

June 9/10, 2018
Rev. Scott Shreve

St. Paul UMC, Omaha
Do Good, In All the Places You Can

Pastor Scott: This weekend I am happy to welcome to St. Paul two college students from the Micah Corp which is a summer internship program of the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Good evening (morning)! My name is Tasho Mataswa. I stand before you as one of the 2018 Micah Corps environmental justice intern. I am from Park City, North Wichita, originally from Zimbabwe, a country south of Africa. I am a Pre-Medicine student at Butler Community College who aspires to be a pediatrician someday God permitting. Learning as well as having opportunities like these to share some knowledge about the environment is an experience that I believe will make me a better doctor, as humans to be specific young children are connected to nature in every way possible. This is my partner, I will let him introduce himself.

Hello, my name is Nick Detter and I am here today as an environmental justice intern for Micah Corps. I am originally from Andover, KS which is just east of Wichita. I attended Chapel Hill United Methodist Church in Wichita growing up and I now attend Southwestern College which is a United Methodist affiliated college in Winfield, KS which is 45 minutes southeast of Wichita. I am majoring in Environmental Studies with a minor in philosophy and religion, and I plan to work within the church to promote awareness of environmental issues when I graduate.

Tasho: Micah Corps is based on Micah 6:8- God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. It is a program that gives young adults aged 18-21 the opportunity to grow in their spiritual walk with God. We link our faith with social justice, learning from social justice experts in Nebraska, Kansas, and Washington DC. The program also strengthens the interns leadership skills. Micah Corps is connected with Great Plains United Methodists across Nebraska and Kansas. The 2018 program mainly goes in-depth in four social justice issues namely: Immigration, Food Insecurity and Poverty, Peace and Non-Violence, and the one we are learning and teaching more on, the Environment. The 2018 Micah Corps team consists of eight young adults, with two people working on each issue. This summer we are visiting a total of about 29 churches. We have been to Camp Chippewa for our opening retreat, Land Institute in Salina, and have started off sharing about our issues in four Salina churches. We arrived in Nebraska on the 3rd and we will be mostly staying at Creighton University throughout the summer as we are yet to be present at some Kansas churches, and be in Washington DC where we will meet with the members of the General Board of Church and Society, learn more about our specific issues from social justice experts, and meet with the offices of our Senators and Representatives from Kansas and Nebraska. We will end with a retreat from the 29-31 July as we separate and continue be mercy and justice ambassadors in our home towns. Allow me to take this opportunity to thank the St Paul United Methodist Church as a whole for your contributions in the form of mission shares. It is because of you Micah Corps observes its 10th anniversary of social justice work.

Nick: Raise your hand if you grow up on a farm? Raise your hand if you have a garden? Raise your hand if you like to ride your bike? Raise your hand if you have visited a state or national park? Raise your hand if you like to hike or fish?

Tasho: As a little girl, sitting under a huge mango tree which is very close to the entrance of my home, became a habit. The shade provided by the canopy made playing pretend alone, as I am the youngest more enjoyable. The feeling of a warm breeze across my face, made me stay outdoors more and forget I needed to nag my mom for snacks. My beloved as we listen to what the Lord has to say to us today, I would like us to take time to think of our life experiences with nature, good or bad and how they have shaped us to be the Christians we are today.

Nick: I think we can all acknowledge there is a part of us that has a connection to the natural world around us or at least an appreciation for its beauty, and this is good for it is the way God created us! In Genesis 1:26 God says that we are created in his image and likeness, and one key aspect of being created in the likeness of God is that we are designed to value and cherish what God values and cherishes. So in Genesis 1:31 when God sees the creation in its totality and calls it very good, because we are made in the likeness of God, we naturally view creation as very good as well. We should cherish and care for creation because God cherishes and cares for creation. However, it doesn't stop there. God has given us a responsibility to care for creation. In Genesis 1:26, God also gives us dominion over creation. Now some people have distorted this concept of dominion to suggest we can do whatever we like with creation, but this understanding of dominion has no biblical basis. Dominion comes from the Hebrew word "radah" which means to rule in a royal sense. The other most notable place *radah* is used in the old testament is in Psalm 72. Psalm 72 was a prayer of guidance and support for King Solomon. Within the Psalm, verse 8 says "*May he have dominion from sea to sea*", but also within the Psalm in verses 12-14 it describes what kind of dominion Solomon should have over his kingdom: "*For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper 13 He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. 14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.*" This is God's view of dominion a rule in which the needs of the most vulnerable are looked out for and the defenseless are protected. This should be our approach to our dominion over the earth, a dominion focused on the protection of creation not its exploitation for our personal gain. God also shows us in scripture that there are consequences when we do not uphold our responsibility to care for creation. In Isaiah 24: 4-6 scripture says "*The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the Lord has spoken this word 4 The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. 5 The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. 6 Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindle, and few people are left.*" This scripture clearly and brutally shows us what happens when we do not uphold our responsibility to care for creation. The earth suffers and people suffer, and the fact is that this is what has happened in the case of Climate Change. Humanity has neglected our responsibility to creation through our use of fossil fuels, the practice of deforestation, and agricultural practices that are not sustainable, and the consequences of climate change are every bit as bad as though laid out in Isaiah. One aspect of climate change that the United Methodist Council of Bishops has acknowledged in their publication "God's Renewed Creation" is that severe storms like hurricanes have become more intense and more frequent as a result of climate change. This is evident in the devastation of last fall's hurricane season. In fact, Harvard released a study just last week that claimed that the death toll on Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria was over 4,600 instead of the officially reported 64 deaths. For some people this is literally a life or death issue. This is why the United Methodist Social Principles have placed such a significance on care for creation and addressing climate change.

