

Grounded: Earth

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 7, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Genesis 2:4b-9, 15](#)¹ and [Matthew 13:1-9](#)

Copyright © 2025 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

The house I grew up in didn't have a back yard so much as a back dirt. It was on the north side of the house and it was surrounded by old (and tall) maple and oak trees, and a locust tree that shed long, dark brown seed pods. Very little sunlight got to the back yard, so no grass grew. And that meant my siblings and I didn't need a sand box. We had the back yard's dirt to play in.

I don't know how many imaginary miles of road my brother and I built with Tonka trucks and garden trowels. The spigot for the hose was on the south side of the house, so I don't think making mud pies happened all that often. I certainly don't have memories of doing so. What I remember is the dirt as being dry and dusty. I suspect it wasn't very fertile. I don't remember coming across earth worms or other bugs as I recreated the story of *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* or built highways like a miniature version of the Everett Turnpike.

I don't remember the dirt having a smell. I remember, as a teenager digging a hole in the neighbor's yard so she could plant a rhododendron. The shovel made a sound as it cut through the sod and into the dirt, and as I turned over the shovel-full, the soil released a smell, a strange combination of decay and life.

That's the soil I image as I read the second creation story in Genesis, especially the part about God creating the "earth creature," as *The Inclusive Bible* translates the Hebrew. I think this is one of the best English translations of the Hebrew. The creature God creates, the *adam*, is a Hebrew word derived from *adaman*, which means earth, dust, or soil. The *adam* was created from the *adamah*. The earth creature was created from the earth.

Imagine you were playing one of those icebreaker games where you tell the story of where your name comes from and what it means – and your name is Adam. What would you say? "My name is mud" would be a perfectly good response.

I mentioned that our Genesis reading is the *second* creation story. The first creation story is much more familiar – probably because it comes first and probably because it is much more poetic. In the first creation story (Genesis 1:1-2:4a), God speaks and things come into being. When we get to the creation of humans – which is the last thing God creates, not the first – God speaks them into being.

God says, "Let there be light," and there is light. Genesis 1:26 says, "Then God said, 'Let us make humans (*adam*) in our image ...'" God speaks humans into being just as God spoke light into being. And the Hebrew word used is the same one used in the second creation story: *adam*. Let us create earth creatures in our image.

¹ We actually read from [The Inclusive Bible](#) translation, but an online version of that translation is not available. As you get into the sermon, you'll see why I preferred this translation.

Because God speaks creation into being in the first creation story, God seems to me to be more removed from creation than in the second creation story. In the second creation story, God forms the earth creature from the dust of the earth. The imagery is of God reaching into the mud and forming a human. And then God animates this mud creature by breathing life into its nostrils. In the second creation story, God ends up with dirt under the fingernails.

The first creation story has its poetry, its rhythm. Each day of creation ends with a chorus of, “And God saw that it was good.” The rhythm and repetition work on us, planting a seed in us, that our goodness is tied up in the goodness of the earth, that our goodness is tied up in the goodness of the whole of creation. Author Cole Arthus Riley write, “Sometimes I wonder if we knelt down and put our ear to the ground, it would whisper up to us, Yes, you are made in the image of God, but God made you of me.”² This reminder makes me read the parable of the sower with a different emphasis.

Most of you know that my first ministry was at a juvenile hall, a county jail for children under 18. I sometimes wondered if what I was doing was making any difference in the long run. One of the things I loved about the job was that I could easily see that I was making a difference in the moment. I could see that I was helping the kids who were locked up make it through the day. Still, in the three-and-a-half years I worked there, I saw enough kids coming back, getting locked up again, I wondered if I was making any difference in the long run.

I found myself looking to the parable of the sower, the parable we heard today, and found comfort and hope. In the parable, the sower scatters seeds willy-nilly. The seeds get tossed on the path and among the rocks and in the weeds and (finally) in the garden. The sower didn’t pass judgment on the soil: “Oh, you’re not deserving of these seeds.” The sower just tossed the seeds out there.

And that’s what I hoped I was doing. I hoped that my words and my compassion and my listening were seeds falling on soil and that some of them might end up where they could both take root and grow to a fruitful harvest. When I worked at the juvenile hall, I was the sower in the parable.

However, reading the parable of the sower in the context of this creation story, reading the parable of the sower after being reminded that we are earth creatures, that we are made of the dust of the earth, that we are soil ... boom ... now the parable seems to be asking each of us (and probably all of us as a church community), What kind of soil will you be?

The Rev. Dr. Adam White writes, “We are dirt that weeps, laughs, dances, and contemplates: [we are] the soil from which a strange and beautiful harvest emerges. And, yet, dust we remain. This is a limit, yes. [And] it is also a promise of possibility and worth.

“Receiving our dirtiness as good news tethers us to the goodness of everything God created, earth, water, fire, air, flora and fauna, and points us to a shared fate. Our dusty nature calls us to be grounded in dust and nature. It reminds us that our goodness is

² Quoted by Adam White in his sermon notes, “If I Were Preaching,” part of the *Grounded In Creation* worship series resources from Church Anew, footnoted as being from Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh*, p. 7.

derived from our substance (not in opposition to [our substance]), calling us away from relationships with creation that turn Genesis' "dominion" into domination and exploitation,"³ calling us to relationships with creation in which we see ourselves as part of creation.

Dr. Heidi Ferris reminds us that we live within four intertwining systems on the Planet Earth: The hydrosphere (water), the geosphere (land materials), the atmosphere (air), and the biosphere (living things).⁴ While separating these may be helpful for scientific research, they really aren't separable. The hydrosphere needs the atmosphere for water to evaporate into and the geosphere to rain on. The geosphere is shaped by the erosion caused by the atmosphere and the hydrosphere. The biosphere cannot exist without the geosphere and hydrosphere to live in and the atmosphere to "breathe" (if you'll allow me to say that plants "breathe").

We also live at a time when all of these spheres can be drastically reshaped by one species: homo sapiens. That is why some people argue that we are no longer in the Holocene, that we are now in the Anthropocene. Understanding that we are part of creation, remembering that we are earth creatures, might help us take greater care of creation. It would also be good if those of us who are descendants of colonialist (those who colonized lands to which they are not indigenous) would learn from the Traditional Ecological Knowledge that indigenous peoples have gathered over the millennia, rather than assuming we know better.

Let us reclaim our identity as earth creatures. As an act of discipleship, as a discipline of faith, let us reclaim our identity as earth creatures.

Touch the earth; go walk barefoot on some grass.

Don't just eat some food today; taste it. And if you can taste something as it came from the ground, as it came out of the garden or out of the farm, without being cooked or spiced or modified, all the better.

Scoop up some dirt and stick your nose in it; smell it.

Maybe you can even listen to the earth. When you walk barefoot in the grass or go for a walk in one of the many parks around us, perhaps you can hear what this land has to tell you. Maybe it will tell you its story, its history.

And finally, look. Look with the curiosity of a toddler. Zoom in on a small patch of ground and notice all that's going on there. Zoom out and notice the landscape.

Using our senses in our environment and letting the witness of our sacred texts echo in our souls is, I think, one method of reclaiming our identity as earth creatures. And if our scriptures are right – that we are created in the image of God and out of the dust of the earth – then reclaiming our identity as earth creatures just may deepen our relationship with God. Amen.

³ Adam White, "If I Were Preaching," part of the *Grounded In Creation* worship series resources from Church Anew, emphasis added.

⁴ Heidi Ferris, "Eco-Faith Reflections," part of the *Grounded In Creation* worship series resources from Church Anew.