

Eating the Roots  
By Mike Anderson

My pastor in Austin, Texas hated sheep. I don't remember why, just that he hated sheep, which is pretty ironic for a pastor, in light of the many biblical allusions to sheep and shepherds. I remember one of Pastor Karli's sermons in which he described the relationship between shepherds and sheep. In addition to protecting the sheep from predators and the environment, shepherds also protect sheep from themselves. Unlike cows, which only eat the blades of grass, sheep tend to eat the roots. Once the roots are consumed, the grass no longer grows back, and both the plant and the animal's future is put in jeopardy. It is the shepherd's job to rotate the flock, before they overgraze the pasture.

This story came back to me in September of 2006 while on a retreat in West Virginia. I was sitting on the back porch one morning, pondering the grass lawn that had been carved out of the forest. Given the cabin's rural location near the Appalachian Trail, it seemed odd to have a grass lawn. I wondered how it was maintained and cut. There were plenty of deer in the area, and I wondered if perhaps the deer grazed on the grass. And while I pondered the eating habits of deer, I was reminded of the sheep in Pastor Karli's sermon. Those poor dumb sheep, not even smart enough to sustain their food source. It's a good thing they have people to look after them, to protect them from themselves.

Then self-assessment set in. I thought about all of the things us humans do to our environment: pollution, unsustainable agriculture, and reliance upon unsustainable energy sources. All of the things we do to undermine the earth's ability to sustain us. As the wind blew through the trees, I could imagine it was Jesus calling, the good shepherd, counseling, "Mike, stop eating the roots."

The evening before, a wasp flew into the cabin. Hyped up on nature's endorphins, we captured her and released her back outside rather than kill her. We had, after all, invaded her habitat. That morning, I thought back to the many times I killed bugs and insects out of convenience. If we disturb the ecological balance by killing off too many bees, wasps, and insects that pollinate our diminishing supply of trees and plants, are we not eating the roots? When we kill off coyotes, the urban rodent population explodes, exposing us to disease, are we eating the roots? I thought of my own behavior. Over the years, I have become so dependent upon air conditioning that I can't sleep when it's over 72 degrees. Rather than adapting or migrating to a cooler climate, I choose to eat the roots. When we turn on the television, every five minutes we see some new medical supplement, meant to make our lives better. Yet many times, this is not medicine curing us of a disease. We are turning medicine into a convenience. That overmedication is leading to resistant viral strains; strains that now show up in birds.

When we clear trees to build a house, not just the trees on the plot, but the trees which might get in the way of our dumpsters and trucks and make construction a little less convenient, are we eating the roots?

When we build 3,000, 4,000, even 6,000 sq ft homes, taking more energy to build, more energy to maintain, and more energy to furnish, are we eating the roots?

Every time I turn around, we are trying to shape and change the world to make it more convenient for us, and we are eating the roots. This is not to suggest that every new

technology is evil; certainly, we have made a lot of gains in sustaining life, but sometimes our steps forward don't seem to be forward at all. Sometimes, we get so focused on controlling the environment that we are disturbing the balance that sustains us. We spray pesticides on crops, then find out years later, the pesticides are poisonous to us too. And now we see news of bioengineered crops in our food supply. We hold cell phones inches from our brains without really understanding the impacts of the electromagnetic radiation. More kids have asthma. More adults develop diabetes. Evidently, we don't always understand or worry about the long-term effects of our lifestyles. Killing a bug or chopping down one tree is probably not going to hurt us, but eventually, as the dead bugs and trees pile up, the balance will be disturbed. Moving forward is fine, but who is listening to the shepherd, cautioning us about the roots?

I am certainly not qualified to stand before anyone as an example of a sustainable lifestyle. Many who read these words are far more environmentally conscious and conscientious than I. And if you're not, just reading shows that you are open-minded enough to learn and change. But people who are predisposed to care about the environment are those willing to read about the environment and are interested in listening to the evidence. One flock will not protect the roots if others follow along, licking their chops, waiting to eat what we leave behind. Protecting the roots that exist is not enough; we must reseed. We need to make the investment to start planting new roots. We have grown addicted to convenience. While we have diets to help us lose weight and nicotine patches to help us stop smoking, what do we have to help us overcome our addiction to convenience? How do we overcome this addiction to convenience?

