

Sermon for Friends Congregational Church
“Our Neighbor Earth: A Sermon for the National Preach-in on Global Warming”
Delivered by Rev. Dr. Dan De Leon
Sunday, February 12, 2012
Mark 1:40-45

What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder. I say this during the Declaration of Marriage at every wedding ceremony I have the good fortune to officiate. Those are affirming words, they’re powerful words. What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder. But “What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder,” has to do with more than just the two people being united in marriage. It also has to do with that love that exists between all of us as neighbors.

We preachers spend every Sunday and every Wednesday and every day in between preaching and teaching and witnessing to the truth that all of us are bound one to another in the bond of Divine love, and that we are called to nurture and strengthen that love as an act of remembering—re-membering—the Body of Christ. (It gets back to that ministry of reconciliation and healing that we talked about last week.) We belong to each other. We need one another. What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder. We’re neighbors. We need to stick together!

But here’s something we preachers spend little to no time communicating—a simple question: Have you ever thought of the earth as your neighbor? And in the same spirit that we are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, do we appreciate the earth as something we are bound to?

Let’s ponder that together this morning: We have a neighborly and even symbiotic relationship with the whole of Creation. We are united in love with the expanse of God’s handiwork. The rivers and lakes and streams, the plants and flowers and trees, the birds of the air, the creatures of the deep, the creatures on the land, the soil and grass and rocks at our feet, the air around us and the air our lungs, we belong to each other. We need one another. We’re neighbors. We need to stick together! And with that truth washing over our souls like the ocean waves washing over the shore’s parched sands, we hear that old charge in a new way: “What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder.”

This morning I’m joined by over a thousand different faith leaders across the country preaching on the topic of environmental stewardship, or what I would call “ecojustice.” This sermon is a part of the National Preach-in on Global Warming. So, it’s encouraging to know that there are hundreds of other pastors and priests and rabbis and imams and teachers raising awareness about this topic in our respective houses of worship this weekend. But our messages are not meant to teach our congregations about the seriousness of global warming alone. Our messages are intended to link our understanding of environmental stewardship with our faith. Our messages are intended to link our ethics of being green with, in our case, our discipleship—our call to follow Jesus Christ. That sacred connection starts to happen when we realize that the earth, this planet, the Creation that God spun into being, is our most vital neighbor. It’s a sacred

relationship that we all share, and it's a relationship from which no one is permitted to tear anyone asunder.

It's fitting, in this respect, that this National Preach-in on Global Warming is an interfaith effort. Our interfaith sisters and brothers make this point that much clearer...

Linda Cutts is the Senior Dharma Teacher at Green Gulch Zen Center. She says that Buddhism sees everything as interconnected. She describes the universe as the Buddhaverse. The charge there is that we're supposed to treat the earth as a piece of who we are. It has strong resonance with our Christian virtue of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Being a good steward of the earth, then, isn't just an ethic, it's a spiritual mandate.

The same thing is true in Islam. Do you know what the word 'Muslim' means? Muslim means anyone or anything that surrenders to the will of God. M.A. Azeez is an imam at the Salam Center for the League of Associated Muslims. He explains that the ocean is a Muslim, because the ocean surrenders to the will of God and does what God created it to do all the time. A tree is a Muslim, because a tree surrenders to the will of God and does what God created it to do all the time. So, if a human being who identifies as a Muslim does harm to the ocean by polluting it or does harm to the tree by destroying it, that person is doing murderous harm to another Muslim, which is a grave crime. Being Muslim or being Buddhist carries with it the spiritual mandate of caring for the earth.

In our Judeo-Christian ethics, we have the same spiritual mandate. We who are made in the image of God at the beginning of all things, we have dominion over all of Creation according to Genesis 1:26. But having dominion doesn't mean that we exploit Creation or that we manipulate it for our own purposes, because dominion means stewardship of, love for, care for. God has dominion over us. So, having dominion over the Creation that God has entrusted to our care means that just like God cares for us so that we might be the best we can be in this life, we are called to care for the earth so that it can be the best it can be. As Rabbi Melanie Aron of Congregation Shir Hadash points out, "God said to Adam, 'This is the last world I shall make. Hold it in your hands. I place it in trust.'"

