

Flying in Faith

Sermon by Fred Taylor

First Congregational Church, Fair Haven, VT. March 15, 2015

I want to thank Marsh, Mary Ann Charron, and the Missions committee for inviting me to be with you today to preach on Mission Sunday. My theme today will be the Environment as part of our Christian mission, and I'll take my cue from today's scripture. In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus' words ring out – "as you have done it to the least of these who are members of my family."

There are two ways these words are relevant to environmental stewardship. Even though when Jesus spoke these words, he was speaking of the human family, increasingly environmental and ethical writers call us to expand our circle of care. Aldo Leopold wrote of a Land Ethic that extended the community of ethical engagement to include all living beings. I believe we are called to extend our love of God and neighbor to include all the beings with which we share our beautiful Earth, and to see that love, also, as a spiritual matter. Carl Safina, a marine scientist and conservationist, said recently in a VPR interview: "I've come to see that the geometry of human progress is an expanding circle of compassion. And that nature and human dignity require each other. And that the world exists as the one truly sacred place."

But there's a second way in which I believe there is an environmental aspect to "the least of these." Increasingly, we see the impacts of environmental devastation fall especially heavily on those who have done the least to create them – in developing countries, in communities of color, in areas of poverty. So caring for our neighbor means taking seriously the way environmental issues affect issues of human justice.

But more on that later. Let's start with loving God's creation, which I think is where caring for the earth begins. I was a nature lover and a writer of natural history long before I became involved in environmental issues. Like so many Vermonters, like each of you, I'm sure, I love the landscape we're blessed to live in here - I love to hike, canoe, kayak, cross-country ski, bird-watch, garden, each of us has our own way in to the natural world, the special places that have nourished us, the particular plants and animals and activities in nature that we're drawn to. By exploring and deepening these connections with nature, we find the source of a deep spirituality that both inspires and challenges us to become involved. How we as Christians

understand our connections with nature has important implications for how we, as church communities, act in the world.

Jewish writer Rabbi Abraham Heschel points to the importance of our connection with nature, when he writes that "indifference to the wonder of creation is the root of all sin." We live in an incredible universe, filled to the brim with natural wonders. When we close ourselves off to that, we are, Heschel says, separating ourselves from God. When we open to that, we come closer to God. This is the world we have been given to live in, to treasure and take care of. Here in wonder and gratitude, is where our sense of stewardship for the earth begins.

Sallie McFague offers a very practical, down to earth suggestion for how we might begin, with the suggestion that we simply learn to - pay attention. "By paying attention to something, we are, in fact, praying." Her question is "how should a Christian love nature? The answer emerging is that we must pay attention -detailed, careful, concrete attention - to the world that lies around us - but is not us. We must do this because we cannot love what we do not know. To really love nature, (and not just ourselves in nature, or nature as useful to us, even its use as a pathway to God) we must pay attention to it. Love and knowledge go together; we can't have one without the other." And poet Mary Oliver said: "attention with empathy is the beginning of devotion."

Each of us has special moments of paying attention, of awe and reverence in nature, what Albert Schweitzer called "Reverence for life." Here's an example of one of mine: One of my favorite outdoor activities is bird-watching, and though I'm not an expert, I find great joy in watching birds in the wild – or in my back-yard. How many of you here enjoy bird-watching? ...One of the birding thrills of my area is the Hawk watch on Putney Mountain. Are there any good hawk watching sites around here – any one go there to watch the migrating hawks?... I love the excitement of seeing the birds fly by on their southward migration – something stirs in me, a sense of the excitement of motion, of travel, of the amazing journey these birds make twice a year. There's a crew of Hawk watchers on P M who can look up at a dot in the sky and identify the bird exactly. I'm always in awe of their skill, one I have yet to develop. But every once in a while there's a day of hawk-watching where I can see the birds close enough so even I can see what they are. That's a day I'll tell you about today.

When I reached the clearing on top of Putney Mountain, I could sense an expectancy, an excitement in the air right away. They'd been counting lots of ospreys – already 10 or 12, and peregrine falcons as well. “Bird over the V” – someone pointed out to me the V shaped opening between a tall pine on the right, and a maple to the left. A spot appeared to the left of the pine, grew larger, sprouted wings, then another behind it and then another. Three birds flew closer, and as they approached, we could see in the binoculars the crooked wrist that ID's it as an osprey. A wrinkle in the line of the wing that opens and closes as the bird gently pulses its wings on the air.

Soon, another dot appeared to the right of the big pine – the “hot spot” they call it. This one flew more swiftly, moving like an arrow across the sky, until it came close enough to see the swept wing design of a falcon. Wings opening back to a point. I gasped. I'd never seen a peregrine falcon in flight before. I'm not sure I'd ever seen one, period. Another group of ospreys flew by, four this time, and they paused to circle on a current of rising air. A small kettle of ospreys. They were so close that when one of the hawk-watchers pointed out the “side-burns” I could actually see them.

