

“A Justice-Seeking People”

October 25, 2009

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According to our fabulous Stewardship Team’s plan, today’s sermon is supposed to espouse our “social justice” work here at Shoreline Church. In truth, this is a difficult task for me, since there are so many ways to think about social justice here. We do so much, and yet we continue to explore new ways to make justice happen in our world.

You know about many of these initiatives—from our once-a-month “offering plate give-a-way” to the beautiful work so many of you have offered at the Food Lifeline group, which meets monthly at their place on 15th Avenue in Shoreline.

The question arises again and again: *What can I do*, given the incredibly complex array of things about our environment which need fixing? There’s the economic downturn. The war in Afghanistan. The health care debate. The incredibly important global warming issue. So much to be done. How can we ordinary, everyday people, ever respond adequately?

I admit our global problems are overwhelming—intimidating to the point of paralysis. What can I, a single human being on the planet, and what can we, as tiny community of concerned individuals, possibly do to make a difference?

This is a truly a monumental question for us this morning.

Well, one thing we can do is join the world-wide consciousness-raising group called 350.org. All over the world, on this weekend, there is a concerted effort to join in to proclaim—on an individual and collective and a national and world-wide level—to demand that the countries of the world recognize the extreme crisis we are now experiencing. 350.org very simply says, “the absolute limit of human interference in the larger, global climate change is 350, which is the most important number in the world, though no one knew it even 20 months ago. When Arctic ice melted so dramatically in the summer of 2007, scientists realized that global warming was no longer a future threat but a very present crisis. Within months our leading climatologists—especially the NASA team led by James Hansen—were giving us a stark new reality check. Above 350 parts per million carbon dioxide, the atmosphere would begin to heat too much for us to have a planet “similar to the one on which civilization developed and to which life on earth is adapted.”

Imagine that! A world-wide movement to scream out to the ones in charge: We are over the limit of sustainability in our world. What we must do is not tomorrow’s business; it is *today* we must act. *Imagine that!* A world-wide movement of consciousness-raising which screams out, “Today is the day of salvation”. It’s either now, or maybe our chances to recover will be over. *Imagine that!*

Today we will collaborate with 350.org, a world-wide movement, which is warning us all that we must act now to lower our collective carbon footprints. It is not longer an option. It is now an imperative, perhaps even a biological imperative (which means our species may be on the line and our *non-compliance* may actual signal the end of our species.) Wow! That’s quite an imperative!

We will also speak, today, of some of the core reasons for our current dilemma. In my opinion, there is one almighty reason, and it could very well be stated in biblical terms. There is a “god” in control of everything in our world right now. No, it’s not YHWH or Jehovah or the god of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, even though *that* god seems to be guiding the three great religions of the Western world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The real god of our world is *the market place*. And the real rulers are those folks who control Wall Street. Anyone who thinks differently is delusional. Wall Street is, in fact, in control of everything.

Here’s what one of my favorite commentators, Chris Hedges, has to say:

“We can join Bill McKibben in nationwide protests over rising carbon emissions. We can cut our consumption of fossil fuels. We can use less water. We can banish plastic bags. We can install compact fluorescent light bulbs. We can compost in our backyard. But unless we dismantle the corporate state, all those actions will be just as ineffective as the Ghost Dance shirts donned by native American warriors to protect themselves from the bullets of white soldiers at Wounded Knee.”

“If we all wait for the great, glorious revolution there won't be anything left,” environmental activist Derrick Jensen warned. “If all we do is reform work, this culture will grind away. This work is necessary, but not sufficient. We need to use whatever means are necessary to stop this culture from killing the planet. We need to target and take down the industrial infrastructure that is systematically dismembering the planet. Industrial civilization is functionally incompatible with life on the planet, and is murdering the planet. We need to do whatever is necessary to stop this.”

“The oil and natural gas industry, the coal industry, arms and weapons manufacturers, industrial farms, deforestation industries, the automotive industry and chemical plants will not willingly accept their own extinction. They are indifferent to the looming human catastrophe. We will not significantly reduce carbon emissions by drying our laundry in the backyard and naively trusting the power elite. The corporations will continue to cannibalize the planet for the sake of money. *They must be halted by organized and militant forms of resistance.* The crisis of global heating is a social problem. It requires a social response.