Given that this sermon has to do with global warming, a quick tidbit that all of us might not be aware of: Carbon emissions contribute to global warming by adding excessive carbon dioxide to our atmosphere and sealing in more and more heat. (After the service you might go online and discover how big your own carbon footprint is at earthlab.com.) Now, Reverend Sally Bingham is president and founder of Interfaith Power & Light. She serves as Canon for the Environment in the Episcopal Diocese of California, and she has good news to report about our carbon emissions. Rev. Bingham says that some congregations are setting examples for their community by putting solar panels on their roofs. In the last year, our church has been shifting our energy dependence to wind watts; another good example for our community. It's the new evangelism, people. Come on in! Rev. Bingham says that congregations are installing compact fluorescent light bulbs.

Wait 'til she sees our cloth napkins. Rev. Bingham reports that more and more congregants are driving more fuel efficient cars.

Now, I drive a Toyota Prius. Your Director of Music Ministries drives a Prius. If and when we ever hire an Associate Pastor for our growing congregation, I think that he or she should be required to drive a Prius, as well. We're setting an example here.

The Toyota Prius gets about 45 miles to the gallon. You can drive 45 miles on one gallon of gas. But here's the thing: Somehow, through marketing or perception, we believe that driving a Prius is good for the environment. It may be better for the environment than most cars and trucks, but it's not good for the environment. (It gets back to that Smartphone Spirituality stuff from last week, right? I have a Smartphone which enables me to do more things, so I should do more things. I have a Prius that gets better gas mileage, so I am free to drive more than I used to.) There's this book, the title of which is inappropriate for me to share from this pulpit, where it jokes about how if you see someone driving a Prius you can say, "Wow, it's great to see that you're doing something for the Earth," and that by saying this, you'll make the Prius driver feel great about themselves, and then they'll offer to give you a ride somewhere thinking that by giving you a ride somewhere they are saving the earth in the process.

Kelly Wellman shared an article with our Social Justice Class about this a few days ago. What's going on here is that technological advancements and innovative breakthroughs are equipping us with things, inventions, gadgets, resources that make us believe the same human behaviors we were doing before those things came along are now somehow good for the environment, good for the earth. "It's okay to drive places I could walk to; I've got a Prius. It's okay to leave every light in my house on 24 hours a day now; I use compact fluorescent bulbs."

Here's where our faith comes in again. Our faith is not something that we ascribe to because it's convenient for us. Christianity isn't meant to uphold our present behaviors and habits and choices. Christianity challenges our behaviors and habits and choices and by God's grace it holds us to the higher standard of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, including our neighbor known as the earth. Our faith, over time, changes us, transforms us so that we are less about finding ways to support the life we want and more about creating a life that sustains what everyone needs. That faith, that spiritual mandate, charges us to do more than buying more energy-efficient gadgets for the sake of ecojustice. That faith charges us to make serious choices, sacrificial choices, life-changing choices that serve to love our neighbor earth as we love ourselves. And when we make those kinds of choices that end up changing us and changing our habits and lifestyles, then our ministries and how we do church will naturally follow suit.

Scott Carlson wrote an article that appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that speaks to this. At Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict in Minnesota, students read a book by Anna Lappé called *Diet for a Hot Planet*. The book was about the vulnerabilities of the industrial food system and the threats posed by climate change. The solutions presented in the book were nothing new: buy fruits,

vegetables, and meats locally, and cook them at home. Simple, right? But nearly all of the students shared the same problem: they didn't know how to cook. Even the young, single adult T.A.'s in the group admitted that they lacked both the know-how and the motivation to cook.

