



Story: Wangari Maathai: Tree Mother of Africa

PEACE AND JUSTICE

>> Lesson 4: Wangari Maathai

Eight point: By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who strive for peace and justice among all people.

Affirmation: I act with inner peace and fairness in all I do.

Getting to the Heart of the Lesson

Wangari Maathai — pronounced one-garry (rhymes with starry) ma-thy (old English ‘thy’) — was a well-educated scientist, women’s rights activist, government official, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. As a young girl, she loved and appreciated the beauty of her native Kenya and learned about the reverence for life from her mother. She lived through a complex and tumultuous time in Kenya’s history as it gained independence from British rule.

This lesson focuses on Wangari Maathai’s environmental endeavors because they are the most appropriate for children at this age to understand (planting trees, helping the environment, and making life better for others).

Teacher Reflection

Wangari always wanted to do her best. She used her intelligence, determination, and courage to solve whatever problems she or her country faced.

- Is there a problem that you’re facing? A situation that needs a solution? A person you know who needs help?
- Ask yourself what you can do and then take action to do it. It can be as simple as running an errand

for a friend or making a phone call for a coworker. It doesn’t matter what you do, just give it your best energy.

Wangari Maathai said that Heaven is green.

- What does Heaven look like in your mind?
- Do you feel a spiritual connection to trees or forests?

Quotations by Wangari Maathai

When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and seeds of hope.

I will be a hummingbird. I will do the best I can.

Young people, you are our hope and our future.

Go plant a tree. Know that an idea as small as a seed has the possibility to grow into the tallest of trees. Work together.

Surely the destruction of the environment is the destruction of God’s creation. This should be a major concern for the Christian faith and for others who share the same heritage of creation. But unfortunately, the way the Bible was translated, we decided we were put on Earth to exploit, to dominate, to subdue nature. We continue to do exactly that. But with the understanding we have now of the linkages between the environment, the way we govern ourselves and our resources, and the way we can live with each other in peace in this world, churches and the faithful should be in the forefront.

Bible Verses

John 8; 1-11

Jesus, however, went to the Mount of Olives. At daybreak he appeared again in the Temple, and all the people came

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to him. So he sat down and began to teach them. But the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery. After setting her before them, they told him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women to death. What do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have a charge against him. But Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in questioning him, he straightened up and told them, “Let the person among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Then he bent down again and continued writing on the ground. When they heard this, they went away one by one, beginning with the oldest, and he was left alone with the woman standing there. Then Jesus stood up and asked her, “Dear lady, where are your accusers? Hasn’t anyone condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she replied. Then Jesus said, “I don’t condemn you, either. Go home, and from now on don’t sin anymore.”

Psalm 23: 2-3

God makes me lie down in green pastures. God leads me beside still waters. God restores my soul.

Opening the Lesson

Welcome students to a circle and tell them, “Today we continue to discuss peace and justice. We are going to learn about a woman named Wangari Maathai who started the Green Belt Movement. Because of the Green Belt Movement, over 30 million trees have been planted all over the world! Wangari felt that by planting trees, she was also planting seeds of hope and peace.”

Hummingbird Movement Activity

Materials needed: red construction paper, blue construction paper, tape, scissors

1. Cut out red construction paper in the shape of long flames. The flames represent a forest fire — a problem. Place the flames against one wall.
2. Cut out blue construction paper into the shape of

drops of water. The drops represent the solution to a problem.

3. Create a “forest fire” by placing the flames on top of each other at one end of the room. The fire should be small enough that all of the drops can cover it.

Wangari Maathai often tells the story of a hummingbird helping to put out a forest fire. You can find Wangari herself telling the story with great enthusiasm online by Googling “hummingbird story wangari.”

Alternately, you can read aloud the following version:

One day a huge fire broke out in the forest. All of the animals, seeing the flames coming closer and closer, decided to save themselves. They rushed to the edge of the forest, feeling overwhelmed and helpless as they watched the fire spread throughout their forest home.

