit which does depaving, which is exactly what it sounds like: ripping up pavement in parking lots to make way for gardens. They have a fun way of going about it: on a Saturday morning a crew of volunteers shows up to wield pry-bars and take out the pavement chunk by chunk. Every 15 minutes or so they call for a stop to the heavy work so the children can run out and pick up all the small pieces and put them in buckets. These are small projects - 6 or 8 parking spaces at a time - but it's satisfying in a way that's hard to describe. Doing that work with other people, it feels like we're helping the earth to breathe again. One of the ironies of the way we've built cities is that they're generally built in places that people gathered because the soil was good for farming, and now those are exactly

the places that are covered in asphalt. Breaking it up feels like a small act of liberation.

There's a saying among some gardeners: "Don't grow plants, grow soil." Then, if the soil is healthy and rich, you'll have success growing just about anything. Or, as E.F. Schumacher said, "Take care of the soil, and the soil will take care of the rest."

It is said that when Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be known as the Buddha, was close to enlightenment after sitting under the Bodhi Tree all night, he was challenged by an army led by Mara, a powerful demon, to prove his worthiness. In response, he simply reached down and touched the earth where he was sitting, and the demon vanished. There are iconic statues of this image, with the Buddha sitting cross legged with one hand down touching the ground, and it's called the "Earth Witness Mudra," And not Earth witness as in "planet earth," or but literally the earth he was sitting on, the soil.

Satish Kumar says, "we have come to think that soil simply means dirt and that dirt means dirty. But dirt is not dirty; it is the source of life. Without it there is no life.

We are related to and dependent on the soil. If somebody grows food, we think: "Oh poor man, peasant, labourer - he is not educated so he has to grow food." If you are educated you don't grow food - you manufacture cars, televisions, computers or work in a bank or office. We sit at our computers and our food comes from somewhere.

The word peasant itself has become a term of an insult. I want to change that. I want to reinstate a respect for soil. We must touch the soil. How many times do we touch our mobile phone every day? Maybe 100 times. How many times do we touch the soil? Hardly ever..."

What if we touched the soil 100 times a day? All of us – farmers, students, office workers, teachers, grandparents. What would that do? Not magically solve all our problems I'm sure, but maybe change us in a way that makes us conceive of our problems and solutions in different terms.

Kumar goes on to say, "We are all part of this healthy web of life maintained by soil. The Latin word humus means soil. The words human, humility and humus all come from the same root. When humans lose contact with soil, they are no longer humans."

Humanity, humility, humus. When we lose contact with soil, we are no longer humans. If we are no longer humans when we lose contact with soil, I wonder what we are. I don't know. Maybe just homo sapiens – the apes who think they know everything.

Satish Kumar is a lifelong student of teachings of Gandhi, having lived in a Gandhian ashram in India as a young man. In his book "Soil, Soul, and Society, he tells the story of an exchange between Gandhi and a politician and activist named Dr. Lohiya. Apparently Dr. Lohiya said to Gandhi, "To be blunt with you, you are not a great orator, not a charismatic personality, and yet tens of thousands of people follow you. When you make a call to action, large crowds turn out. People listen to you. Whereas when other great speakers and famous politicians with handsome bearing and charming personalities make a call for action, only a few turn out. What is the secret of your magic? People talk about the "Gandhi touch." What is it? Gandhi was taken aback. He paused and then said, "I don't know! The only thing I can say is that I have not asked anyone to do anything that I have not done myself." Dr. Lohiya responded, saying "That makes sense. It's your integrity, not the argument, which has such power..." Gandhi replied, "Dr. Lohiya, we have to be the change we want to see in the world."

I read that and thought: There it is. The quote we've all seen on t-shirts – If you're like me you've maybe even worn the t-shirts – finally explained with some context. It's not just a one-line catchphrase, it's an explanation for why someone who apparently was not particularly charismatic or well-spoken could inspire millions. It makes me pause and consider that perhaps one reason for our current political dysfunction is that even the smart, charismatic, well-spoken public figures with good ideas don't exude that kind of rock-solid integrity that people can feel. Maybe it's not that simple – Gandhi himself was a complicated man, after all – but I can't help but think there's something to it.

As the Tao Te Ching says:

"All streams flow to the sea  
because it is lower than they are.  
Humility gives it its power.

If you want to govern the people,  
you must place yourself below them.  
If you want to lead the people,  
you must learn how to follow them."

Easier said than done of course, and there's the risk that any talk about these ideas is just more empty rhetoric. Maybe we need to touch the earth 100 times a day for a year, and see what happens.

Some of you may have heard of the "overview effect," which a number of astronauts have described upon seeing the earth from space for the first time. Seeing the earth as a pale blue dot in space makes national boundaries and human conflicts seem irrelevant, and evokes a feeling of wonder and unity that apparently changes a person forever. Some have said that the first photos of earth from space played a big role in launching the environmental movement, and helped birth a real global consciousness. I bet it would be an incredible feeling, and of course it's an experience I've never had. And at the same time, I wonder if thinking in that way can also create a kind of one-sided transcendence, and thinking of "the earth" in a cosmic way, instead of simply earth as soil, something you can sit on, stand on, touch for support, like Gautama Buddha did.

I wonder if what we need in our times right now is not transcendence, but "descendance." Descend to the soil to find our humanity. They say we are stardust, but we are also compost. Humanity. Humility, Humus.

Last week I suggested going and talking directly to the lake. So we'll see if this becomes a weekly thing: today I'm going to suggest another practice to you: sometime this week, stop and touch the soil. Don't just stop and smell the roses. Bend down and touch the soil. I bet it will feel weird. And if touching the soil is something you do anyway for work or for gardening or some other purpose, try doing it slowly and intentionally a few times. See what it has to say to you about being human. Amen, and blessed be.