My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

When’s the last time you read, or better yet heard, the story of creation? And this isn’t the whole story by a long shot, it’s just a few verses, but I’ll bet if you close your eyes and listen to the words, it transports us to another time and place. Of simplicity. Of beauty. Of stillness. Of peace. The creating God gives all of what we see, experience, and what we are, a tangible form because God loves. It’s that simple. When we love, we create, don’t we? God creates because God loves, and the earth, and sky, and sea, and plants, animals, birds are all expressions of that love. Oh, and yes, we are, too. It’s so easy to get lost in all the aforementioned stuff, and to be in total awe of that, we sometimes forget parts of creation in our awareness and conscience. Having just returned from Alaska and seeing, in no particular order, mountains high as you can imagine, bald eagles that flock like crows, bears three times the size of the ones we have here lumbering past you to fish for food, and whales and sea life majestically floating and flirting with the waters of the deep—yes, I sometimes do forget about parts of creation.

But we have unfortunately fallen into the trap of believing that we own the earth, because we have papers, documents, and titles which say we own parcels of land, condominiums, houses, cars, and boats. And most of us here just experienced how difficult ownership of God’s great creation can be, with such things and gifts and bequests to the church. When these folks gave to God, I’ll bet they never expected many decades and centuries later someone would try and take issue with that, second-guessing title or intent, or whether it was freely given in the first place. If I were God I’d be scratching my head over all of this. God freely gave the Garden of Eden. Period. The end. Enjoy it, and you two can live happily ever after. Become one in love, and let no one take that love from you, not even your kids.

But when things are too good, what do we do? We look toward the next thing that we think will make us happy, kind of putting in the rear-view mirror what just happened to us that made us think we’re finally there, in the nirvana bliss of never wanting anything more. Adam and Eve succumbed to it, too. They could do anything except one thing, and they pushed through that because…well…because it was there.

We all have a thing that we know what will make us happy: more money, a better job, a new car, or love. But I listen to this radio show called Hidden Brain and there’s a psychologist named Sonja Lyubomirsky who says our happiness doesn't necessarily work like that. Happiness often slips through our fingers. We have insatiable wants as humans, never really arriving at happy.

Megan Markle talked about this when marrying Prince Harry. That should make you happy, right? To be in love, on top of the world, no troubles with money or helpers or anything. In one of her interviews last year, she said, “I remember so often people within [the monarchy] would say, ‘well, you can’t do this because it would look like that’…I know there’s an obsession with how things look, but will anyone talk how it feels? Because right now, it could not feel lonelier.”

So therein lies the difference, in my view. We are too often taken away by our egos, our thinking, our cross-comparisons of me versus you, us versus them. We are never all that satisfied with where we’re at, because there’s always someplace better that is where we should be. It takes up an inordinate amount of energy, this wondering where happiness is.

And yet, that is exactly what we are asked to enter into through this story of Creation. This most familiar of all biblical landscapes, the Garden of Eden, offers wisdom to reshape our values toward nature. No other story in our religious heritage so clearly shows that we are utterly linked to our seascapes, landscapes, plants, and animals. God created them first, after all. We came last. It should be our work to serve nature’s needs and orders, not the other way around. Nature was happy before we came along. And then, in God’s image, we were plopped here with all our insatiable wants and longings.

Now, the animals don’t seem to suffer like we do, with feelings of regret and ennui. They don’t seem to need psychologists to talk to, medication to help them snap to, or any number of bad habits that become addictions that take them out of creation altogether. My dog Grace is here today, as you know, that big white Great Pyrenees over there. As our dog, we expect a lot from her. There’s a pillow we have in our house called, “Pet Rules”, which summarize those expectations. Wanna hear them? OK.

Be loyal and faithful. Ask to go outside. Do tricks. Take naps. Be a best friend. Have patience. No drinking from the toilet. Show affection. Sit. Stay. Shake. Fetch (she doesn’t do that). Lay down. Cuddle, always.

What does she want from us? Food, for sure, and fresh water. But mostly, just love. She showers us with all these things that make us feel better if we just give a little love in return. It’s really quite an unequal exchange. But she somehow chooses to hang out with us anyway.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

God keeps reminding us to be thankful and grateful, because God loved us first. Could we, like Grace, return all kinds of beautiful feelings to each other as a result? Each of us is an image of God, after all. Or will we continue to see each other as less than that, the animals and our environment as something made for us, and not a web of God’s grace in which we all depend on each part for our very survival?

What if we just sat in God’s love, as Grace sits with our love? What wonders could we do in return and in grateful repose for all that is here, not all that is not?

William Sloane Coffin, ordained in the UCC and who spent many years at the great Riverside Church in New York, wrote about grace once. Here’s what he said:

“May God give you the grace to never sell yourself short; grace to risk something big for something good; grace to remember that the world is too dangerous now for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love.”

God felt love when he created. It was a universal and all-encompassing blessing that we inherit to this day. Love is feeling, not a purpose or a will of mind. I wonder if we are able to understand that the truth of life is in creating the blessing of love? Not just for some, but for all.

And particularly those who are our closest companions, listeners, and who patiently bear all our moods while asking nothing but love in return?

That’s the power, and blessing, of being saved. By God’s grace, maybe we can re-create that blessing today.

Thanks be to God, Amen.