That is, all animals except one: a hummingbird, who said, “I’m going to do something about the fire!” She flew to the nearest stream, scooped up a drop of water in her beak, and deposited it on the blazing fire. Tirelessly, she flew back and forth from the stream to the fire. Each time she carried a single drop of water and let it fall on the flames.

The other animals watched her with disbelief. “You are too small,” they said. “You cannot hope to put out the fire. What do you think you’re doing?”

The little hummingbird scooped up another drop of water and said, “I’m doing the best I can.”

Tell children that they are going to become like the hummingbird in the story as they play a relay game. Explain that the object of the game is to cover the “forest fire” with “water drops.”

Divide the class into teams. Give each team a container of water drops. Just like the hummingbird in the story, one at a time, a child from each team will pick up a

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water drop and “fly” to the other side of the room and to put out the fire (cover it with water drops).

Explain that they will work together as a team and also as a class to put out the fire. As teams use up all of their water drops they can continue to flap their arms as they cheer for the other teams. If you are working with just one child or a small group, you can create the scene and then use a timer- or a song- and have the child try to cover the flames before the time is out. Tell the child that they are just like that single hummingbird, it might be hard, but they can do it!

Encourage each child to do their best as they rapidly flap their wings as fast as they can. (A real hummingbird may flap its wings as fast as 80 times a second.)

Notice the time when the relay begins and when it ends. You may want to use a stopwatch.

When the fire is put out, gather the children around and tell them how long it took to put out the fire. Remind them that they all worked together. Tell them how long it would have taken if they were doing it all by themselves. (Multiply the number of minutes by the number of children in the group.)

Explain that there is a Kenyan word for what they did. It is “harambee,” which means “let us all pull together.”

Building the Lesson

Read the story of Wangari Maathai’s life. You may want to refer to Wangari as Mama Miti because it’s easier to say. Mama Miti means “mother of trees.” She is also called the tree mother of Africa.

Discuss the questions at the end, and do the following art activity.

Art Activity: Growing Appreciation

Materials needed: tree branch, coffee can or similar-sized container, rocks, green construction paper, string

(Instead of using a tree branch, can, and rocks, you may use brown construction paper and poster board.)

1. Place a tree branch in a large can filled with rocks so that it stands up. Alternately, use brown construction paper to create a poster of the trunk and bare branches of a tree.
2. Cut out leaf shapes (one per child) from construction paper and use pieces of string for hanging “leaves.”
3. Remind children that Wangari appreciated the beauty of nature in her country—the wheat fields, sunsets, tadpoles, dark soil, rain, clouds, and sun. She especially loved the fig tree.
4. Ask children what they love about trees.
5. On a construction-paper leaf, have children draw a picture of something that lives on a tree or visits a tree, such as a caterpillar, beetle, squirrel, raccoon, monkey, sloth, woodpecker, bluebird, and so on. Alternately, they could draw a picture of a special place in nature they especially like.
6. When finished, children hang the leaves on a tree branch or tape them to the tree poster.

Closing the Lesson

Materials needed: large seed (such as a bean or sunflower seed), pot of soil (optional)

1. Gather the children together in a circle to share hopes and dreams.
2. Tell them that protecting the environment is a huge job. It can feel overwhelming for us to try to help. We might think, “I am just one person, how can I help?” The story of Wangari is an example of how one person can make a difference. Wangari was guided by her hopes and dreams to do what she felt was right.

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3. Show the children a large seed (such as a bean or sunflower seed). Holding the seed in your hand say, “This seed symbolizes hope. It’s very tiny; but with care, it will grow into a tall plant.”
4. Explain that you’ll pass the seed around the circle and each child can say one thing they hope for. Model the process by saying, “I plant seeds of hope. I hope for _____ (Complete the sentence with a hope you have, such as “clean water,” or “fresh air,” or “a clean park.”)
5. Pass the seed to the child next to you asking, “What do you hope for?” The child says, “I hope for _____.” Listen to all answers without making any value judgments.
6. Continue around the circle until the seed returns back to you. If you choose, you can then plant the seed in a pot of soil and let the children watch it grow.