I had a lot to think about that night when I went home. I remembered, as a child, seeing an osprey fly above the waters of Puget Sound, then dive foot-first into the water, emerging bearing a fish in its bright green talons. One of my first memories of the gift of birds and their wildness. What is it about these birds that stirs us so? Migrating birds are such a miracle of evolution, such a wondrous creation. Seeing them soar on the wind inspires our sense of being on a spiritual journey, of yearning to fly with them, to go flying in faith. (I recently heard interviewed on NPR the author of a new book, *H is for Hawk*. The author acquired a goshawk after the tragic death of her father – and the book is an inspiring account of how the bird helped her to heal from that wound – animal as spiritual teacher.)

I remembered a photograph of Rachel Carson sitting on top of a rocky outcropping at the top of Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania. She's bundled up in a leather jacket, with a pair of binoculars pointed straight up to the sky, watching hawks. She was in love with the hawks, and I can't help but think that that's part of what gave her the courage to pursue her quest. Carson's words spawned a movement to ban DDT, and it's because of her work that today, peregrine falcons and ospreys are once again flying their way home along the oceans of the sky.

But then I remembered something else. I recently read that ospreys are having a hard time finding food when they get to the ocean. The old fish hawk of my childhood relies on flounder for its catch, but the flounder off the New England coast is moving farther and farther north, due to the warming oceans. What will happen if the osprey that make their way south to the bays and sounds of southern New England, arrive there to find their reliable source of food not so reliable.

Wendell Berry recently spoke in an interview about how his life has been impacted by an awareness of “disappearances,” Bill Moyers asked: What are the precious things that you think are endangered now? Berry responded: It’s mighty hard right now to think of anything that’s precious that isn’t endangered. But maybe that’s an advantage. The poet, William Butler Yeats said, “things reveal themselves passing away.” It may be that the danger that we’ve now inflicted upon every precious thing reveals its preciousness and shows us our duty.”

So when we pay attention, deep attention, to what’s going on in the world we love, the world that is God’s gift to us, we also discover the ways in which that earth is suffering, and feel the call to do something about it. As we notice the disappearances, we learn our responsibility. Let’s pause for a moment now to reflect on where we’ve been so far. Does anyone want to share briefly about a moment of awareness in nature? ... Anyone have a moment that led them to an awareness of things passing away?

This, then, is one aspect of our mission, the way in which we are called to take action on behalf of the earth. But there’s another, and more all-encompassing way in which the plight of the earth today calls us to a wider sense of our mission. As I suggested earlier, more and more people are recognizing that environmental issues have become issues of human justice. Climate change presents us with an example of this. It’s an all-encompassing issue, “The mother of all issues,” as one environmental leader puts it. Because of the way it impacts humans across the globe, it’s not just about saving nature, it’s about loving our human brothers and sisters, and acting in ways that express that love, as Jesus commanded us to do.

Climate change is at its heart an issue of justice, an issue that underlies and impacts all the issues of justice that our sense of mission calls us to respond to. It’s so all encompassing, and impacts so many of the issues we care about, that until we integrate it into our vision of our mission, we will only be scratching the surface.

Let me give a few examples. In today's Scripture, Jesus says: "I was hungry..." One of the church's missions has always been to reach out to those in need of food: feed the hungry. As climate change worsens, glaciers melt, and droughts and famines become more common, world-wide hunger is predicted to become more prevalent. "I was thirsty..." With rising global temperatures, and growing pollution, safe, clean, plentiful drinking water will become increasingly rare for many of the world's people. "I was sick..." As temperatures rise, increasing rates of heat-related illness are projected. But perhaps more significant, our carbon extractive industries - such as hydraulic fracturing and mountain-top removal coal mining - take a huge toll on the health of the people who live near them - more often than not, low income communities and communities of color.

Rev. Meghan Pritchard, the Environmental Justice minister for the National UCC reflects: "This parable in Matthew 25 has a stark judgment aspect to it: those who do not care for Christ in creation are cast into outer darkness." She goes on to ask: "How will we be judged for the ways in which we have lived on this planet with each other? Will we have tilled and kept it well, as Adam and Eve were commanded to do? Or will we have dominated and destroyed it?" She ends by saying: "We have choices every day. Choose to see Christ in every person, every bee, every bite you eat, every river and lake. This passage suggests we are all connected by the presence of the divine within us, and we are called to care for each other and for all of creation. Our very existence depends on our doing so well."

One example of this that I find particularly poignant and compelling is the series of Typhoons that have wracked the Philippines in the past several years. I noticed recently a brochure for "One Great Hour of Sharing" which highlights relief efforts for the victims of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. That outreach is one important way in which we can express our sense of mission - it's our moral obligation to reach out to the victims to relieve their suffering. But we need to look deeper. Most scientists now predict that devastating storms like Haiyan, (and Hurricanes Irene, Katrina, and Sandy) will become more and more prevalent due to warming global temperatures. So don't we also have a moral obligation to make it a top priority to take actions in support of fundamental changes to our economy, our energy policies, that will help to avert the worst effects of climate change? Here is where the plight of earth calls us to a new kind of prophetic witness.

