

Thank you, Tammy. I think many of us can feel your words – the call of the woods, the mountains, the ocean, the desert. We share that deep visceral connection to our earth, because we are from it, a part of it.

Our worship theme this month is Care of the Earth, and our topic today is eco-action. Later in the service Janet deVries and Leanne Woodfill will be talking more about eco-action and sharing slides from their trip to Switzerland last year that illustrate what's possible when communities come together to care for the Earth. They will share ideas for what we can each do right now, even during this time of crisis and social distancing, and they'll ask for your ideas too.

But, you may ask, what good will these tiny little acts do? When our governments and our corporations have so much power and often seem to dismiss the exploitation and degradation of our earth as simply a necessary byproduct of economic progress? After all, they are just providing what people want, right? When we see our neighbors and friends give little concern to buying and throwing out massive amounts of plastic. When we see the trash pile up around Amoco Park. What good will our small acts do in the face of what seems to be at times an uncaring culture of unchecked consumption and waste?

Good question. For maybe a partial answer. I want to share a personal story. The title of this story is 55 Hundred Butts.

A few years ago on a sunny and brisk Saturday morning in May I helped with a highway clean up at the intersection of Wyoming Boulevard and the old Glenrock Highway. It was coincidentally my birthday. I started out with my bag on the north-east corner of that intersection. I was a little grumpy.... It had rained and the trash was sopping wet, and the mower had been through, so all the plastic cups and Styrofoam and plastic bags were shredded, much harder to pick up.

I could not believe the number of cigarette butts everywhere. Thousands of them. Disgusting! Should I try to pick all these up? No way, I shouldn't even try! I can't possibly pick all these up! It would take hours! These darn smokers! How can they be so thoughtless? They're not only damaging their bodies their damaging our earth? They should quit! They should have to pay fines for throwing their butts out! They could have started a fire! They should be here picking up these darn butts, not me! I was ticked!

There was one area right by the stop light where it looked like someone had dumped their entire ashtray, so I decided I would just pick up that small area. So I settled in, on the ground, and started picking up those butts. Many were squashed and I couldn't pick them up with my gloves on, so I took my gloves off. I tried sort of sweeping them into the bag, but that was picking up too many rocks and too much dirt, so I went back to picking up one butt at a time. I got the big pile picked up, but I just continued on. By that time, my initial anger and disgust dissipated, I grew calm, and I started reflecting. Who knew sitting on the ground along the Old Glenrock Highway with traffic roaring by, picking up cigarette butts would be such a reflective, almost meditative experience. Maybe it was because it was my birthday, and i was already in a reflective mood.

And I said to myself, Laura, remember, you were once a smoker. I started at the age of 16 when Corby Sanders, older sister of my good friend Karie, offered me that first cigarette, while we were dragging main in Worland WY. A Marlboro. I smoked for about 8 years. I didn't smoke a lot, I wasn't a two-pack a-day-er. But I enjoyed smoking most on long car trips. Driving across Wyoming to softball tournaments, to college, to my parent's house for a visit. And it hit me like a flash: How many butts did I throw out my car window during those eight years? I probably didn't think twice about it, and if I did, I

probably told myself “It’s just one little butt, and the world is a huge place. I’m just one of billions of people. What harm could this one little butt do?”

I realized in that moment that I wasn’t picking up the butts other people had thrown out their car windows: I was picking up the butts that my 20-year-old-self threw out, and it was about damn time. I was finally cleaning up my own mess, at least part of it.

And I felt ashamed: ashamed for the actions of my 20 year old self, but also ashamed for my self-righteous judgment of others earlier that very day.

So I continued picking up butts. My knuckles became raw from scraping on the rough sandy soil. I got sunburned, and my knees and back ached for days afterwards. A most memorable day: my fifty fifth birthday, on the 5th day of the 5th month, when I spent 5.5 hours picking up what seemed like 55 hundred butts.

My lesson from that birthday was that I needed to stop wasting time pointing fingers and judging others, and instead focus on the changes I can make in my own behaviors every day to honor my love for this earth. For sure, there is plenty of room for improvement! And, I can practice reflection, and I can acknowledge the paradoxes in our society and in my own life: we all benefit from the material goods we consume and throw out, we all use fossil fuels. I stopped buying bottled water many years ago, but I’m lucky that I don’t live in a place like Flint Michigan where it’s unsafe to drink the city water. I drive an eco-friendly Subaru made in a zero-waste factory, but I love taking trips to visit National Parks in my gas guzzling motorhome. You know, you can buy a bamboo toothbrush, but it costs 5 times as much a plastic one – not something we can all afford! Acknowledging the paradoxes in our society and our own lives can help us feel empathy for others, and empathy serves our world and feeds our spirits much more than judgment and condemnation.

Yes, grand global action is necessary, our governments and corporate leaders must collaborate on climate change and pollution and loss of habitat and species extinction. We can encourage and support and participate in all of that.

But also, I can practice self-reflection, and think of actions I can take to express my love for our sacred planet. Even in this time of fear and hardship and uncertainty, I can take time for study, and maybe think of some new habits I can adopt – how I can reduce what I consume, how can I reuse what I buy, and as a last resort, how can I recycle more? What sustainable life-style changes am I able to adopt to help clean up my own mess?

And the little voice says: It’s only one little butt, what harm will this do?

- My tiny little acts of harm degrade our world, and the excuses I tell myself while I’m doing them degrade my spirit.

And the little voice says: It’s only one little butt, what good will it do to pick it up?

- Not being able to do everything is not an excuse to do nothing. Each eco-action of spirit, no matter how small, helps heal our world and reflects our love for this beautiful earth.

What good can one person’s one small action do? All the good in the world.