

What Do You Love?

A Sermon for Earth Day

April 19, 2015

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Hymns: We Are Keepers of the Earth (Joyce Poley, insert); 163, For the Earth Forever Turning; 298, Wake Now, My Senses.

Choir: i thank You God (e. e. cummings)

Testimonies: (Climate Ribbon project): What do you love and hope not to lose to climate chaos?

Shared Offering: Supporting UU Justice Ministry of California

Reading:

When I Am Among the Trees by Mary Oliver

When I am among the trees, especially the willows and the honey locust, equally the beech, the oaks and the pines, they give off such hints of gladness. I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself, in which I have goodness, and discernment, and never hurry through the world but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves and call out, "Stay awhile." The light flows from their branches. And they call again, "It's simple," they say, "and you too have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine."

Sermon:

At an international conference in 1969, a peace activist called for a day to honor human peace around the Earth, calling it Earth Day. In 1970, Earth Day was founded in this country by a Senator from Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson.

Nelson intended for the 22nd of April to be a day of learning, a national teach-in. In major cities, 20 million people made peaceable protests out in the sunshine, calling for changed habits and new laws. That spirit of activism led Congress and

President Nixon to found the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. It led to the banning of leaded gasoline, cleanup of lakes and rivers, widespread adoption of recycling programs, and incentives for solar power.

Unfortunately, that spirit did not end our American addiction to gasoline, which remains relatively cheap at the pump and deadly expensive where it's extracted from the ground.

The United Nations adopted Earth Day, calling it International Mother Earth Day in 2009. In countries around the world, over 200 million people showed up to protest for the planet. Millions are still showing up to show their environmental concerns.

Over the 45 years since that first Earth Day in 1970, shared human effort and the grace of Mother Earth have preserved many wild areas, waterways and coastlines, have restored much devastation, and brought new life. Yet now, our protected places are *all* in peril; everyone is in peril, due to global climate change.

Yale University professor James Gustave Speth has been an environmentalist leader, an advisor to presidents, and a chief of the United Nations Development Program. In his book *Red Sky at Morning*, Speth says: what used to be localized environmental problems have been overtaken "on a frightening scale" by global ones, by rapid and interconnected crises, such as the "devastation of ocean fisheries, deforestation in the tropics, loss of species, land deterioration" and climate change.¹ Although human activity set these trends in motion, now we can't reverse all their effects. We can't even predict the full extent of the damage to come.

I don't know about you, but news like this calls to mind ancient religious terms like *desolation*, *dread*, *lamentation*, and *sin*. It brings up concepts like confession, repentance, and asking for mercy.

Such words do seem to fit. But so do ancient religious words like *faith*, *courage*, and *love*. While it may not be clear whether humanity can very much reduce the harm we have set in motion, we clearly cannot succeed without faith, courage and love.

But how to put these values into action that matters? What can you do, what can I do, as just one person? I like to *think* I'm shrinking my carbon footprint. I've reduced the number of times a week

I eat meat and fish, and I use the sustainable seafood guide when I'm shopping. I try to save energy and water. I have an in-ground sprinkler system in my yard, and am pretty sure it's now OFF. But the lawn is still green, so I mow it with an electric mower, not a mower with a dirty two-stroke engine. And surely it helps that in my procrastination, I don't get it mowed that often.

When I turn on the shower in my bathroom, it takes awhile for the water to get hot, so I collect the cold water in a bucket. I use those two or three gallons to flush the toilet and water my plants. This effort is my penance for all the water I wasted as a teenager, taking long showers.

In the Midwest, a retired minister friend of mine tries to live as close to the land as possible. Rather old fashioned, he has used a fountain pen to write calligraphy note cards to place on his toilet tanks, advising guests to save water: "If it's brown, flush it down. If it's yellow, let it mellow."

Thanks to our State smog testing standards, my old car needed a new catalytic converter. Costly, but it's an improvement. In many places, including at the church, if I spy a bottle or can that should be in the recycling bin, I can't resist relocating it. I send emails to government and corporate leaders. I vote and speak up. But does any of this really matter?

Given the global scope of the crisis, do our choices make a difference?

I heard one answer last week from the Reverend Lindi Ramsden, a Unitarian Universalist colleague who knows about water policy in California. "Thirsty for Justice" is the name of the film she co-produced about the recent struggle for safe, clean and affordable water through the enactment of our Human Right to Water Act. Even though agriculture and industry use many more times the water than households do, Lindi says, our individual conservation does matter.

In some watersheds, in some areas of the state, fresh water is so scarce that avoiding waste is imperative. In any case, however, the act of conserving water gives us a tangible awareness of the issues of drought and resource limits. Conserving can give us a felt relationship with people now suffering with a lack of safe water. It can give us a taste of solidarity, even of sacrifice.

James G. Speth, the Yale professor, writes: when governments refuse to take actions for environmental sustainability, when nations as a whole fail to lead, then voluntary actions by individual consumers, families, businesses and other organizations are crucial. Yet he calls for more. As a former United Nations official, he says that solutions do exist, but success lies in cooperation among nations and a better show of leadership by this country among the nations.²

Tim DeChristopher calls for a moral, political and social revolution. He is a Unitarian Universalist seminary student right now, and a climate justice activist. DeChristopher has served time in prison for the civil disobedience he waged at an oil and gas auction of the federal Bureau of Land Management. He finds fault with all the attention we give to consumer habits for saving the planet.³

It's not enough to focus merely on consumer choices, and it's narrow. He puts it this way: "The mantra of 'vote with your dollars' means that those without many votes, [without many dollars] don't matter very much." And whether you have money to spend or not, all of us have a claim on the struggle for a sustainable planet.