I don't know if it was irony, or a deep appropriateness, that at the same time as Typhoon Haiyan was ravaging the Philippines, world leaders were gathered in Warsaw to negotiate a climate treaty. One of those leaders was Yeb Sano, the chief climate negotiator from the Philippines. The previous year, he had given a passionate speech at the climate negotiations in Doha, shortly after another Typhoon – Bhopa - had wracked the Philippines: “An important backdrop for my delegation is the profound impacts of climate change that we are already confronting... There is massive and widespread devastation back at home. Hundreds of thousands of people have been rendered homeless. And the ordeal is far from over.... And heartbreaking tragedies like this are not unique to the Philippines, because the whole world, especially developing countries struggling to address poverty and achieve social and human development, confront these same realities.”

As he concluded his speech, his voice broke with emotion: “I appeal to all: Please, no more delays, no more excuses. Please,...let 2012 be remembered as the year the world found the courage to take responsibility for the future we want. I ask of all of us here: If not us, then who? If not now, then when? If not here, then where?”

The next year at the Warsaw climate negotiations, in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan, Yeb Sano again spoke out of the tragedy of his people, while he was also fasting as a witness. “What my country is going through as a result of this extreme climate event is madness. The climate crisis is madness.... We cannot sit and stay helpless staring at this international climate stalemate. It is now time to raise ambition and take action. We need an emergency climate pathway.” His words are an urgent plea for help on behalf of the people of the world who have done the least to create climate change, and who are suffering the most from it. It is a plea not only for relief from the devastating effects, but a plea for action to avert further devastation. This is a call for environmental justice.

A fundamental part of our mission today is to engage in serious theological reflection, prayer, and action, around environmental issues, especially the issue of climate change. Communities of faith have recognized this and are rising to the challenge. Sallie McFague, speaking at Middlebury College back in the early 90's, put it this way: “*The* moral issue of our day is the global one of whether we and other species will live and how well we will live. Therefore, the moral challenge, the planetary vocation or agenda, can be summarized by the

rallying cry of the World Council of Churches: peace, justice and the integrity of creation.” That sounds like something we in communities of faith ought to be paying attention to.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu eloquently spoke from his faith perspective when diagnosing the situation: “Climate change and the destruction of natural habitats are not mistakes, they are by-products of the greed that has come to characterize the human condition. We are so focused on reaching our destination, we are no longer able to see, or care where we are going.” But then out of the deep well of his faith, and his life-long commitment to justice, he concluded: “The only way to stop the climactic symptoms of the juggernaut of consumptiveness from destroying us, is for you and me to join hands and demand change... To demand that for once we put planet and people before profit. We are at a crossroads now. We can continue straight in the direction we are headed, or we can set ourselves free in the hope and promise of the resurrection, and in the ministry of reconciliation with God, with others, with all of creation.”

Recently, with the 50th anniversary of the Selma march, I’ve been thinking a lot about Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. Watching a news clip from the original march, I was surprised, but maybe not really, to see Rabbi Abraham Heschel marching side by side with King. It inspired me to see this strong voice for the earth also marching for civil rights – it affirmed my sense that environmental issues and justice issues are intricately intertwined. And it reminded me of how faith leaders were absolutely crucial for the progress and success of the civil rights movement. This inspires me with a sense of the unique contribution we have to make to environmental issues.

For my closing words, I quote Larry Rasmussen, who invokes the imagery of King to talk about the way our faith can inspire us in this quest as well: "Faith is the name of the strong power behind the renewal of moral-spiritual energy. It squarely faces the fact that there will never be decisive proof beforehand that life will triumph. Yet it still acts with confidence that the stronger powers in the universe arch in the direction of sustaining life, as they also insist upon justice. World-weariness is combated by a surprising force found amidst earth and its distress. Creation carries its own hidden powers. It supports the confidence of the gospel that a steadfast order exists that bends in the direction of life and gives it meaning. Faith is the great confronter, uncovering in us a capacity to fight for life in the face of death, and venture the risks necessary to be part of a radically different world."

It strikes me that this is just another way of saying what the prophet Isaiah said over 2,500 years ago. “They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” And we have not only the eagles to remind of this, but the ospreys, the peregrine falcons, and any other bird that gives our heart wings.

Announcement after sermon about possible ways of getting involved

I’d like to call your attention to a few very exciting ways that we can express our faith that can make a huge difference. I know your congregation has already taken some important steps, like having an energy audit, and your amazing Biblical Garden program. I also know that you have an impressive array of other mission programs. So it may not be so much about adding another program to your already busy lives, but exploring together how environmental problems are interwoven with the issues you’re already involved with. There are some excellent films that explore these questions. The “Ecumenical Lenten Carbon Fast” offers daily suggestions for prayers, readings, and actions to lower our carbon footprint, as a part of the witness of Lent. It’s not too late – why not give up pollution instead of chocolate this year? A group of faith leaders in New England have initiated a “New Awakening,” that will take place next fall and winter - to intentionally frame the next climate negotiation in Paris, offering resources for preaching, prayer and action. Another program that focuses on the climate negotiations in Paris. The group “Green Faith’s Our Voices” program will feature pilgrimages, worship resources, and even a fast inspired by Yeb Sanyo’s fast at last year’s climate summit.