“The reason the ecosystem is dying is not because we still have a dryer in our basement. It is because corporations look at everything, from human beings to the natural environment, as exploitable commodities. It is because consumption is the engine of corporate profits. We have allowed the corporate state to sell the environmental crisis as a matter of personal choice when actually there is a need for profound social and economic reform. We are left powerless.

“Alexander Herzen, speaking a century ago to a group of Russian anarchists working to topple the czar, reminded his followers that they were not there to rescue the system. “We think we are the doctors,” while, in fact, “we are the disease.”

I believe they are other modern day prophets, often coming from unexpected places. One is the most famous rock singer in the world, the leader of the Irish band U2. Of course, I'm speaking of Bono, who has become a serious and well-informed activist, talking always about such issues as Africa and HIV/AIDS. Bono is a spiritual man, though not much of a church person.

Bono spoke at the *Africare* dinner in Washington, to fifteen hundred of the capitol's leaders and media. “Excuse me if I'm a little nervous,” Bono apologized, “but I'm not used to speaking to less than 20,000 people!” Then he started preaching:

“So you've been doing God's work, but what's God working on now? What's God working on this year? Two and a half million Africans are going to die of AIDS. What's God working on now? I meet the people who tell me it's going to take an act of God to stop this plague. Well, I don't believe that. I think God is waiting for us to act. In fact, I think that God is on his knees to us...waiting for us to turn around this supertanker of indifference...waiting for us to recognize that distance can no longer decide who is our neighbor. We can't choose our neighbors anymore. We can't choose the benefits of globalization without some of the responsibilities, and we should remind ourselves that “love thy neighbor” is not advice: it is a command.”

I am personally convinced that global poverty reduction will not be accomplished without a *spiritual engine*, and that history is changed by social movements with a spiritual foundation. That's what's always made the difference —the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, civil rights— they were all social movements, but they had a deep spiritual foundation.

Let us take this monumental challenge today. Because of our important and significant spiritual values, we must rise to the challenge. The “beloved community of faith” (in Martin Luther King’s words), will lead us on now and always when it comes to matters which make the world work the way it does. Who else is there to proclaim these important values? Who else can rise to the occasion? Who else has any idea of the meaning of these issues and of their consequences?

The people of faith can rise up in the ancient tradition of the prophets of old:

“He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.” (Micah)

Micah is saying, you simply cannot and will not beat “swords into plowshares” (that is, remove the threats of war) until people can “sit under their own vines and fig trees” (that is, have some share in global security). Only then will you remove the fear that leads inextricably to conflict and violence.

Several millennia later, Pope Paul VI paraphrased Micah when he said: *“If you want peace, work for justice.”* The prophet’s insight is that the possibilities for peace, for avoiding war, even for defeating terrorism, depend also upon everyone having enough for their own security—having a little vine and fig tree. The wisdom of Micah is both prophetic and practical for a time like this. If the tremendous gaps on our planet could be leveled out just a little, nobody would have to be so afraid.

Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams says it well, *“There is no security apart from common security.”* The developed world will never be secure until the developing world also achieves some economic security; America will not be safe until the injustice and despair that fuel the murderous agendas of terrorists has finally been addressed.

Poverty is not the only cause of terrorism; it’s more complicated than that, with roots that are also religious, cultural, and ideological. But “unless we drain the swamps of injustice in which the mosquitoes of terrorism breed, we will never overcome the terrorist threat.”

Micah knew we will not overcome violence until everyone has their own vine and fig tree—their own little piece of the global economy, their own small stake in the world, their own share of security for themselves and their families. Because when you have a little patch upon which to build a life, nobody can make you afraid. And it is fear that leads to violence. That spiritual reality is truer today than ever before. Our weapons cannot finally protect us; only a world where people feel secure will truly be safe for us and our children.

Yes, and Amen! Shalom and Salaam and Blessed Be.

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