"We are more than consumers," DeChristopher notes. Reducing us all to the identity of consumers is a large part of how we brought the natural world to this perilous point. We're paying a high price now for a century of convenience, consumer comforts, and inexpensive resources. What we need instead is to enlarge our sense of identity, claim our place in the human family and the family of creation. Everyone has a voice in the decisions that shape the future of life on this earth.

Thinking globally, James Speth urges countries to agree to work less at pursuing material growth and to cooperate more on protecting and "enjoying the nonmaterial things that peace, economic security, education, freedom and environmental quality can make possible."

Speth asks: "Can a country make a decision that **enough is enough**? Or is our ... system so geared to high economic growth that it is either up, up and away or down, down and out?"⁴

DeChristopher says we must be “willing to engage in a real struggle,” a political and moral one, one that will “demand real sacrifices.” To mitigate our human effects on climate change, he says what we must do is **not extract more fossil fuel reserves**. Leave most of them in the ground. Leave behind our dependence on them as soon as we can.

He admits that “keeping most fossil fuel reserves in the ground” will threaten the expected future profits of some of the “richest and most politically powerful corporations in the world.” Pursuit of such a goal calls for courage. He says that fossil fuel industries have a long history of trading human lives for profit. DeChristopher’s home state of West Virginia, for one example, “has been extracting fossil fuels longer than anywhere else in this country,” at the cost of countless lives, and the at the cost of leaving West Virginia, statistically, “as the least livable [state] in the nation.”⁵

From Ecuador to Africa, he notes, the mineral and energy-extraction industries have destroyed communities. They have bribed greedy officials and assassinated human rights and environmental activists. They won’t give up their power or their source of wealth without a fight. Hence, the rest of us cannot give up the health of later generations without a fight, a nonviolent fight/ but a risky one nevertheless. For this we need courage.

As the freed slave and American abolitionist writer Frederick Douglass wrote a century and a half ago: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them.”⁶

The stakes in the climate crisis are high and the odds are long. This is where faith comes in.

It is worth recalling that generations of slaves and abolitionists envisioned a day of liberation, but did not live to see it. Generations of African Americans prayed and struggled for real freedom and civil rights, but while on that long journey, many have passed away, some of them dying by violent repression. In the nineteenth century women’s equality activists called for voting rights which they would not live to see enacted.

This is why faith matters in the struggle toward a sustainable way of living on this earth.

DeChristopher says: “The movements that persevere are those which find a form of hope, a reason to continue the struggle, even in dark times.” “[That] it what it means to be faithful to the people we love, to be faithful to the world we love, and to be faithful to a God who loves the world.”

The predictions for life on this planet are so unsettling. The forces of denial and greed are strong. It’s tempting to join in the denial, tempting to stay inside and avoid the hard work.

I’d like to retreat. I feel like hiding in my home, hiding under the comforter and under the comforts of our national consumer culture/ and stop thinking of a world at risk. Perhaps you feel like that sometimes.

But I suspect that feeling, impulse, or temptation is not the same feeling that drew any of you here this morning.

We didn’t come here to hide from our mutual dependence but instead to deepen and celebrate our sense of connection. We came here for love. What has drawn us here is the deeper truth of connection and care. What calls people out into the streets and the sunshine on Earth Day is love. The love of life and the world, the love of people we know, and love for future generations of human beings and other species on this earth.

This Earth Day, this is the question: What do you love?

On any day when it’s hard to get out of bed, hard to bring your best self to the world, this is the question: What do you love and not want to lose? What do you love and want to multiply in your life and in this world?

In these times, of course, it can be hard to have optimism. Yet, as the seminarian Tim DeChristopher says: “We are not called to be optimistic; we are called to be faithful to our love.”

I’ve been wondering: If the climate scientists who study the situation feel as bleak as their predictions can make me feel, do they feel a temptation to give up?

If their urgings are ignored by government leaders, ignored by energy companies and investment managers, and ignored by consumers here and abroad, do they want to give up?

Maybe they do sometimes, but they keep going, keep studying, talking, writing, speaking out and urging us all. I wonder what keeps them going?

Maybe it's love. Maybe it's love and gratitude and wonder. DeChristopher says: "As much as we need to ... recognize the harsh truth ... of our challenge, we must just as fully affirm/ with gratitude/ the goodness and beauty we love in the world."

On this Earth Sunday, and on International Mother Earth Day this coming Wednesday, and on every day, let us remember to remember to ask: What do you love?

Let us commit to open our hearts again and again for all that we love and value.

Let us keep the faith. Let us find courage in our gratitude and wonder for this precious life, this precious world, this precious earth.

Let us open our hearts to life's deeper truths of connection and care. Let us commit to share the love and courage we all need, to share the love and courage that surround us, shine within us, and abide with us, day after day. Amen.

New Haven, 2004: Nota Bene/ Yale University Press, p.192.

⁵ He cites a 2012 Gallup poll measuring 13 metrics to determine which states will be the best places to live in the future.

⁶ Frederick Douglass. "The Limits of Tyrants," in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston, 1993: UUA, #579.

¹ James Gustave Speth. *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*. New Haven, 2004: Nota Bene/ Yale University Press, p. xi

² James Gustave Speth. *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*. New Haven, 2004: Nota Bene/ Yale University Press, p. xii.

³ Tim DeChristopher, "This Activist Went to Prison for the Climate. Now He Wants Churches to Take Moral Leadership," originally published in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, republished at *Yes! Magazine*, March 27, 2015, accessed at <http://www.yesmagazine.org/planet/this-activist-went-to-prison-for-the-climate-now-he-wants-churches-to-take-moral-leadership>

⁴ James Gustave Speth. *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*.