

Caretakers

OF OURSELVES & OTHERS!



Session 4 – Teens

Caretakers of God's Creation

Consistory Office of Youth & Young Adult Ministry
Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA



Last month we discussed how we consume things in the world around us. We also discussed how this relates to fasting and being a better caretaker of creation. Do you remember anything else from last time we talked?

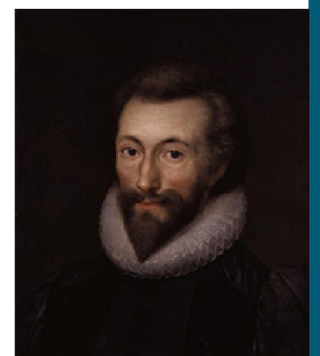


The most important, impressive and magical of all the things God created is us – people, human beings. We have the ability to do things which no other creature can: though hyenas may laugh, they don't seem to have a sense of humour. Though birds can sing, they don't compose operas. Unlike anything else in the universe we can think – not only that, we can think about thinking! As we read in the book of Genesis, man and woman are the crown of God's creation. So caring for creation means caring for each other, and for ourselves. Read Genesis 2: 4-25.

How special are we? On December 25th/January 7th we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord – Christmas. We believe that God Himself became a human being, just like us. Think of it – God identifies completely and totally with us, with you, and with me. So if God thinks this highly of us, we should certainly think just as highly of ourselves and others, and treat others, and ourselves, with dignity, respect, love, and compassion. Take a moment to ask them what they think about this. Ask them if they have ever heard, "Created in the image and likeness of God."



Caring for ourselves and each other is undoubtedly the most important way that we care for God's creation. And one of the most important needs that each and every one of us has is the need for community. The English poet John Donne famously said that "no man is an island." None of us is self-sufficient, we all need others, and this truth is part of our traditional Nativity and celebration.



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I'm sure many of you know about our traditional Ukrainian Christmas Eve Holy Supper (Свята Вечеря). One of the beautiful things we do is to leave an empty spot at the table to remind us of loved ones who aren't with us like our deceased family members as well as those who are away at school, for work, etc. The empty place is also there in case a stranger or hungry person comes to the door. It reminds us of those who have no one to share the joy of the holiday with, and that we should be ready to welcome them at our table. The empty place reminds us of what it is to be lonely; to miss the presence of a loved one; to have no one to share a celebration with.

We all are lonely at one time or another, but the fact that loneliness is common doesn't make it pleasant, and it can often lead us into temptation. When we're lonely it's easy to be drawn into various types of sinful and destructive behavior, or even just to waste time on social media, watching TV, or surfing the web.



Everyone needs love. The knowledge that I am loved is probably the most important piece of information that any human being has or needs (by the way, it's the central message of Christmas – God loves you). When we feel lonely it might be out of a longing to be with people we love, and people who love us. But it might be because we feel abandoned, ignored, or unloved.

The first step in combating loneliness is to be peaceful within ourselves. Many things can help us cultivate this inner peace such as prayer, active participation in the spiritual and social life of our parish, being involved in sports, being intellectually engaged, and actively ministering to the needs of others (e.g., volunteering for a social assistance agency, joining a service club, visiting the elderly and infirm, etc.).

After God, our greatest, deepest, and most fulfilling relationships will usually be with family members. Though we will definitely experience tension, conflict, and frustration in our families, a healthy relationship with family members is one of the best ways to maintain good mental and spiritual health.

Strong, loving relationships with close friends, friends we can depend on, friends who are true and trusted, is equally important. If you don't have any really good friends try to find one. If you know someone who doesn't have any friends, maybe you're the one they're waiting for. But make sure in either case that they are persons of quality. It doesn't matter what a person looks like on the outside – it's inner virtues like honesty, trustworthiness and faithfulness that matter most.

Being a caretaker of God's Creation means being caretakers of ourselves and the people around us. Loneliness is never pleasant for anyone. Weaving a net of healthy, supportive relationships is important for our spiritual and mental well-being, and for the well-being of the people around us.

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As we start the new year, check out the list below, and see if there isn't something you can begin to do which will help you or someone else be less lonely:

- Participate in group activities, like orchestras, choirs, sports teams, church youth groups, service organizations, etc.
- Cultivate healthy relationships with family members and friends. Each of us should have a trustworthy person we can talk to at any time about anything.
- Do you know anyone who struggles with loneliness? Try to get together with them face-to-face every now and then just to talk.
- Is there someone you know of who will be alone on Christmas? Invite them to your Holy Supper and to Church
- Elderly people often feel lonely. Try to visit elderly relatives, parish members, or nursing home residents just to sit and listen. You will bring great joy to their lives.