I had to ask and pray about that question over a dozen times before the answer came. Grace and faith. People do not overcome this addiction. God helps us overcome this addiction. God appointed us as stewards of the earth, not so we could exploit the earth's resources for our own greed, but to protect it and keep it in balance and harmony. We need to look no farther than Christ's example to see the truth. Jesus consumed only what was needed. He had no house, McMansion or otherwise. He rejected outward signs of status or material wealth. Jesus teaches us to simplify, forsaking earthly wealth and comfort. "Take up the cross and follow-me." The shepherd leads us. If we have faith in God and listen to God's word, we will recognize the shepherd's voice. We will strive to lead a healthy, sustainable, and godly life. And though we will often fall short, God's grace will lift us up and renew us. And this is the beauty of the relationship between faith, grace, and the environment. We don't have to do everything, but we must do something.

It is beyond our human capability to do everything, but our faith moves us to do something. We must do something. In the tenth chapter of John, Jesus teaches us, *"...he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. "To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. "When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. . . Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. "All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. "He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf*

*coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. "He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."*

Many of us get discouraged and overwhelmed with the expansiveness of social injustice in the world. Genocide in Dhafur. Poverty throughout Africa. Children murdered in schools here in the US. And the ever-present racism, homophobia, and socioeconomic barriers. Sometimes, we even start to rank the things we care about, so that we can mete out sympathy. Caring for the environment need not replace the concern you have for people suffering. While our time and resources are limited, there is no reason we can't care about every issue that inspires us. And once we care about the environment, we find there are small, even convenient ways to help protect God's creation.

We don't have to do everything, just do something. It starts with caring enough to try. Reducing what we produce, use, and consume is the first goal. Next, look for opportunities to reuse what we do make. Finally, when reducing and reusing don't apply, try to recycle. These three principles apply to so many aspects of our lives if we just take the time to remember. Purchasing locally-produced goods reduces on the energy costs of transportation. Donating clothes to thrift stores promotes reusing goods. And recycling is becoming easier and more convenient every year. When making purchases among comparably priced items, select the one that is more environmentally-friendly to produce, package, ship, consume, and dispose of. That may be the recyclable egg-carton, the item with a lower shipping weight, or even the one that is less-likely to end up in a landfill. Participating in advocacy events and reading literature is in of itself, doing something. We don't have to do everything, just do something.

Doing something also includes telling other people. You can't have grass-roots activism without roots. You can't. It doesn't work. Someone with an environmentally unfriendly leaf blower will come along and scatter us. We've got to put down roots and seed new roots. Sharing, teaching, promoting. We don't have to tell everyone, just tell someone. Jesus calls us to be his shepherd-sheep. Helping other sheep to learn and grow closer to God. As we each find those easy but powerful steps in our personal lives, sharing those ideas will help others find those easy, convenient steps towards sustainability. We can overcome the myth that caring about the environment is expensive and cumbersome. This is the power of grass-roots activism. We are not alone in this cause. There are flocks all over this planet, looking for ways to protect the roots. The shepherd can help bring God's flocks together. And all of us shepherd-sheep can grow our pastures, expanding them until they join, bringing other sheep into our fold. We don't have to do everything, just do something. We don't have to tell everyone, just tell someone. We can make a difference.

The shepherd is calling us, telling us to stop eating the roots, leading us to new, greener pastures, and showing us a better way in our relationship with the earth and with God. But the shepherd has also recognized our human weaknesses. And that is the power of grace. We will not earn our way into heaven by buying indulgences, protecting the environment, trying not to sin, or evangelizing. We don't earn our way into heaven. Salvation is a gift, just as the earth itself is a gift. Yet if we have faith, we are driven to live up to God's will and recognize the shepherd's voice. We need to reexamine our own lives and help others grow. We may not be able to do everything, but we can do something.