

➤ **INTRODUCTION** – I’m reading a book entitled “**Grinnell: America’s Environmental Pioneer and His Relentless Drive to Save the West**”. George Bird Grinnell was an easterner, educated at Yale, who discovered the beauty of the western US soon after he finished Yale. Yellowstone Park had just been established when Grinnell went on his first trip, but he was very involved in establishing firm boundaries for the park and preventing commercial entities from abusing and misusing Yellowstone. Grinnell was the momentum behind the establishment of Glacier National Park in northern Montana. A glacier and a lake in the Park bear Grinnell’s name. Our earth is a living organism, not some hunk of inanimate stone. Taliaferro’s book quotes Grinnell, describing his glacier almost as a living organism: “*The glacier was vocal with the sound of running water. The musical tinkle of the tiny rivulet, the deep bass roar of the dashing torrent, the hiss of rushing water, confined as in a flume, fell upon the ear, and up through the holes and crevasses in the ice came strange hollow murmurs, growlings, while the whole ice mass seems to shake and quiver from the concussion of the masses of water that are rushing along beneath it.*”<sup>1</sup> I am sure if George Bird Grinnell could see the photos comparing Grinnell Glacier from the time he wrote this in 1888 to now, he would weep! In 1966, Glacier Park had 35 named, active glaciers; by 2015 only 26 named glaciers due to climate change. The average glacier area reduction over those fifty years was 39%; but some glaciers lost as much as 85%. I weep along with George Grinnell, because, growing up so near to Glacier Park, I have many boyhood memories of those murmuring, growling ice masses.

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<sup>1</sup> John Taliaferro, **Grinnell America’s Environmental Pioneer and His Relentless Drive to Save the West**, (Liveright Publishing, New York, 2019) p. 171.

➤ **THOSE WHO ARE GENTLE WILL INHERIT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE EARTH –**

Matthew's words from the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5:5 are translated as "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." But the Greek word translated as "meek" equally translates as "gentle". Inherit means a whole lot more than having a bunch of money to spend; it means to have responsibility for spending wisely. God's instructions after creation in Genesis 1:28 are often translated "subdue and have dominion" but the Hebrew translation of 1:28 has a different meaning than we moderns attach to it. The command to "subdue" (kabas) focuses on the earth, particularly cultivation; subduing involves developing the created order. "Have dominion" (rada) must be understood in terms of care-giving and even nurturing, certainly not exploitation or doing as you please. As humans are made in the image of God, human beings should relate to the non-human exactly as God relates to humans. Human dominion over the earth must contribute to the preservation and benefit of God's creation. And if we look back in Genesis 2:15 to God's instructions to humans, those instructions were "to till and keep (or guard) the land". I believe it is safe to read Matthew 5:5 in this way: "Blessed are the gentle for they will inherit the earth and have responsibility to cultivate, to give care, to nurture, to guard, to develop, and to share God's love with the earth as God so graciously loves us."

➤ **LEAVE SOME HARVEST BEHIND –** In Leviticus God commands the Israelites in harvesting to leave some of the good grain and the good grapes behind to share with the poor. God says to leave the "gleanings". In sharing the blessings of the harvest, the harvester and the gleaner alike share and theirs becomes the

kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven as the Beatitudes declare. “For Jesus, the Kingdom of God was epitomized, [was a perfect example], of everyone being invited to the table. The Kingdom is known by radical equality at the level of bodily needs.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, rich and poor alike have exactly the same need to be fed, to be nourished, to grow. Not only will leaving the gleanings of grain and grapes behind provide food for the poor, but organic matter will be left behind to also nourish the soil and put back what is needed to grow good grain and grapes for the next harvest. When we put back as Leviticus asks, we bless the world; we contribute to the world we all pray for, a world where everyone is invited equally to the table. It is “a world we ache for, a world where children get to grow up and live to old age, a world where people have food and houses and enjoyable work, a world where animals and plants and human beings live together in harmony, a world where ‘none shall hurt or destroy.’”<sup>3</sup> The kingdom of heaven demands the integrity of creation, the integrity of creation for all, the integrity of creation for which we who are made in God’s image have responsibility!

