



Interfaith Power & Light

A Religious Response to Global Warming

Earth Sunday
The Rev. Sally G. Bingham
April 27, 2003
Grace Cathedral

In the name of God in whom we believe, but cannot see.

Ecology is religious. There, I have said it!! Everyone sit back, it's Earth Sunday. Ecological issues are religious issues and environmental issues are spiritual issues. Life is religious and one's spiritual life is dependent upon a relationship with the Creator and the Creation. Without them we have no life. All life is dependent upon the Creator in whom we live and move and have our being. Without one we will not have the other: Without a healthy ecological system we cannot live healthy lives.

In case any of you think that environmental issues don't belong in church. Think Again!! If you are here today because you have a deep faith in God and consider yourself a Christian, believe this. You are an environmentalist. You may not like that word because it carries baggage with it but we can repack the baggage to mean "a person who cares for others and their neighbor". If you don't want to be called an environmentalist because it sounds liberal, democratic and political then call it something else: call it stewardship of Creation, call it concern for the legacy we leave for future generations, call it being "mindful of your behavior". Call it "loving others as I have loved you". Remind yourselves that "in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and not one thing came into being that didn't come through the word". Jesus was there "in the beginning". All living things will be reconciled to God through Jesus, not just you, me and other humans. All things, all life. Everything that God created and called "good". As a Christian, you and I are called to be care takers of God's Creation. Care for Creation is central to Christology. It belongs right along side love, justice and peace. It is not ours to exploit and to use UP. It is for us to preserve, nurture and keep healthy for the next generations.

If you hadn't realized that your faith calls you to protect and love Creation, but are willing to at least entertain the idea, hold the thought and here is something else to think about. The environmental community is not doing a very good job protecting Creation. After thirty years

"The human race has only one, or perhaps two generations to rescue itself,"

Overuse of resources, pollution and destruction of natural areas continue to threaten life on the planet. Conditions continue to deteriorate rapidly, the report says. Although there are some hopeful signs in that technical solutions to the problems have been found and - where there is political will be adopted, in most cases nothing is being done. The state of the world's natural life support system is perhaps the most worrying indicator for the future, says the report. About 30% of the world's surviving forests are seriously fragmented or degraded, and they are being cut down at the rate of 50,000sq miles a year. Wetlands have been reduced by 50% over the last century. The 20th annual State of the World report

concludes with, “The longer that no remedial action is taken, the greater the degree of misery and biological impoverishment that humankind must be prepared to accept,”

So, in the future, from today on. it is going to be up to us, you and me and other communities of faith around this country to take a leadership role in the protection of our land, air and water and subsequently our health. If people of faith don't take on this role, how can we expect others to? It is our responsibility. Furthermore, I must remind you that our baptismal vows denounce forces of evil that destroy Creation. Our baptismal vows.

We may not think that we matter when the problems are not on our doorstep, but we do matter. Every one of us and every one of our behaviors matter. Our choices matter. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the coffee we drink the electricity we use and the cars we drive. These behaviors all affect someone else and many cases, these behaviors affect others adversely. Might we begin to live our lives in a way that shows our love for God? If we recognize God as the source and sustainer of everything, let's live that way.

God loves us and God loves the Creation, which was created to sustain us. Our role is to be in relationship with God in such a way that God, our Creator might know our love. We live for God, do we not! Listen to the lesson from the first letter of John. “If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

This relationship with God must strive to be a harmonious one. If we walk in the light with one another and with all living things we carry forth our faith. We must love the whooping crane and the forest for their own sake, not just for what they can do for us or what USE they are. Use, yes, but exploit and plunder, no! Sustainable use, conservation and sharing rather than greed and hoarding

We are destroying rainforests before we even know the value of what is there. Medicines and cures are being rapidly extinguished. And as my young friend in Japan asked me at a conference. “Why do you adults destroy things that you don't know how to bring back?” She said that she was raised not to take things apart if she didn't know how to put them back together.

Each of us has a working theology. Each of us has a place where we center (ourselves) on God; A place where God works through us. We live into that center. Some of our working theologies are in lesser-developed stages than others, but if we live lives for God we do things that are pleasing to God. We love each other and we can, and mostly do, demonstrate that love in many different ways. Some work with the homeless, some with the elderly and sick, some with children, some in prisons and some of us are just nice people who are kind to strangers, ushers here at the Cathedral, some feed the hungry. My working theology is to live and lead a life that demonstrates love of Creation. In this way, I show my love for God; I drive a small car, have compost in my back yard, and walk when I can, reduce purchases of things I don't really need, and conserve both energy and water. What is your working theology? Where in your daily life do you show God your love?

