

Circles and Lines

Ecclesiastes 1:3-9, Mark 9:42-48

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Not too many miles from here, but in a different universe politically, there is a strange and wondrous place that some call the People's Republic of Boulder. It is said to rival Berkeley, California as the home of all things liberal and "politically correct."

So I was intrigued to discover that one of Boulder's long-term environmental goals is shared by ... the US Army base at Fort Carson. Both places are working toward "zero waste" – the goal of not sending anything at all to a landfill. When two communities with such dramatic differences share a goal, then it is worth taking a look at what is going on!

Fort Carson wants reach their zero waste goal by 2027. To do that, they are developing incentives to reuse or recycle products, decrease the use of hazardous materials, create a composting program, recycling and reusing construction and demolition waste, and taking product life cycle costs as well as environmental and social costs into account.

[<http://www.springsgov.com/Page.aspx?NavID=2961>]

The "garbage" company that serves Boulder County, Eco-Cycle, is a global leader in the zero-waste movement. Their website explains the core concept: "Instead of seeing used materials as garbage in need of disposal, discards are seen as valuable resources. A pile of 'trash' represents jobs, financial opportunity, and raw material for new products." Eco-Cycle does a superb job of educating, encouraging and supporting families and businesses in reducing their waste.

A few years ago, the UCC church in Longmont made a concerted church-wide effort toward zero-waste, and they did very well at it. Their building, which houses a preschool and lots of community groups, used to fill up a whole trash dumpster every week. As they developed their campaign, they were down to one trash can a week, and trying hard to not need that.

The principle of zero waste goes far deeper than processing trash. It is rooted in a refreshing and sustaining view about how the world works, and how we participate in it. It is appropriate that we consider that perspective in the context of worship, because it speaks to us about both responsible environmental actions, and about faithful understandings of God's creation. This morning, we'll see that our society, and much of our personal experiences, have been grounded in a flawed world view that is very different than the zero waste one.

As a shorthand for those two sets of values, I'll speak of "circles" and "lines". I'll be lifting up circles and cycles as God's intention for this good Earth, and challenging lines as an approach that has caused a lot of our planet's problems.

Circles

Let's start with the circles, the cycles of nature.

There's a very old tradition in Christianity which speaks of two books by which God is revealed to us. One is the Bible, the book of scripture. The other is the Book of Nature – the Creator is revealed through the creation.

For people of the past – until a few hundred years ago – the message of that book of nature was fairly self-evident. It was daily experience for people who lived close to the land. They all knew about planting seeds and harvesting crops. They knew about using manure as fertilizer. "Composting" wasn't a fancy process for the rich folk in their leisure time, it is what everybody did with the vegetable peels.

When folk of the past looked at how their everyday world worked, they saw lots of cycles of life – of birth and death, of planting and harvest, of predator and prey, of seasons and years. That is the way God created it. It is "zero waste" by design.

There are places in the Bible where that truth is specifically named. When Eve and Adam have their little mishap in the Garden, God describes the consequences of their actions. We quote one line of that story often as part of funeral services: "you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Ecclesiastes – the cynical, rather depressing preacher of the Jewish wisdom tradition – reflects on circles and cycles of re-use. For him, the way of life isn't about progress and newness and change. What goes around comes around, over and over again. It is *the* way of life.

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun goes down.

In the seasonal patterns of the Middle East, the wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

Ecclesiastes is right. That's the way God made the world. That is the wisdom at the core of our planet's long history of evolution and creation. It is how our world has been a thriving, life-sustaining place for billions and billions of years. Things go around in cycles – water, nutrients, energy.

The scientists of our day have helped us to understand the amazing complexity and beauty of that system. The cycling of life is not accidental or incidental. It is built into the operating system of the planet, and probably of the universe.