Tasho: The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church also give us as United Methodists a more well-defined understanding of the importance of nature in relation to our faith. The social principles are a set of values that the United Methodist church has agreed upon through vote at General Conference every four years, and they are included in the United Methodist book of disciplines. In short they are the principles that we as United Methodists are called to pursue and uphold. The social principles put a high emphasis on care for creation. "The Natural World" is the first section of the social principles. It comprises of subsections on responsibly using energy which includes limiting the use of fossil fuels and promoting the development and use of renewable energies. The Social Principles also instructs us to care for the global climate and includes a statement that "greenhouse gas emissions threaten to alter dramatically the earth's climate for generations to come with severe environmental, economic, and social implications" (Section I subsection D). It is clear through both the Bible and the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church that we have a God-given responsibility to consider how our decisions both as individuals and as a society impact the environment. As United Methodists we are expected to work with all governments, inform the world, and practice methods that result in the significant reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. We need to do this because the reality of climate change is those who are least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions often suffer the most from climate change. This is the textbook of definition of injustice and as Micah 6:8 says God desires us to do justice.

Nick: Now the question becomes what can we do as a church and as individual Christians to uphold our God-given responsibility to care for creation. First, I would like to thank your congregation for the efforts you have already taken to care for the environment. We were interested in what kind of things you might already be doing as a church so we checked your website and newsletter and saw that you have a garden, have held a grounds cleanup day, and have a “green team”. Those are all great things! The great but challenging thing about caring for creation is that it is a process and there is always room for growth kind of like our faith as a whole. An example of work we have seen done in other churches that your church might be interested in is starting a compost collection ministry. First UMC in Omaha is currently working on this, and they estimate they have kept the equivalent of five tons of CO2 out of the atmosphere from the food waste they’ve been able to keep out of the landfill through their program. One suggestion from the United Methodist Council of Bishops is to “conserve natural resources and use only renewable resources in” church gatherings. This could be something as simple as switching from Styrofoam or paper cups and plates to reusable cups and plates or using LED light bulbs in the church. Also while lifestyle changes are great and important, part of truly pursuing environmental justice is trying to create change as a systematic level. As a church that might mean staying up to date on legislation that impacts the environment and discussing as a congregation how you feel about such legislation. If you as an individual wants to get more politically engaged on climate issues you could join a group like Citizen’s Climate Lobby who has a chapter in Omaha and is a bipartisan organization with the mission statement “creating political will for climate solutions”. We also brought letters that if you want you can sign for your Senators and representatives stating that we as United Methodists support action on Climate Change. I know this can seem like a daunting task, trust me I am 19 and I’ve thought a lot about how climate change could impact my future, but it is important to remember that change is possible. Some of you might be part of OTOC a local faith-based group in Omaha who with other a few years ago was able to convince the Omaha Public Power District to shut down a coal fired power plant in North Omaha, and on a larger scale we have made great environmental progress as a society before. Under the Nixon administration we created the EPA and passed the Clean Air and Clean Water acts, and under the Reagan administration we passed laws to address the Ozone crisis in the 80s. These are great examples that caring for the environment should not be a partisan issue. Previous administrations both republican and democrat, both liberal and conservative have found ways to work together and take collective action to solve environmental issues. We can do this again with climate change.

Tasho: But Most importantly we are a religion of hope, we belief that Christ died and resurrected, We believe God is with us and when we are pursuing justice God is on our side, thus a day will come when climate change issues are just history. Hearing about what you have done as a congregation makes me certain that if we all hang in there, persisting towards the goal of environmental sustainability, we will bring the change that will make my grandkids and great grandkids playing under mango trees a possibility for with Christ all things are possible and the word impossible itself says I am possible.

Nick: Closing Prayer