

Sunday, May 1, 2022
Acts 9:1-6 / John 21:1-17
"Business as Un-usual"
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

On the heels of Earth Day and now on the final day of Faith Climate Action Week, we're focused this morning on climate justice, ecological justice, earth care.

As far as I know, we don't have any climate change deniers in our congregation. Those who deny and resist are primarily those who benefit economically from our continued dependence on fossil fuels – by far the largest, though by no means the only, driver of climate change.

We know that global warming and climate change are all-too-real, and increasingly and rapidly so.

As sustainability scientist and author, Dr. Kimberly Nicholas, wrote on a poster during her first climate change protest in 2014: "It's warming. It's us. We're sure. It's bad. We can fix it."

Eight years later, in spite of a growing global movement of truth-telling and people-powered resistance, and in spite of ambitious but unrealized benchmarks established by the Conference of the Parties (COP) and the Kyoto Protocol and its participating countries, including ours, it's worse, not better.

BUSINESS AS USUAL continues to move us all in all the wrong direction.

Average global temperature continues to rise, with the seven warmest years on record all since 2015. The Paris Agreement calls for all countries to work toward a limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming compared to pre-industrial levels; last year was about 1.11 degrees warmer. Estimates suggest we could get to 1.5 as early as 2030, and the science suggests it's still possible to stay under 1.5 IF we halve greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 – keeping fossil fuels in the ground and transitioning to 100% renewable energy. That is the ONLY way to flip the script.

But even short of that level, as we already know from frontline communities around the world, and in our own communities, the impact is profoundly dangerous and life-threatening:

- increased air, water and land pollution
- increased frequency and severity of extreme heat and weather events
- ocean warming and acidification as oceans absorb most of the additional heat, leading to
sea level rise – global sea level rose almost 8 inches in the last century, but the rate in the last two decades is nearly double that
- melting polar ice caps, shrinking ice sheets, retreating glaciers and reduced snow cover
- loss of habitat and species extinction
- and forced human migration and resulting poverty and hunger in the millions, especially among populations already most vulnerable

We know this to be true. We read about it. We've experienced it. It's overwhelming. It's depressing. What we, collectively, are doing is nowhere near enough. Business as usual is burning fossil fuels as usual. Is transportation as usual. Is factory farming and corporate, animal-based agriculture as usual. Is deforestation as usual. Is overconsumption as usual.

The earth is tired. The earth needs us to do business as UN-usual.

Our reading from Acts describes the dramatic encounter between Saul and the risen Jesus. When we meet him here, Saul is still a hell-bent enemy of the new church, of those who “belonged to the Way” (Jesus' Way). He's described as “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”

Just beyond our reading, Saul is rendered temporarily blind by the encounter – eventually regaining his sight, converting, getting baptized and making himself quickly known as we know him now, by the variation of his name, Paul. As in the apostle Paul.

But for our purposes today, we're focusing on his initial exchange with Jesus. After a flash of light from heaven forces him to the ground, Saul hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" he responds. And then he hears this reply, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Friends, in the face of increasing global warming and devastating climate change, we hear the earth crying out as the one we are persecuting.

"Why do you persecute me?" Why do you continue to persecute the very creation on which your own livelihood and well-being depends? On which all life depends?

We are in need, most of us individually and all of us collectively, of dramatic conversion. We need to see with new eyes and act with increasing resolve. We need to believe that change is possible.

Our second reading provides a different insight. This one from the last chapter of the gospel of John, one that most scholars believe is actually an appendix or epilogue added later since the previous chapter reads in many ways like the end of the book.

In any case, the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples for the third time – this time by the Sea of Tiberias.

Following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, presumably overwhelmed and still fearful about what happens next, Simon Peter does what he knows best. He reverts, if you will, to business as usual. He goes fishing. And the other disciples go with him.

They catch nothing. Jesus appears to them on the beach, though again, they don't realize it's him. Knowing they have caught nothing, he directs them to cast their nets to the other side of the boat, where they'll have better luck. They do as the stranger says, and they do have better luck.

This story mirrors one found early on in Luke's gospel, where Jesus provides the same instruction to a group of fishermen, including Simon (not yet, at that point, Simon Peter

the disciple). This time Jesus is in the boat with Simon after teaching crowds gathered along the shore, and the miraculous catch of fish leads Simon and others to leave everything behind to follow him.

Back to the post-resurrection encounter. When they bring in the massive haul of fish, they realize it's Jesus. They join him on the shore and have a fish breakfast, a FIRST breakfast with their now risen Lord after a LAST supper with the soon-to-be-crucified Jesus.

And then we get this famous exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus:

"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Then "Feed my lambs."

And again: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

"Tend my sheep."

And finally, a third time to drive the point home:

"Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep."

Feed my sheep. Feed my sheep! You are way past the point of loving with lip service. Lip service is not love. Feed my sheep. Stop fishing. Stop defaulting to your old, easy ways of being and engaging the world, to business as usual.

Feed my sheep. Show and share my love. Remember why you left everything to follow me in the first place.

Now, as then, is the time for business as UN-usual. Change is possible, another way and another world are possible, but only if you help make it so.

The message of the resurrected Jesus, the resurrected Christ, is also ours to hear. Change is possible, another way and another world are yet possible, but only if we move beyond lip service and help make it so.

That resurrection message applies to all expressions of love as compassion, love as justice. A world beyond poverty and racism and sexism and homophobia is possible, but only if we move beyond lip service and help love it into being.

But today, on the heels of Earth Day and on this final day of Faith Climate Action Week, I challenge you, as I challenge myself, to step up your earth care game. And your climate action game.

To give greater attention and intention to what's so urgently at stake in the midst of our current climate chaos.

To give greater attention and intention to our sacred roles as Easter people, as co-creators, with God, of new life. Of a way and world renewed.

To give greater attention and intention to the personal choices we make and actions we take (or don't), on a daily basis, as individuals, as consumers, as home and vehicle owners, as voters, as citizens. To how we will give witness to earth care.

To how we will support or increase our support, with our time and our talent and our money, for advocacy and activist organizations like Interfaith Power & Light or POWER or Philly Thrive or Earth Quaker Action Team or the Clean Air Council or The Shalom Center or the Sunrise Movement or 350.

To how we will get involved, or even more involved, in the broader global movement for climate justice, to hold politicians and the corporations who bankroll them accountable to a bottom line that prioritizes the planet and its people over profits, creation before cash.

The kind of radical change the planet so desperately and urgently needs, and so we all need, requires more from all of us. It requires business as UN-usual. It is still possible.

We know exactly what we need to do. As our Prelude song suggests, “The tide is rising, but so are we. The task is mighty, but so are we.” No more lip-service love, Jesus says. Feed my sheep, like your life, like all our lives, depend on it. Because, of course, they do.

Toward that end, I invite you, in closing this meditation, to join me in a pledge of resistance and recommitment – inspired by a Buddhist prayer.

As you feel so moved, repeat after me:

I vow to myself and to each of you:

*To commit myself daily to the healing of our world
and the welfare of all beings.*

*To live on Earth more lightly and less violently
in the food, products, and energy I consume.*

*To draw strength and guidance from the living Earth,
from the ancestors,*

*the future generations,
and my siblings of all species.*

*To support others in our work for the world
and to ask for help when I need it.*

*To pursue a daily practice that clarifies my mind,
strengthens my heart,
and supports me in observing these vows.*

May it be so.