- **ARE WE BUILDING OUR WORLD ON SAND OR ON ROCK?** – At the end of his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:24-28, Jesus tells the parable of the house built on stone and the house built on sand. Are we doing a good job of building this earth, this house we live in? Are we building our house on the firm foundation of taking gentle care of the house with which God has blessed us? “God’s already made it plain [in Micah] how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your

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<sup>2</sup> Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2008) p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 144.

neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, And, don't take yourself too seriously— take God seriously.”<sup>4</sup> Taking good, gentle care of this earth in which we live is being fair and just to our neighbors – our human neighbors and our neighbors that crawl, swim, fly, run, and hop. If we practice righteousness and justice to all creatures, we build our house on stone. As we fight for clean water and clean air, the stone foundation gets more robust. But when we ignore the needs of all neighbors for justice in terms of cleaner air, cleaner water, and ready access to nutritional needs the rock begins to erode and soon crumbles into fine sand that will not sustain earthly life except maybe for cockroaches. Being compassionate for all life builds up the stone. When we ignore science, which too is a gift of God – science that tells us: *People you are wrecking this house, our earth through your systematic ignorance of what is happening to the foundation, a foundation which is getting weaker and weaker. Your ignorance is displacing rock with slippery, slimy sand. If you don't pay attention, if you don't mend your ways, this house, this home we call earth will slip away into the cosmos.* “Climate is earth's largest, most important, and most vulnerable interlocking system; [climate] allows for and sustains life.”<sup>5</sup> Climate is the most important stone in our earth's foundation.

- **CONCLUSION** – In 1925, at the age of 61, George Bird Grinnell made his last climb to his namesake Grinnell Glacier, He fell twice on his descent and that night in the newly constructed hotel on Swiftcurrent Lake he wrote in his diary: “The Glacier is melting very fast and the water coming from it is very great.” (In the past year

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (Mic 6:8). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

<sup>5</sup> Sallie McFague, p. 14.

alone, the ice had receded 65 feet.) Grinnell added: “All the glaciers are melting rapidly and after a time will disappear.”<sup>6</sup> In 1925, climate change was already beginning to take its toll! What have we done? What are we doing? In modern society we’re distracted by hundreds of things saying, “It’s OK, try it, you’ll like it,” whether it’s power, food, drugs, material things, or sex. We cannot escape distractive temptations – on TV, in the movies, on billboards – temptation abounds. In the case of gentle care for our earth, it’s mostly money that distracts, our preoccupation with more oil, more gas, more minerals. Unlike Jesus, but like Adam, we give in, letting monetary distractions tempt us into sin that betrays our earthly home. Time after time; it’s the story of the human condition, it’s that human genetic defect called “curvature of the soul.” Sin emerges because we are distracted from our earthly mission. Why do you suppose God ends the Ten Commandments with, “Thou shalt not covet....?” Because distraction starts with coveting and coveting leads to temptation. Temptation then becomes a burning obsession in the depth of our souls for a piece of fruit from the forbidden tree – more money, more status, whatever it takes to exalt our rapacious egos. Then sin emerges and we ask, “what’s a little more carbon dioxide in the air or a few parts per billion of lead in the water?” Sin happens! Distractive temptations ignite coveting, and coveting burns through our souls, and we are led into sin. Maybe God’s prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge was God’s attempt to protect us from our handicap of soul curvature. In spite of God’s caution, distractions persist, too often covetousness and ego win, sin happens, and creation deteriorates! The world is covered with distractions and sin happens, but

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<sup>6</sup> John Taliaferro, p. 502.

Jesus Christ also happened to straighten out our soul curvature so we can build this house we live in on stone. AMEN.

➤ **Let us pray:** Loving God, you know us, and you call to us; we are: your beloved made in your image. We are entrusted to be loving caretakers of your amazing gifts of creation. Help us to live with eyes open, holding bright light to the needs of our neighbors and this earth, our only house. We must fight injustice every day, we must be bearers of your compassion, we must ensure that all creatures are beneficiaries of your love, we must be instruments of your peace for this earth. *Amen.*

**Prayer of Confession:** Creative God, we are confident that creation's crashing waters were clean and pure. Yet, we have fouled so much of your sparkling clean water with our greed. Forgive us Lord. The spotless air in which your first birds flew was certainly pollution-free. But we continue to spew carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, other greenhouse gases and even more dangerous gases into your crystal clear air. Forgive us Creator of the universe. You have blessed us with soil to grow grain, vegetables, and fruits, but we have contaminated it with radioactive waste. Forgive us God. Too many of your creeping, swimming, flying, walking, and running creatures have disappeared from your good earth. Forgive us God! We ignore the threats of climate change in the face of overwhelming evidence. O God open our eyes that we may see! We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the first of all Creation, Amen.

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