Optional: The Four R’s Scavenger Hunt

Wangari strongly believed in the three Rs of Reuse, Reduce, and Recycle. And she added a fourth R: Repair, meaning to repair resources if necessary. She encouraged everyone to look around during daily life to see what needs doing. Then ask, “How can I help?”

If you have time, give children an opportunity to take action by going for a walk around the church grounds to pick up trash. Bring everything back to the classroom and sort into “recycle” and “not recycle” piles. (Be sure to have plastic gloves for all children to wear.)

Story: Wangari Maathai, Tree Mother of Africa

Wangari was just like the hummingbird — bit-by-bit she has done her best to help people and the environment.

Wangari Maathai was born in a beautiful valley in

Kenya, Africa. Her mud-walled, thatch-roofed house didn’t have any running water or electricity. She slept on a bed made from wooden planks topped with a mattress stuffed with leaves, ferns, and grass. The house was small, but it never felt crowded to Wangari because everyone was outside all day long.

Every morning Wangari went into the fields with her mother. She had her own little plot of land in the middle of her mother’s field where she planted sweet potatoes, beans, maize, and millet. Sometimes Wangari grew impatient waiting for the seeds to germinate, so she would lift them out of the ground to see how quickly they were growing. Her mother cautioned her not to remove the seeds, but to keep them covered. She said, “You have to let them do all this by themselves. Soon they will all come above the ground.” And to Wangari’s amazement, they did!

Wangari loved to go into the forest near her home. One of her favorite places was a wild fig tree. Hundreds of birds would fill the tree’s giant canopy when the figs were ripe. The fig tree was considered sacred by Wangari’s tribe. No one took any of its branches or cut the dense undergrowth that grew beneath it. Wangari’s mother called it the Tree of God.

Near the fig tree, water bubbled up out of the ground to form a little stream. Its fresh, cool water was delicious to drink. Arrowroot plants grew all along its banks. Their large, deep green, arching leaves created the perfect hideaway for Wangari. She would sit there for hours, lost in a fascinating natural world.

When Wangari went to school, she learned about the connection between the fig tree and the stream. “The fig trees roots burrowed deep into the ground, breaking through the rocks beneath the surface soil and diving into the underground water table. The water traveled up along the roots until it hit a depression or weak place in the ground and gushed out as a spring.” Wherever there were fig trees, there were usually fresh, clear streams nearby.

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Most village girls stayed at home and didn't go to school, but Wangari's mother decided that she should get an education. She sent her to a local school and then to a Catholic boarding school. The nuns who ran the school were like mothers to Wangari. They were nurturing, encouraging, and compassionate. Wangari often wondered why they would make sacrifices in their own lives to help strangers in a remote part of the world. She remained inspired by their service her whole life. From them Wangari learned that a woman could do anything she wanted to.

Wangari worked hard to be a good student. She loved science and went to college in the United States. But when she returned home to Kenya she was shocked to discover that many things had changed. Her sacred fig tree was cut down, as were most of the trees. Entire forests were gone. As Wangari talked with village women, they told her some of their problems:

- We don't have any clean water to drink. The springs are dry.
- We can't grow food for our families and our animals. Landslides have washed away the soil and the soil that is left is too poor.
- We can't cook our food because we don't have any firewood.

Wangari listened carefully. She believed the solution to the women's problems was to plant trees. As the trees grew, they would provide firewood, building materials, shade, and fruit. Trees would allow the rainwater to seep slowly into the ground to refill the underground reservoirs. Less water would rush down the barren hillsides and there would be fewer landslides.

Wangari didn't waste any time. She got together a group of women and they planted seven trees. Although she started out small, Wangari had a vision of what many women could do if they all worked together. She organized women all over Kenya to plant trees. Wangari told them that the earth needed "to wear a dress of green...When the soil is exposed it is crying out for help. It is naked and needs to be clothed

in its dress." Her small group grew into a worldwide organization called the Green Belt Movement. They've now planted over 30 million trees.

