

Religion and the Environment

A Sermon by Doug Merrill at
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I chose to speak about this topic because environmental degradation is one of the great issues of the day. Until recently, nature has dominated mankind. In recorded history, there have been five episodes where a large proportion of the world's species have vanished from our planet. All these events have had "natural" causes, such as an exploding volcano or a hit by an asteroid. However, in this age of industrialization and expanding population, man-made phenomena have developed potential to be equal in scope to those long-ago natural catastrophes. Are we glimpsing the beginnings of the sixth period of mass destruction? Is it too late to pull back? And, as a religious person, I must ask 'What is the role of the religious community in all of this?'

Environmental Problems

Even a partial list of problems (real and perceived) is daunting. Such problems include:

- Depletion of resources
- Deforestation
- Rapid changes in global temperatures
- Pollution of air, water, and land
- Species extinction
- Overpopulation
- Falling agricultural output
- Rising sea levels
- Destruction of marine life by plastic litter
- Increase in pests and disease
- Extreme weather patterns
- Unintended consequences of development projects
- Widespread poverty and inequality of income
- War

Many of these problems are interrelated. One of the first things I learned during my environmental graduate studies in the 1970s was that "everything is connected to everything else." It was true then and it's true now.

Consider global warming, what causes it, and how its effects spread throughout the environment. Global warming is caused by the buildup of heat-trapping gases (such as carbon dioxide [CO₂]) in the atmosphere. The major man-made CO₂ sources are burning of fossil fuels for energy production and torching of forests to create agricultural land (deforestation). Deforestation is a double problem, because forests convert CO₂ to oxygen during photosynthesis. Eliminating forests thus eliminates an important CO₂-reduction mechanism.

Rapid rises in global temperatures can lead to extreme weather patterns such as more intense hurricanes and drought and longer spells of dry heat or intense rain (depending on where you are in the world). Droughts lead to loss of agricultural lands and desertification, hence famine and poverty. A report in the journal *Science* in June 2002 described the alarming increase in the outbreaks and epidemics of diseases in land- and ocean-based wildlife due to climate changes.

Water expands when heated, and sea levels are expected to rise as temperatures increase. Sea levels will also rise as the polar caps begin to melt. Rising sea levels have already caused the people of some small islands to leave. The same result could occur in highly populated low-lying areas such as the coasts of Bangladesh, East Anglia (England) and the Netherlands.

With global warming on the increase and species' habitats on the decrease, the chances for various ecosystems to adapt naturally are diminishing. Animals living in the Polar Regions (polar bears, penguins, and harp seals) are especially imperiled.

What Does Religion Say About the Environment?

The starting point for any discussion of religion and environmental stewardship begins with the Genesis story. "So God created man in his own image, in the Image of God he created him: male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" (Genesis 1:27-28).

The word "subdue" has proved controversial. Some have interpreted this passage to mean that God placed man in charge of the world to do anything he (man) wants, for his own purposes. I prefer the more balanced interpretation that God placed man as stewards over the order God created and that we bear responsibility for how we treat and use it.

A second passage comes from the Summary of the Law, which says in part "The first commandment is this. 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. There is no other commandment greater than these". From an environmental perspective, the first commandment may be interpreted to mean we show our love for God by loving His creation. The second commandment asks us to love our neighbors. And who are they? All humankind, regardless of creed, race, color, or belief, and everything else in the natural world (animals, plants, land, water, and sky).

Religious leaders have traditionally been silent about environmental affairs. Perhaps they felt their business was the saving of souls. Saving the earth was to be left to others. Some conservative leaders have called environmentalism the "devil's diversion" since it deflected attention from matters related to the human soul.

But that situation is rapidly changing. Leaders of all faiths now realize that God created and maintains the earth and that we humans must be willing partners in the task of preserving it. We in the Diocese of California are particularly fortunate to have strong environmental advocates in Bishop Marc Andrus and in the Rev. Canon Sally Bingham. Rev. Bingham is the founder and president of Interfaith Power and Life, with more than 4,000 congregations, mosques, and temples, and more than 500,000 people engaged in faith-based action to heal the earth.

My Story

I am an environmentalist by choice and profession. Back in the 1970's I found myself increasingly disenchanted, not with my profession (engineering), but the circumstances in which I was practicing it and the ends to which it was being used. I decided to go back to school to pursue a graduate degree in water pollution control, which I perceived to be an up and coming field, technically interesting, with redeeming social value. This was during the time of the first great environmental movement. I was around to participate in the first Earth Day in 1970.

After graduating I worked for Brown and Caldwell, an environmental consulting firm, first in Seattle and then in Walnut Creek. During those years, I worked on water- and wastewater-treatment projects throughout the US and wrote manuals of practice for fields related to wastewater treatment, corrosion control, and treatment and disposal of municipal wastewater sludge. It was a hard-working life but a good life. I felt I was working on the side of the angels.

My work was mostly technical, with a few thoughts about government policy, since the government set the standards I had to meet. My focus was on producing treatment systems that achieved the desired results and finishing jobs within the time frame specified and budget allowed. Thoughts about the moral and spiritual aspects of environmentalism never crossed my mind. They came later, much later. Preparing to deliver this sermon has allowed them to crystallize. I will speak of them shortly.

How Can We Respond to the Environmental Crisis?

I believe we can respond to environmental problems in three ways. The first is a personal response (things we can do individually). The second is a policy response (actions to influence government behavior). The third is a moral and spiritual response. I believe all three are needed to get us where we need to go. They are like individual wires in a cable. Alone, they can't support the load. But intertwined and interconnected (there's that word again), they can lift great weights.

The Personal Response. The personal response has several facets.

