

"We Are Stewards of the Earth"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
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From Meltdown by, Bill McKibben

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We need a movement to combat climate change, we need it fast, and we need it to involve as many churches as possible. ... How's that for a blunt and artless beginning? But that's the point. The time is so short, and the task so large, that eloquence seems almost frivolous.

The bottom line: we have much less time to act than we thought, and that action has to be dramatic. James Hansen is the country's foremost climatologist, a man who will doubtless win the Nobel Prize for his decades as a NASA researcher running the most powerful computer model of the climate, and he said last year that we have a decade to reverse the flow of carbon into the atmosphere or else we will live – his words – on a "totally different planet." There's enough theology in that phrase for a month of sermons, but let me concentrate on the politics. It means that the changes we make in our homes and churches as individuals and congregations, vital as they are, can't deliver the speed or magnitude of change that will slow climate change. It means that we need to change light bulbs – but we also need to change laws. It means that Washington, after two decades of very successful bipartisan effort to do nothing, needs to spin on a dime.

We don't lack for science or engineering, nor indeed for economic mechanisms to make a transition more efficient, or policy proposals to guide our work. What we lack is simply political will.

"Looming Climate Catastrophe: Extinction in Nine Years?"

That is the headline of the article that I decide to read just before going to sleep. No Sleepytime Tea for me. No. I end the long day with news of the Earth's and in turn humanity's certain demise. The article begins:

Reports from the Arctic are getting pretty grim. The latest, from a blog called Arctic News, warns that by 2026 — that's just nine years from now

— warming above the Arctic Circle could be so extreme that a massively disrupted and weakened jet stream could lead to global temperature rises so severe that a massive extinction event, including humans, could result. David Lindorf in “Counterpunch”, February 10, 2017

Pleasant dreams!

As we do every year, come April we will celebrate Earth Day at All Souls. But as our ministry theme this month is Stewardship, I thought that Stewardship of the Earth would be a good topic not knowing then what this past week would bring: the confirmation of a climate change denier as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency. To remind, these are the folks who tend to the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. Apparently, he'll be serving the EPA only through December of 2018 if the bill HR 861 is passed into law. The bill in its entirety says this:

The Environmental Protection Agency shall terminate on December 31, 2018.

The bill was introduced by Florida Republican Matt Gaetz and co-sponsored by representatives from Kentucky, Mississippi, and Georgia. As one writer said, the bill

doesn't bother with anything like wondering what happens to the data the agency collects, or the enforcement the agency carries out. It doesn't sweat the details of employees or contracts. There's nothing about what happens to the Clean Air Act, or the Clean Water Act, or the Endangered Species Act, or ... anything at all. Just 'terminated.' Mark Sumner in the “Daily Kos” February 15, 2017

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/861>

Sadly, this sermon's timing couldn't be better because politically, things couldn't be worse for the environment. Now, when I preach I try very hard, even with difficult topics, to move toward a more hopeful place because that's what being a person faith is about: keeping hope kindled. That's particularly challenging this week as we are likely feeling like we're up the soon-to-be-horribly-polluted creek. So what's a faithful person, what's a faith community to do?

First, we are reminded that the grim news is hardly new. Ten years ago, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

issued an equally grim report that warned that if steps weren't taken quickly to reduce human-made emissions, a third of the world's plant and animal species could become extinct by the end of the century. The report warned that rising seas could threaten some of the world's busiest seaports, including Boston and New York. Soon thereafter The Day published an editorial that stated that "The government must follow through with an aggressive clean-energy campaign that engages the public. The American public has demonstrated in the past its willingness to make sacrifices for important causes, and with the right leadership, it can and must do so again."

There are certainly many people and institutions who have been convinced of the urgency of the situation. And so those people - meaning you and me - and those institutions - meaning All Souls, for one - must work harder than ever to do more than we ever thought possible.

I've said that quite a few times from this pulpit over the past two months.

Bill McKibben says,

It means that the changes we make in our homes and churches as individuals and congregations, vital as they are, can't deliver the speed or magnitude of change that will slow climate change. It means that we need to change light bulbs - but we also need to change laws. It means that Washington, after two decades of very successful bipartisan effort to do nothing, needs to spin on a dime.

We have absolutely no indication that there will be any dime spinning any time soon. And so our resolve must be greater than ever.

Let's pause here for a moment. This would be a good time to talk about faith communities and politics because mixing the two is not going to go away nor has there ever been a time when faith communities have not commented on politics in pursuing their / our moral vision for our country. It's just that faith communities dramatically differ in their interpretations of what constitutes "moral". And we likely differ as dramatically in our interpretations of what constitutes "political".

Politics is "the practice or profession of conducting political affairs" says dictionary.com. The Unitarian Universalist Association posts a monograph called "The Real Rules: Congregations and the IRS Guidelines On

Advocacy, Lobbying, and Elections". I hope that the opening paragraph will put to rest whatever concerns you may have:

Religious individuals and groups have played a prophetic role in public life throughout history by calling attention to oppression, demanding change, and holding leaders and institutions accountable for their actions and policies. While this is still true in the United States today, too many people are under the false impression that religious organizations cannot have a voice in the public policy arena as a result of the Constitutional separation of church and state or Internal Revenue Service (IRS) regulations. In reality, there are many activities that any religious group can do without jeopardizing its nonprofit tax-exempt status. There are restrictions on certain kinds of political actions, but the range of what is acceptable is wide enough to exhaust the time and resources of any congregation without crossing any regulatory lines. Rob Keithan, November 2016

We've not crossed regulatory lines here at All Souls. But crossing regulatory lines is not really where most of the tension lies. The tension lies when our words and actions become more about the civic and less about the spiritual, the meaning making. This tension is what we need to tend to and be mindful of. Tom Schade spoke about this tension, if indirectly, when he preached here in January. He reminded us of our 7 principles pointing out that these principles outline our vision of the world as it should be: just, fair, equitable, honoring the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interdependent web of which we are a part. What stands between the world as it is and the world we covenant to create together is one thing only: oppression. And to dismantle all sorts of oppressions one must engage with the systems that have the power either to dismantle or conserve those systems. One must engage in the "practice ... of conducting political affairs." Politics.