When the Kenyan women came together to plant trees, they told Wangari about the many problems in their communities. Even though it meant disagreeing with the government, Wangari spoke out about these problems and tried to find solutions. The government told her to stop, but she didn't. She stood up for what she knew was right. People in the government said cruel things about her, tried to hurt her, and even put her in jail.

Such hardships would have caused many people to give up, but not Wangari. She said, "Every person who has ever achieved anything has been knocked down many times. But all of them picked themselves up and kept going, and that is what I have always tried to do." Wangari was elected to the Kenyan government. She helped pass laws that improved life for all the people of Kenya. One day Wangari heard the news that she had earned one of the world's highest honors — the Nobel Peace Prize. To celebrate, she went outside and planted a tree.

Discussion Questions

1. Wangari had a special place in nature where she liked to go — the fig tree and stream. Do you have a special place in nature where you like to go?
2. What does it mean to do your best? How do you know when you're doing your best?
3. Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a house without electricity or running water?
4. What would you be willing to sacrifice to help people in need?
5. Trees are beautiful to look at, to be around, and to play under. But did you know that trees are also essential to our survival and well being? They are part of the circle of life. Without them

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river beds dry up, the air isn't clean, and animals can't survive. By planting trees, Wangari was also bringing health and wellbeing to the people she wanted to help.

6. Why do you think Wangari didn't give up helping people, even when others were mean to her?

Aspects of Wangari's life that are emphasized in this lesson include:

- Doing your best. She compared herself to the hummingbird in the story because she always tried to do her best, whether it was working in her garden as a child or organizing the Green Belt Movement in her country.
- Appreciating nature. Wangari loved Kenya's natural environment, and especially the wild fig tree.
- Finding solutions to problems. Wangari planted trees as a way to help women in Kenya.
- Standing up for what you believe is right. Wangari spoke up even when she was beaten and put into jail. She helped improve Kenya's natural environment and social conditions for people.

Background Information

Wangari was educated by Catholic nuns who inspired and encouraged her, and as an adult she drew spiritual inspiration from many sources — the Bible, Buddhism, the Qu'ran, and the environment. She said, "I would say I am a good student of Jesus Christ. I read the Bible and am inspired by it. I use it a lot in my environmental work. But I also listen to what the Buddhists tell us. I listen to what the Qu'ran tells us about God and life and values, about how we should relate to each other and the environment."

When Wangari saw her country being destroyed, both environmentally and socially, she knew she had to do something to help. Her genuine concern for

her country and her kinsmen spurred her to action. She mobilized women to take one simple action—to plant trees. Wangari used the Kenyan word *harambee* to describe the spirit of her tree-planting campaign. *Harambee* means "let us all pull together." Planting trees not only improved ecosystems, it brought people together. The result was the establishment of the Green Belt Movement, which has planted over 30 million trees in 12 countries. Today, the mission of the Green Belt Movement isn't just to plant trees. It's to use tree-planting as a way to mobilize community consciousness for self-determination, equity, improved livelihoods and security, and environmental conservation.

Wangari also fought for many social justice issues, including women's rights, fair treatment of prisoners, and reform in Kenya's corrupt government. She showed great courage as a woman in a male-dominated society, and she risked her life many times as she courageously stood up for herself, for others, for her country, for the environment, and for the world peace. She made many personal sacrifices to do what she thought was right.

In 2004, she received one of the world's highest awards — the Nobel Peace Prize. Wangari made history as the first African woman to receive the prize. She was also the first environmentalist to receive the famous award for promoting world peace. What is the connection between world peace and a healthy environment? The Nobel Committee put it this way, "Peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment." In addition to the peace prize, she won over 40 national and international awards.

Key Dates in Wangari's Life

- April 1, 1940: born in British Kenya
- 1960: Went to college in America
- 1977: Began Green Belt Movement
- 2002: Elected to Parliament
- 2004: Received Nobel Peace Prize
- September 25, 2011: Died at the age of 71; survived by her three children

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