

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL J. KOTTKE  
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**Sunday, June 13, 2010**

**Title:** The Days of Accountability – the Grief of God

**Scripture:** Genesis 6:5-8 and Revelation 1:1-8

**Theme:** In this the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we must acknowledge that to be a faithful Christian is to be ecological stewards of this earth. To live otherwise is to be held accountable by God.

This morning's scriptures are two passages to which normally I do not give much attention. You know me well enough to know that the predominance of my focus is on God's grace and the injunction to love self, to love the other, and to return God's love, as we have been loved. This is the core commandment affirmed by Jesus, and thus I take it very seriously. As a corollary, I don't spend much time on the passages of accountability. In our Tuesday's Men's Faith & Fellowship, Glen Tuthill likes to remind me that there will be a day of accountability with our lives and he is right. The image is of standing before God or St. Peter at the Pearly Gates and Peter looks into our book of life – the question being what will your book of life show? Clearly, this is meant as a metaphor and not a literal image, but it is one that is helpful for us to keep in mind. The basic question is, "Are we living our lives such that we will be able to stand before God when the time comes and with integrity say, 'I did the best that I could, not perfectly, but with sincere effort.'"

While it is important for us to look at the scriptural passages of accountability, it is also important to remind ourselves that the fact that we fall short does not negate the original blessing of God's love. God's accountability is always in the context of God's love.

Both scripture readings this morning are of accountability. The first is of Noah. With every baptism, I make reference to this story, as I did this morning with Anna Bella's baptism, of the

first and universal covenant which God makes with humanity. [Gen. 8:21-22] Today's reading is at the beginning of the passage of Noah's story. It starts with God's recognition of the sinfulness of humankind with the most poignant verse being: "And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind and it grieved him to his heart." [Gen.6:6] [I wonder if there are not many parents who can identify with this all too human emotion. So angry, so hurt by the actions of the child that they are "grieved to the heart."]

We never talk about the grief of God and yet it is a critical way of acknowledging that we are in a genuine "give and take" relationship with God. Our faith is not about being obedient to a despot monarch, but being in a loving relationship with God, who is like a parent. The story goes on to tell us that God was so angry and so hurt that he resolved to destroy all living things [including the animals, the birds, the creeping things] because of the sinfulness of humanity. Then the passage ends with this significant line: "But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord" – a line that illustrates a key theme within the scriptures. Many times God is justified to engage in judgment and destruction, but because God finds favor with even one individual, God changes the course of action. Ultimately, as Christians, we are mindful of the baptism of Jesus when he comes up out of the water and God's voice saying, "You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased." The Christian statement to the world is that God's course of action for the world affected by his

love of Jesus. This speaks to the understanding in which we engage all our baptisms.

In the passage of Revelation, we read of accountability as well. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, this particular book of the Bible gets terribly misused. We have been living in a state of the “End Time” for 2,000 years. Revelation is not about predicting a specific calendar date. Rather it is about being held accountable within our current lives. Without getting too complex, what these two passages remind us of is that, yes, there is accountability but always in the covenant of God’s ultimate love, much like a parent, lovingly seeks to hold a child accountable.

This is the second of a two-part sermon series addressing the call for us to be ecological stewards, if you will, to engage in good business practices as Christians. Last Sunday, I spoke of the original blessing as recorded in the creation story of Genesis in which God invites us into a partnership of caring for creation. Dominion to which the creation story refers is not permission to wreckishly use and abuse nature but to nurture it into its full abundance. The biblical witness is clear that there are times when humanity falls terribly short – but the covenant of God has remained intact. Yes, our actions can lead to the grief of God. Surely, God is grieving over the destruction within the Gulf of Mexico. And surely, there is a sense that we will be held accountable for the ways in which we fail in our tasks as ecological stewards. The invitation of this sermon is to gain some insights into the accountability to which we have been called.