Well, that's not just a Minnesota thing, and it's not just a college students thing either. So, what if this green church with its Earth Stewardship Covenant were to offer the ministry of a cooking class? It could foster community, it would give us a chance to get to know each other better, and it would be equipping us to be better stewards of the earth. It might seem quirky or even unorthodox at first, but it starts to make sense after a while, and it all starts with a choice.

A man with leprosy comes to Jesus and begged him on his knees saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus was filled with compassion, so he reached out his hand and touched the man saying, "I choose. Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left the man and he was cured.

Seems like a simple story. Jesus was compassionate. Why wouldn't he have healed this guy? But there's so much more going on here. The man had leprosy. It was a societal taboo, it was a cultural no no to come in contact with someone who had leprosy. The Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament dictated that if you saw someone with leprosy, you were required to yell out, "Unclean! Unclean!" and you were supposed to keep your distance. Don't touch. So, you see how much more is at play when the leper says, "If you choose, you can make me clean," and Jesus says, "I choose."

By touching the man with leprosy, Jesus violated the very holiness code that the people subscribed to in order to best understand God. By touching the unclean man, Jesus violated a societal taboo, which itself violated God's compassion. How ironic that in our doctrinal concept of the Incarnate Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, in the limited human form of God, used the extension of human touch to expand and increase the cosmic love of God. He didn't wait for some justification for his actions or some Divine epiphany that might tell him, "It's okay, really. Go ahead and touch him." Jesus just took compassion on the man because it was a good thing to do, and he made a choice to heal him.

Now, when I was baptized at the age of 14, I didn't know what I was doing. The main reason why I got baptized was because my little brother decided he wanted to be baptized, and I thought, "No way my little brother's getting baptized before me!" I really didn't have any concept of what I was doing. All I knew was it was a good thing for me to do, so I made that choice. I have spent the 23 years since the day I was baptized figuring out bit by bit, piece by piece, day by day, prayer by prayer, failure by failure, and lesson by lesson what it means to be a baptized into the Christian faith. It's a journey that has challenged me and strengthened me and humbled me and that has above all changed me. And I am thankful to the point of trembling for how much it has changed me.

The point I want to make is this: One sermon might not be enough to help us connect environmental stewardship with our faith. One series of classes, like the one our Social Justice Class is having right now on environmental stewardship, might not be enough to help us wrap our heads around our care for the earth being a spiritual mandate. One National Preach-in on Global Warming might not be enough to help us see the earth as our neighbor. But the earth with all its rising seas and droughts and crop disruptions and increased floods and polluted waters and smog-filled air is saying to us, "If you choose, you can make me clean. You who are the hands and feet of Christ in this world, if you choose, you can heal me." Making that kind of choice might violate societal norms or cultural norms or political taboos or even some religious taboos, but we are being called to choose, to choose to love our neighbor earth as we love ourselves. And, sisters and brothers, if we commit to that choice, then by God's grace the choice will challenge us and strengthen us and humble us and above all it will change us.

I'll leave you with this: A couple of months ago, Ecumenical News International reported that about 200 young people travelling in a caravan of buses left Nairobi on November 7th. Their group was promoting action on climate change. It was a two-week trip. Two weeks punctuated by music and dance and drama, and sponsored by faith-based groups and secular groups. The Climate Caravan ended in Durban, South Africa, at the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change conference called COP-17. Norwegian Church Aid was one of the supporting agencies for the caravan, and at their launch event, a Kenya coordinator named Paul Mbole said, "Climate change requires a justice response. We cannot afford to see it differently. It is not only an economic, but also a moral ethical issue. It needs a response that addresses the injustices it has caused so far."

Rev. Bingham says, "Global warming is the greatest moral issue of our time, because how we respond to it is going to define the future." Well, how will we choose to respond? How will we choose to respond to our neighbor earth, our sacred neighbor with whom we all have a relationship? What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder. Amen.