The water that is the basis of all life is constantly cycled – and this year's drought is making us intensely aware of that water. What comes out of our faucets in Denver is fed by rain and snow in the mountains. Those mountain streams flow to the plains and on out to the ocean. Along the way, that water is used multiple times by cities and farms. Eventually, it evaporates, only to fall somewhere as rain or snow. Around and around.

Most of us know the basics of the cycles of life: a tree grows in the forest. When it dies, it falls over and the decaying wood renews the soil for other trees. Round and round is not just nice, it is essential to life and health. The soil needs the trees just as much as the trees need the soil.

Those nice, tidy, simple circles are important, but not terribly exciting. Let me tell you about a "zero waste" cycle that's far more interesting. It has to do with salmon in the Pacific Northwest.

Those amazing fish hatch from eggs in the gravel beds of mountain streams, swim sometimes vast distances down to the ocean, spend years maturing as salt-water fish, then go back to the

very same fresh-water stream where they were born to spawn, and to start another generation. We've all seen pictures of salmon leaping up waterfalls to return.

A report that I saw a few years ago talked about the fish that almost made it back to the birth stream, but not quite. You see, along with the salmon in the rivers, there are lots of bears, and the bears love to eat the fish. So at spawning time, bears stand in the water and grab the fish that are heading upstream. The bears are really good at catching salmon, and – in some places, at least – there are lots of salmon, so the bears just take one or two bites of the best meat, and toss the rest of the fish away, usually into the bushes along the stream. Waste!

But the area is rich in birds that quickly grab the dead fish, and eat most of the rest of the carcass. Then they drop it. Mice chew on those parts, and then insects finish off all of the edible pieces. The droppings from animals that have eaten the fish contain lots of nutrients, and that fertilizes the soil, often quite far away from the river. Biologists talk about the salmon as a sort of nutrient escalator, carrying food energy and essential minerals upstream and inland, moving the bounty of the ocean up into the mountains.

Here's the most amazing part. The Sitka Spruce in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest needs those nutrients from the far-away ocean to thrive. The spruce are more numerous and healthier along the streams where salmon spawn, and where bears throw their "waste" into the bushes.

Throughout the system as a whole, there is no waste. Everything is re-used. Everything is necessary. The health of the forests depends on the cycling of energy and materials through fish, and bears, and birds, and small mammals, and insects, and trees, and – eventually – the water carrying the minerals back out into the ocean.

There's nothing of the fish that just stays there and accumulates as waste, as garbage, as unusable.

That is the way this world operates. In cycles and in mutual relationships, life and natural processes are fed and encouraged. The death or leavings of one provide life for another. There is no waste. For billions of years, this planet has recycled and reused all things.

That's a central theme that we find in the book of nature. It is a message that is reflected, both explicitly and implicitly in the book of scripture. Cycles, circles, interconnection.

That's just the way it is. That's the will of God, embedded in creation. We find joy and life and health when we go along with God's intention for Earth, and we get into trouble when we work against God's will.

The wisdom of cycles is represented in the three arrows of the familiar recycling symbol, arrows that go around and around and around. Recycling is one of the basic ways that we can live more fully in accord with God's intention.

Lines

Cycles, recycling, zero-waste is the way this world was designed to work – but it is not the way that it is working now. Humans, through the wonders of what we call "civilization", have come up with a different way of living with the things of this world.

Rather than cycles, we have created lines. We have created things that don't go back to feed and nourish life. We have created stuff that is permanent, or dangerous, or deadly.

Instead of creating opportunities for the cycles of life to continue, we have viewed the world as grounded in linear processes. We think of things going from raw materials, to become a product, and from there, to become waste.

Think about a trip to the grocery store, and buying muffins or a salad. That's likely to come in some kind of plastic box, which was made out petroleum products. The store sends you home with that hard-to-recycle packaging, which goes in the trash, and off to the landfill, where it is entombed for thousands of years. It is a product that is specifically designed to be thrown away after one use.