Over the last few months, there has been a particular focus on holding business practices accountable, specifically those of British Petroleum. As I mentioned in the Friday email, I was privileged to be invited to a faculty seminar acknowledging the release of a book by several of the faculty of the Daniels School of Business at the University of Denver. The book is entitled *Good Business*. Daniels sees as its task to teach its students best business practices. According to this book those practices include producing business leaders

who value their community, business leaders who understand the importance of social values integrated into the business’ financial values. In short, teaching that the best of business practices must be fundamentally grounded in the good of the whole. What I found fascinating in this seminar is that if I but changed a few of the words, the conversation would largely have been the same within the circles of students and faculty at The Iliff School of Theology – the best of value-based practices.

Regarding the abuse of business practices, one of the Daniels faculty who also is a CEO of a turnaround company, Bob Vanourek, writes:

*Every few years, an egregious ethical scandal plagues American business. The 2008-09 global financial crisis is the latest, preceded earlier this decade by the “hall of shame” of Enron, Tyco, Adelphia, World-Com, and others. [Of course, he could now add the Gulf Crisis of B.P.]*

*Ethical lapses occur in business not just because a few people are crooks. Unethical behavior in business is a failure of leadership. Too few executives have fully grasped that corporate leadership must be based on a foundation of ethics. Business schools, the media, corporate boards, and executives focus too much on the personal traits and characteristics of leaders, the situations to which they respond, their uses of power, their charismatic persuasiveness, and their relationships with followers – all of which, indeed, have a place in the study of leadership. But these approaches alone, even coupled with more regulations, will not give us the ethical corporate leadership we desire. Above all, a different type of leadership is required to instill ethical behavior: values-based leadership.*

Mr. Vanourek goes on to observe “Ethical failures typically occur for several reasons: erroneously thinking that ‘if it is legal, it is ethical’; intense performance pressure,

addictions, toxic leaders, and overblown egos.” [Good Business, Chapter 15, p.186-7] The same intense pressures on the leadership to produce results that exist within the business community also exist within the local church. And thus unethical, unhealthy practices all too easily emerge that violate the very values which are articulated.

Dr. Buie Seawell, Clinical Professor for Business Ethics at Daniels, writes that ethics is a contact sport – that is, every time you have contact with another individual you are engaging your ethics. What does your engagement say about your ethics? [p.199] As religious leaders, as disciples of Christ, our values are exerted every time we engage each other, every time we engage someone outside of our congregation, and every time we engage the environment. How do our practices speak to our values? I wonder if often the reasons we as Christians shy away from our ecological stewardship is that we feel it will negatively impact our quality of life.

The story is told in *Good Business* of former dean Bruce Hutton using this illustration from Charles Dickens *Christmas Carol* in one of his classes:

*You know, it's really simply about this...Scrooge is all upset that the dead vision of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, is one of an old man in chains and money boxes. And Scrooge protests, "But Marley, you were always such a good business man." And Marley answers, "Business? Business? Mankind was my business." [p.200]*

Given today's context, I would take Marley's response one step farther. Instead of stating that the condition of humanity is our business, as faithful Christian stewards, we should cry out "The earth is our business."

Our task then is to realize our ecological stewardship with new clarity and passion and to reclaim our partnership with God in caring for this earth so that we are able to live sustainable lives. In the process, we will identify ways that

we are able to reduce, reuse, and recycle the God-given resources.

I close with this statement from the United Nations Environmental Sabbath Program:

*We who have lost our sense and our senses – our touch, our smell, our vision of who are, we who frantically force and press all things, without rest for body or spirit, hurting our earth and injuring ourselves: we call a halt.*

*We want to rest. We need to rest and allow the earth to rest. We need to reflect and to rediscover the mystery that lives in us, that is the ground of every unique expression of life, the source of the fascination that calls all things to communion.*

*We declare a Sabbath, a space of quiet for simply being and letting be, for recovering the great, forgotten truths, for learning how to live again. [Earth Prayers, 1991, p.92]*