So as Unitarian Universalists have done for generations, All Souls will continue to engage in the effort to dismantle oppression so that our vision of a world with a moral center in which all people are honored for their inherent worth and dignity may not only be realized but will thrive.

And undoubtedly, mistakes will be made. We may land too heavily on the civic without enough emphasis on or connection to the spiritual but we'll learn from that. Perhaps some Souls wondered about reading from Coretta Scott King's letter to Strom Thurmond last week. After the fact, I too wondered. I didn't wonder if I'd violated any regulations in choosing

to use that reading as an example of Agape. I did wonder if by doing so I landed too heavily on the civic and too lightly on the spiritual.

That's the struggle, Friends. Not whether or not All Souls will lose our non-profit tax status if we have a postcard-writing event that criticizes the government or from this pulpit there is railing against the state of our democracy and threatened freedoms. We're committed to doing exactly that by our principles.

So, there's that. End of pause.

And now, as our 7th principle is so deeply compromised, let's consider how faith communities may respond.

Bill McKibben has been thinking and writing about climate change since 1989. The man is serious. He is the one who got going the Step it Up campaign that took place in over 1000 communities throughout the country several years ago. You remember this effort as a few local congregations took part. The campaign was launched in order to nudge Congress to do something quickly, something concrete to decrease carbon emissions. Faith communities displayed and then took photographs of banners that said, "Step it up, Congress: cut carbon by 80% by 2050. Your move!"

In writing about the Step it Up rallies McKibben indicated that they would be taking place in town parks, League of Women Voters meetings, City Hall plazas. And on church steps. "Why church steps?" he asks. "Because, to put it crudely, politicians pay attention to people on church steps."

Let's consider McKibben's strategy in light of our Unitarian Universalist commitment to the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. What is the religious response to the matter of environmental justice? Why should we be at the forefront of this movement and on the church steps?

- 1) If you care about social justice, he reasons, this is the biggest battle we've ever faced.
- 2) If you care about ... creation, then get to work.
- 3) If you care about the future – about 10,000 generations yet unborn – then this is your cause.

4) If you care about the selfish individualism that has come to define too much of our culture, then this is the chance to act. ... This movement ... will force us to answer deep questions about what [the] good life is. Eighty percent less fossil fuel use means a different America by mid-century – perhaps one where people depend more on their neighbors than they do now. The church – which can still posit some goal for human life other than accumulation – must be involved in the search for what comes next.

To McKibben's thoughts I add the following:

We've bought the right light bulbs, we recycle faithfully, and many of us have tried to decrease our imprint on the Earth in a whole host of ways. But it's not enough. In this political climate that is hostile to the environment's good health, we need to be more creative in order to be more effective. And we're in good position to be so creative. Consider this:

In general, UUs are deeply committed to justice work that involves people of all faiths. We get excited about interfaith-based organizing the most recent example is our involvement with Start Fresh, the refugee resettlement effort. Working relationships and friendships have been forged across denominational lines. And as a wide range of faith traditions are involved in environmental justice we are well-positioned to partner with other local faith communities in this effort. How about we capitalize on that already in place partnership and suggest that some effort be directed to environmental justice?

And let's do some work within our walls. Through a great deal of work by a few leaders: Lee Boltz, Tracey Rose, Jonathan Harger and many others who contributed time and effort, in 2009 All Souls was named a "Green Sanctuary" congregation. This would be a good time to revisit the commitments that got us that distinction. Perhaps you'd like to help revive All Souls' Green Sanctuary working team and move us toward greater responsibility in our carbon footprint. If so, let me know.

And as individuals, we can push back on the effort to eliminate the EPA. In all of your efforts this week, perhaps you may include contacting your House representatives this week to tell them that because you believe in the interdependent web of all existence you insist that HR 861 be blocked from becoming law and that the Environmental Protection Agency plays an essential part as a steward of the Earth.

These and indeed, all of our efforts reflect our religious imperative to work on behalf of and in solidarity with the natural world.

I recently quoted St. Francis, a man we typically envision standing beside a birdbath conversing with a flock of birds. He's the saint that Christians, and Catholics in particular, often associate with the environmental justice movement. Lovely and poetic as that image is, St. Francis was a tough cookie. You start a new and radical religious order; devote yourself to the poor; cast off all your possessions and ask that others do the same and we'd can assume this man was as steely as he was gentle and kind.

We must call up that same brand of resolve. Gentle. Kind. Steely. Our world, the Earth we share with our kin everywhere, is depending on such resolve.

There's plenty to do. And you know what? When you're actually doing something, you're less likely to feel hopeless.

We are Stewards of the Earth. Our Mother Earth, Brother Sun, Sister Moon lie in wait for our support and love.

Take heart, Friends. And let's take that heart to the church steps.

Blessed be. Amen.

For more information on the religious response to environmental justice:

UU Ministry for the Earth: uuministryforearth.org

The Interreligious Eco Justice Network: irejn.org