If you haven't found your niche, why not try showing God your love through living a sustainable live style. Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.” “Jn. 13:35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”)

People will you know us by the example we set.

Some of you may doubt the seriousness of environmental problems: the global warming, the spread of disease, toxins in the water and particulates in the air, the high and rising rates of cancer and asthma. There will always be doubting Thomases, but please don't be one. You can be one, but not about this issue. Don't wait until the wounds are at your door. You don't need to touch and feel what the Scientist know. Don't be afraid to believe them. The problems are real: more study and delay is only allowing things to get things worse. According to the National Academy of Science, over 90% of the world's accredited scientists agree that human activities are destroying creation. They don't call it Creation, for them it is the planet, the living organism that sustains all life.

For religious people the living organism that gives us life is the Creation that God called "good" and gave us dominion over. However, it is a very dangerous notion for us to think that meant we are the center of the universe. God created this world, and put us here to care for it, but we seem to be busy decreating. We have decreated almost everything that God gave us to care for.

There is almost no place in America that we might call pristine. When we go hiking in the mountains now or into a park to sit under a tree, you see coke cans or plastic bags. Trash covers our beaches, lies in the bottom of rivers and streams and once you see that bottle or can, the nature of nature is changed. At least for me. I go into the wild for peace, for communion with the Divine, for a reminder of my relationship with God and for quiet and to be alone. I can't find that anymore. There are snowmobiles racing through our national parks, airplanes and helicopters flying over, noise from cars and worst of all, trash.

All I need when I am out in nature to quickly ruin the communion is one plastic six pack holder on the trail or in the bottom of an otherwise clear stream. Humans are everywhere and seemingly determined to leave footprints.

Nature isn't the same as it used to be. Humans are creating and decreating. There is hardly a natural anything left. We humans have our influence everywhere and the most startling of all is the climate. We have influenced the climate. Fifty years ago no one would have thought that possible. Image, (pause) the insurance company can no longer claim the severe storms and falling trees are acts of God. You can tell them that there are no more acts of God. The storm damage is the result of human behavior. The increase in carbon dioxide that we have put into the atmosphere has upset the balance that God put into place and now the storms are far more severe and more frequent than ever before. We are influencing every aspect of what was once called the force of nature.

What this is leading up to is a question, if we destroy nature, what are we doing to our relationship with God? What does it mean, when God is no longer in charge, but we are? Genetically engineering plants and cloning animals, changing the climate, killing vast numbers of species that were sacred with their own intrinsic right to life? Bill McKibbin, a writer and naturalist, asks the question: "Have we become God's equal in terms of what happens in the natural world or is there an natural world anymore?"

I struggle with these issues and I have no answers only questions, but it scares me because I am a great fan of the theologian Paul Tillich who said the answers are in the questions.

What are we to do? Well, for starters, don't doubt the seriousness of the ecological issues and the condition of the planet. Believe the scientists. Then let's start to live lives that demonstrate love for one

another and love for God. We can do that by shifting what is in our own self-interest. If, instead of the bigger is better, more is better attitude, we can open our hearts to recognize the truth which is that more and bigger are not always better, but rather destructive and harmful even to the owner. If we are going to look after ourselves which most people seek to do, understand that it is in our own interest to become conservationist.

It is most probably love that will transform us. If we can learn to love the natural world, we will protect it and if we love one another we will want future generations to share the bounty that we have had during our time here..

I will interrupt myself for a moment to describe thirty minutes of my Friday afternoon. I left my office about six and went down to Crissy Field. It had just stopped raining, but the sky to the north was still stormy, to the east the sun was out. The normally calm beach was being hit with medium size waves and the sound was wonderful. A large blue heron was standing like a statue in the lagoon. I walked along and took in all the amazing beauty around San Francisco. We are so blessed to live here. Our Presidio still has foxes and at least one coyote. I felt guilty taking in all the natural beauty that so few people get to see much less live in the midst of. We can ski, four hours away, surf, swim, bike on trails, hike within minutes of our homes and all in such splendor. As I thought about what I would say to you today, it occurred to me that I should have rented a couple of buses and taken you all to a beautiful natural place and just asked you to love it and appreciate it. We don't harm what we love. If our hearts can be transformed to love what God has given us, we will become caretakers of the earth. Become environmentalist. We will want to protect our air, land and water and we will become informed as to how to do that.

So let's bring our religious lives, our faith, and the natural world together into a working theology. Make the connection between ecology and faith and become a steward of creation, a good neighbor, a person who cares about the legacy we leave for the next generations, and, without shame, become an environmentalist. Amen