

“Economy & Ecology—Honoring the Logic of the House”

*A Sermon for IPL’s “National Preach-In on Global Warming”
and upon the public announcement of our church’s decision to divest
from fossil fuel holdings*

Rev. Dwight Davidson, The United Church of Granville, Feb. 15, 2015

“Listen to God’s accusation, O people! No one is left who keeps our agreement.
Cruelty and deceit, violence and theft rule the day.
And so your land is a desert, says Adonai. Every living creature is dying—
People and wild animals, birds of the air; even the fish of the sea.”
- adapted from Hosea 4:1-3

Today’s scripture reading is a undeniably “a downer.” But isn’t it interesting that this text, written thousands of years ago, rings so true to modern ears? Could ancient people even have imagined what damage human beings would one day be able to wreak upon our planet? Could they have imagined nuclear weaponry? Mass extinctions? Environmental collapse? I’m not sure they could have—which makes today’s Hosea passage all the more intriguing to us. There is a wisdom here.

It’s interesting to me that the words “ecology” and “economy” have the same Greek root—*oikos*, meaning “dwelling place.” Literally translated, “ecology” refers to the “logic of our dwelling place”—*the logic of the house*—the science and study of how it’s *structured*. “Economy” contains that same root—*oikos*—“dwelling place”—and refers to “household management.”

So let me give you a real life example of how these two words might interrelate. I have a house with southern exposure. My house also has a lot of windows on that southern side. The *ecology* or “logic” of my house would seem to suggest it wouldn’t be wise to put a chest freezer beneath those windows. Why would that be so? Because, as we all know, that freezer would get very hot under those windows. Very literally, that would be an “uneconomical” decision—it would be a demonstration of mismanagement of my “*oikos*” and that poor decision would reflect that I didn’t understand the logic, or ecology, of my home.

The same applies with our planet. It has a *sacred logic*—an ecology. And Archbishop Rowan Williams of the world Anglican community rightly says, “economy and ecology cannot be separated... To seek to have an economy without ecology is to try to manage an environment with no knowledge or concern about how it works *in itself*—to try to formulate laws in abstraction from or ignorance of the laws of nature.”

We at the United Church of Granville believe this is what's happening today—we live in an economy driven by profit motive, not in an economy informed by the laws of nature. And this has been a long time in the making. Recently, we had an energy audit done on this building, and we found that the architect of our soaring sanctuary, L.B. Valk, designed this structure in the 1880s to ventilate—he designed it, very literally, to breathe. The turret atop our sanctuary roof is actually a ventilation mechanism, which was designed not only to evacuate the original gas light vapors from the building, but also—in the summertime, to naturally cool the space, drawing the cold air from the basement via a chimney effect.

Over the years, congregations with buildings like ours have forgotten this wisdom and have resorted to artificially cooling their sanctuaries—cooling them by utilizing, ultimately, fossil fuels.

And this is just one example of the way, over the last two hundred years, we humans have often unwittingly allowed our “economies” to operate outside of the “logic of nature.” We see this in today's industrial monocropping, in the development of suburban sprawl and shopping districts few can walk or bike to, and in our business models which are driven by maximizing profit and minimizing cost rather than by honoring the “logic of our earth house.”

As for today's focus on global warming—here too, we've obviously created an economy uninformed by our ecology—uninformed by the laws of nature, or the “logic of our house.”

We know that, for every bit of carbon we release into the atmosphere, we're increasing the greenhouse effect, increasing the temperature of our planet, melting our fresh water reserves, raising sea levels, and causing other kinds of harm to the environment and to many of the earth's creatures. These are scientific facts. The carbon we're releasing when we use fossil fuels has been safely stored under the earth's surface for centuries, and it's only within the last few hundred years that we've begun tampering with this energy store. The effects of this tampering may verge on the catastrophic. Dr. David Orr of Oberlin, in his recent book, *Down to the Wire*, calls what we're facing, “climate collapse.” And speaking of the peril to our race alone, famous South African human rights advocate, Bishop Desmond Tutu recently said, “Climate change has become *the human rights challenge* of our time,” and “We can no longer continue feeding our addiction to fossil fuels as if there is no tomorrow, or there will be no tomorrow.” Poor “household management”—poor “economic” decisions—cause real harm—harm not only to us, but to the very planetary home entrusted to our care.

So at the United Church of Granville, we have decided that, since safe, clean, energy alternatives already exist, the moral choice is to simply stop funding a fossil fuel industry

that's putting our planet in peril. We realize that there are complexities here and that no choice is "pure"—almost all of us transport ourselves in vehicles and live in houses that are powered, in one way or another, by fossil fuels. And many energy companies which have historically traded in fossil fuels are now also investing in clean energy. But at the same time, we've learned the lessons of history. We know that "big oil" is committed to continuing to extract all the cheap energy from the ground it possibly can, as long as that extraction and production remains *profitable*, whether or not the continued use of fossil fuels is good for our planet's environment.

We're happy that The United Church of Christ was the first denomination in the USA to divest from fossil fuels at the national level—we feel that divestment is an important moral statement calling for an *economy that squares with our ecology*. We, as a local congregation, are proud to follow our denomination's lead in this decision.

But moving from the congregational to the personal--What what will be our *personal* responses to this environmental crisis? As a church, we've decided to divest, and to make our buildings as efficient and as earth-friendly as they can be. What will *you* do? Could you take the same criteria we've given to our financial advisors, and hand them over to yours, saying, "I really don't want to invest in this particular industry. In fact, I'd like to invest a portion of my savings in companies focused on developing *renewable energy*..."? Could we as individuals make sure our homes and our lifestyles are as planet friendly as they can be? What small changes can each of us make, right now, to move the world in the right direction?

Yes, today's Hebrew Scripture passage was a bit of a "downer." It speaks of risk and danger. But we know there is a Gospel—a "good news" to be told, too. Organizations like Interfaith Power and Light and 350.org are helping religious communities like ours take up the moral issues involved in earth care. There is a renewal of commitment, especially among the young, to caring for our planet. And people are banding together all over our planet to raise a common voice—a call for a new economy—a new way of managing this precious gift of our earth home. We're calling for an economy that honors our ecology. And this prophetic voice is the hope of our planet—the hope of our children, and of all living things. Let us pray.