On an even nastier level, through the wonders of chemical processes, we create polychlorinated biphenyl compounds (PCBs) that have some particular industrial uses. And then we hope that those are sent to special toxic waste dumps, because they're deadly. Nothing in nature knows how to take that human chemical creation, and to use it in another cycle of life. We create chemical and nuclear waste that contradicts God's intentions for how the world should work. In God's design, there are no dumps. In our world, we depend on them.

We make glass and plastics that don't decay, that don't break down, that don't become something else that's useful. Raw materials, to a product, to junk. It is a straight line to a dead end. Unfortunately, as you've probably heard, tons and tons of those plastic bags and bottles drift out into the ocean, where they form vast areas of floating garbage – and that garbage kills animals that get caught in it, or try to eat it.

Ores are extracted from the Earth, refined into metals, used to make a can or a car, and then, off to the dump. Except that we are learning that it is a whole bunch cheaper – not to mention better stewardship – to recycle the metal over and over again.

Actually, there is waste at every step along the line, not just at the end point – in gathering or producing of materials, to producing the product, and finally in getting rid of it. A recent report from the Worldwatch Institute details how much waste we make. "Every year we dig up and process more than half a trillion tons of raw materials – and six months later more than 99 percent of it is waste."

A lot of that waste is generated before products come into our homes and offices. In a video put out by Eco-Cycle, they say that, for every trash can that we put out by the curb, there is the equivalent of 71 more cans worth of waste created in getting those materials to us.

Our modern world misunderstands how the world works. We have forgotten or rejected the cycles that are inherent to God's creation, and we've come to think that those lines are the way the world should be. Now, you may think I'm overstating it. Of course we make some garbage in our technological world. But it is not like we insist on it. Or do we?

Well, let me give you an extreme example of how we dedicate ourselves to creating waste: our lawns. Maybe not yours, but probably one of your neighbors. We take a piece of dirt, use lots of water & fertilizer & deadly chemicals to create nice green grass. Then we mow the lawn, put the grass clippings into plastic bags and send them to the dump. Raw materials are used to create a product – that green lawn. And then what comes off the lawn, we think of as waste.

That's when you see a real worldview at work. When something as natural and obvious as the life-giving grass clippings, full of moisture and nutrients, is seen as garbage, we're seeing the world in the wrong way. When we have to teach people to just leave the grass clippings on the lawn, instead of working to rake them up, putting them into non-degradable plastic bags, and trucking them off to a dump where they'll be sealed for thousands of years, then we need a change in our hearts and minds!

This is a new thing. In biblical times, most people lived something pretty close to zero waste. They understood the cycles of nature. They did not live in a "throw-away" society.

The image of hell for them was the garbage dump – that spot just outside every community where stuff went when it was totally rotten and unusable. So when Jesus talks about going to hell, he's using the familiar image of the dump. It is the place where "the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." It is the horrible and disgusting place where there are always maggots, and where bodies and the utterly unusable smolder and burn. It is a place where you do not want to go. It is better to lose an eye or a foot than to be cast into the fires of the cosmic dump. But even there, most of that trash is still working through the cycles to become soil.

It is a frightening realization for me as I ponder that biblical text. The disgusting image for hell in Jesus' time was more life-giving and more in tune with God's creation than the sealed-up garbage heaps and deadly toxic wastes of our day.

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Our society misunderstands how the world really works. Those mistaken notions lead us to the over-exploitation of resources, the creation of pollution, and the generation of waste that cannot – and should not – be cycled back into life-giving materials.

But there is good news. We can reshape our understandings, and reclaim the ancient wisdom of circles and cycles.

Places as different as Fort Carson and Boulder recognize the truth about how God's creation works. They are letting us know that aligning ourselves with how the world really works is economically and practically sensible. The communities working toward zero waste show us that we can act our way into new understandings as we recycle, reduce our consumption, buy more locally, and simplify our lives.

Reorienting ourselves toward zero waste – honoring the circles and cycles of life – is good for us, it is good for our faith, and it is good for the planet. Amen!