

SERMON: 2/16/14

(Delivered by John Fetters, at First English Lutheran Church in Columbus)

This weekend, Valentine's Day weekend, people of all faiths are taking part in the national Preach-in on Climate Change organized by Interfaith Power and Light. The mission of Interfaith Power & Light is to be faithful stewards of Creation by responding to global warming through the promotion of energy conservation, energy efficiency, and renewable energy. This campaign intends to protect the earth's ecosystems, safeguard the health of all Creation, and ensure sufficient, sustainable energy for all. So in churches, mosques, synagogues and Baha'i centers around the US, climate change is being discussed from a faith perspective, urging members to action to reduce our own emissions and sending messages to Congress asking them to do their part in moving us toward a low-carbon energy future. After worship, you will have a chance to discuss our response and to send postcards.

I signed up to preach this weekend – not to try to convince you that global climate change is happening – you have plenty of evidence over the past several years to make a believer out of you. But even if you do not “believe” in global climate change, as God's people and as disciples of Jesus, the care of God's creation is important enough to focus your attention.

Here's why. The foundation for the faith we hold that we are called to act comes from scripture. In the 2nd chapter of Genesis we are given an important job by God. In chapter 15, we find: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” Now the Hebrew words for ‘work it’ and ‘take care of it’ translate to “serve and protect.” We are to “serve & protect” the garden in the goodness and fruitfulness of God's creation. Protection of the earth from that which can ruin it, therefore, is a direct order from God.

In Luke 10, we read the familiar Good Samaritan story in which Jesus tells of a hurting person helped by someone who did not know him. Jesus orders everyone who will listen to him “Go and do likewise.” To me, this is a simple directive from our Lord to do what we can, wherever we are – to help with the problems that plague people, including the consequences of global climate change. Here, neighbors are defined as anyone who helps those in need – “the one who had mercy on him.”

In Matthew 22, loving God with our whole heart, mind, and soul, is linked with the command, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Not only is caring about our neighbor essential, but the justice principal “as you love yourself” promotes our neighbor's well being to be as important as our own.

If we are going to follow Jesus' command, we better know who are neighbors are. Are they only those that live near us? While our immediate neighbors are included, that's probably too narrow a definition for Jesus' disciples.

We know that neighbors will include the people of the Canadian Arctic – the Inuit – whose lives are at this time being affected by melting glaciers & icebergs. It includes those who live on the lowest lying islands and on the mainland coasts of the world's oceans – usually the poorest of the nations – who will drown from monster storms or by the rising seas as they wash over them. They include babies born with high levels of mercury ingested by their mothers who ate fish from oceans polluted by coal-fired power plants. They include future generations – our great great-grandchildren – who we probably will never see. They include all species of plants and animals – especially those we mourn who will soon become extinct. In other words, all creation – people, plants, animals, planets, asteroids and other galaxies – the whole of creation, including God's creatures and every human being, belongs to God. Every molecule is creation!

And what about us, here in the city? From a book edited by Stan LeQuire, of the Evangelical Environmental Network, "Many city dwellers feel that 'the environment' is a peripheral issue compared to the many pressing concerns of the urban world." But if every "inch is owned by the creator," then "we are all created and live within creation." "We understand that God created people and pigeons." God is the "maker of mountains and minorities." Suburbanite and urban dwellers both breathe the same air. "Indeed, we cannot draw lines dividing creation into 'theirs' and 'ours.'" "Creation is all God's, and God's command is for all people to 'take care of' the garden." "So creation care should be seen as a viable, even vital, calling for inner city ministries" as we have demonstrated here at First English in small, but important ways. "Earth keeping is a valid ministry for all God's people, no matter where they are serving."

We ignore God's command and Jesus' call to act at our own peril.

Ezekiel 34:18 contains this warning. "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?" A sobering thought about how to treat God's creation in our time as well as in the time of ancient Israel.

Calvin DeWitt is a lifelong environmentalist, a professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I met Cal several years ago and went on a retreat at the Au Sable Institute he founded where we studied his book "Earth-Wise: A biblical Response to Environmental Issues." In this book, he lays out the Christian response to the question "What must we do about creation?"

Quoting from Calvin's book, "The simple yet profound response to this question appears to be this: 'Love God as Redeemer and Creator, acknowledge God's love for the world, and act upon this by following Jesus – the One who creates, upholds, and reconciles all things.'"

Three simple terms:

“Awareness – seeing, identifying, naming, locating”

“Appreciation – respecting, valuing, esteeming, cherishing”

“Stewardship – using, restoring, serving, keeping, entrusting”

“Our ultimate purpose is to honor God as Creator in such a way that Christian environmental stewardship is part and parcel of everything we do. Our goal is to make tending the garden of creation, in all of its aspects, an unquestioned and all-pervasive aspect of our service to each other, to our community, and to God’s world.” (end quote)

God, through nature speaks to the child in each of us. But the world we love is imperiled by climate change. The New York Times reported last month from a UN draft report from the world’s top climate scientists that “If the world waits another 15 years to seriously limit carbon emissions, then it will be too late.”

But I have hope that from now until then, God’s people, Jesus’ disciples, will be in the forefront and lead the changes that need to take place. I also hear hope in a poem written by our oldest birth son – Rob, read with permission.

You are not here
yet always with me.

It is beautiful.
Trees, insects, birds, wind, poets.

You taught me
and provided opportunity.

The only family in town
recycling, composting
separating metal cans
and glass by color
into large wooden crates
in the rusty garden shed.

Egg shells and coffee grounds
where the Garter snakes curl.
I did not appreciate the chores
but I did understand their importance.

Energy efficiency, short showers,
restricted thermostat,
68 or 76 degrees.

If you are cold
put on a sweater.

Come upstairs
and turn off your light.

Dates and miles and gallons
line every page of a tiny notebook
in the glove compartments of small cars.
Bumper stickers plead "Slow Down, Save Gas."

At camp, Luther and Mowana,
and YMCA Indian Guides
Care for Creation
and the Earth is our Mother
Hay Young Ho Young Hay Young Young.

T8s, CFLs, LEDs, occupancy sensors.

Going out of your way
to pick up trash and aluminum cans
and 40 ounce bottles
carelessly discarded along busy streets.

You have done well.
I hope to too.
Viengsamai singing "Kids of Creation"
BounLieng singing "Nature needs Kids and Kids need Nature"
Khampraseuth teaching specific tree names
and a rainforest unit.
Me calling and canvassing on campaigns.

Your work continues
through you
through us
through them

Listen as the earth rejoices.

AMEN