Conservation. Conservation means using less to accomplish the same result. My parents (and probably yours) told us to "waste not, want not." Our forebears, who more often than not were fighting for survival, wasted very little. But the US has become a wasteful

society. Consumerism is rampant. We indulge ourselves. For example, while the US comprises but 4 percent of the world's population, it emits 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. We can do better. By conserving, we can protect the environment while. We can also save ourselves money.

Conservation should be considered "low-hanging fruit," relatively easy to do while providing the best monetary return on our investments. Here are examples of ways to conserve.

- Save water by using drip irrigation and low-flow showerheads and toilets; use drought-tolerant plantings in your garden on the rest of your property.
- Save energy in the home by conducting energy audits; buying energy-efficient appliances; replacing incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents; using programmable thermostats and motion-activated lights to heat/light spaces only when occupied; setting thermostats higher in the summer and lower in the winter; turning off lights and appliances when not in use; installing insulation in walls and ceilings and placing fans in attics; and sealing air-carrying ducts
- Reduce transportation costs by car pooling; taking public transport; purchasing energy efficient vehicles; and buying food and goods produced locally to reduce shipping-generated CO₂ emissions.

Support sustainable energy practices. Sustainable practices derive their substance from renewable sources. Unlike carbon-based sources, they can never be exhausted and are carbon-neutral (no net CO₂ generation).

- Install solar-powered electric and water-heating systems.
- Purchase power derived from renewable resources (sun, wind, hydro, and non-food biomass).

Minimize waste to preserve natural resources, reduce the load on landfills, and maintain the landscape's natural beauty.

- Support stores that go light on packaging materials
- Minimize use of one-time throw-aways (e. g., paper plates, plastic cutlery).
- Recycle.
- Compost yard waste

Engage in Earth-friendly practices.

- Plant a garden

- Minimize use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.
- Dispose of hazardous materials in approved facilities.

Educate. Environmental knowledge is one of the greatest gifts you can give anyone, particularly children. It's an investment in their future. Changes to children's curricula that address creation care in general and faith-based responses to environmental issues can take place more rapidly than almost anything else. Children are not only open to learning new things, they are also willing to integrate these lessons into their basic world view.

The Policy Response. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "policy as a course of action adopted and pursued by a government, party, ruler, etc." Individuals are free to develop their own environmental policies as part of personal visioning. However, big societal changes require government action. The recent changes in our federal administration came about because Americans demanded changes, including changes to federal environmental policies. The new administration takes an aggressive approach to environmental affairs. It faces entrenched opposition.

Our duty as citizens demands we let our legislators know where we stand on environmental affairs. Personal responsibility, as described above, is essential, but it is not enough. It's up to us to articulate our needs to our legislators. Recently, I have begun calling and e-mailing my Congresswomen (yes, they are all women) letting them know how I feel about legislation concerning global warming. It's something I never thought I'd do, but now I'm doing it. And I support organizations I feel can effectively lobby and educate legislators on behalf of the environment, like Environment California and the Environmental Defense Fund. I now realize how important this kind of activity is. Changing a light bulb is good. Changing a member of Congress is better.

The Religious Response. God created the world. If we love God, we must know (or love) His creation and be willing partners in preserving it. Regardless of how one understands the Creator, there seems to be widespread realization among different faiths that we humans have forgotten that the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Our ecological crisis is evidence of our forgetting. Awakening to this realization may be the primary human task of the 21st century.

Many of the issues I described before as environmental issues are also issues of justice and compassion. When people in coastal areas must abandon their homeland before they are swallowed by the sea, that's an environmental issue and also an issue of justice and compassion. When corn doubles in price when used to produce ethanol instead of food, those who must spend most of their incomes for food fall further into poverty. That's an environmental issue and also an issue of justice and compassion. When pesticides used to increase food production cause migrant workers to fall ill, that's an environmental issue and also an issue of justice and compassion. We are all in this together. What hurts one hurts all.

For more comfortable communities such as ours, those without pressing survival concerns such as poverty, housing, and discrimination, the environment has been viewed as a leisure issue, something which could be pursued when time could be found for it. As the environmental implications of our collective economies have become more obvious, we must look beyond our noses to see what's happening in the wide world beyond.

Gus Spaeth, Dean of the Yale University School of Forestry and the Environment said "Thirty years ago I thought with enough good science we would be able to solve the environmental crisis. I was wrong. I used to think the greatest problems threatening the planet were pollution, bio-diversity loss, and climate change. I was wrong there too. I now believe the greatest problems are pride, apathy, and greed. Because that's what's keeping us from solving the environmental problem. For that, I now see we need a cultural and spiritual transformation."

Put simply, we must change our hearts. Without this change and the vision it can bring, we'll just keep on doing things as we've always done them.

Why Churches Must Lead

Religious institutions are uniquely qualified to be leaders in the green revolution. Churches have always been at the forefront of social justice issues (abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and desegregation, for example). They shape cultural values and are vessels of moral authority. They have the ability to change from within and spark change from without. They are not static institutions. Churches bring hope - a crucial ingredient of faith - to the never-ending doomsday message from the environmental community. And there are a lot of us churchgoers to carry out this work..

St. Anselm's is already a leader. It was the first church in our diocese to install solar panels and generate our own clean electricity. Additionally, through energy conservation measures, we have reduced further the amount of electricity we use. We have also greatly reduced our water consumption. But the changes made at St. Anselm's are just the tip of the iceberg. Imagine the powerful ripple effect when our parishioners decide to incorporate sound environmental practices in their homes. St. Anselm's impact will be magnified many times over.

The Rev. Sally Bingham said "Who are we, as human beings, if not caretakers of creation? Stewardship of our planet and care for one another is our greatest moral duty. The pursuit of justice, peace, and harmony are our spiritual mandates. Who, if not our us, will show the way to this new creation?"