

Saving Mother Earth - Mark 4:19 - Westminster Presbyterian Church

September 15, 2019 -Marcia Buhl

In the mid-1960s, when Molly Gray and I were enrolled at a liberal arts college in the midwest there was a requirement that all on campus read the same book - students, faculty and staff. The selection that year was Rachel Carson's *SILENT SPRING*, seemingly a quite different genre than the previous year's choice, John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*.

Carson's book, published in 1962, documented the detrimental effects on the environment—particularly on birds—of the indiscriminate use of pesticides. The title, *Silent Spring* suggested that pesticides and other chemically altering substances could very well kill all the insects and other life forms that bring songs of life to this planet. In Carson's vision, if the rate of chemical contamination continued, we would be faced with a silent world.

The 1949 publication of ecologist Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* advocated the idea of a "land ethic", and it is credited as a turning point in the American conservation movement. So, too, *Silent Spring* provided a wake-up call to the American public in terms of our relationship to our environment.

Growing up in a rural part of Michigan, heavily dependent upon agriculture, DDT and similar pesticides, were commonplace. In fact, DDT, which Carson targeted as a particularly toxic substance, was part of every child's vocabulary.

In the decades that would follow, children and adults, alike, would add these new terms to their common lexicon: toxic waste; biofuels; Carbon footprint; carbon neutrality; acid rain; renewable energy; geothermal resources; green house gases; mitigation of green house gases; global warming; climate change; climate crisis and DOZENS more.

But in the 1960s, it was Edward Abbey's 1968 publication of *Desert Solitaire* that heightened the controversy, as his writing was more confrontational and politically charged than others'. His book interspersed observations and discussions about the various tensions – physical, social, and existential – between humans and the desert environment. But he also engaged in lengthy critiques of modern Western civilization, United States politics, and the decline of America's environment.

Also in 1968, Joni Mitchell wrote Big Yellow Taxi, a song that expressed her concern for the environment. The theme in Mitchell's song was so-called "progress" occurring at the expense of the environment. At the time DDT was still very controversial. It wasn't until 1972 that it was banned in the U.S. You will recognize her lyrics: "They paved paradise and put-up a parking lot!"

Don't it always seem to go

That you don't know what you've got

Till it's gone

They paved paradise

And put up a parking lot

Hey farmer farmer

Put away that DDT * now

Give me spots on my apples

But leave me the birds and the bees

Please!

Our first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970. It was memorable for the poster featuring Walt Kelly's famous cartoon, Pogo: "We have met the enemy and he is us", declared Pogo, as he surveyed seemingly endless piles of rubbish, effectively eliminating our forests. Kelly, of course, had done a creative twist on that famous military quote of Oliver Hazard Perry's, "We have met the enemy and they are ours."

By 1972, an advisor to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment began using the motto, **Think Globally, Act Locally**.

The phrase urged people to consider the health of the entire planet and to take action in their own communities and cities. Long before governments began enforcing environmental laws, individuals were coming together to protect habitats and the organisms that live within them.

Though, it would be some time before the formula **Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Refuse** would creep into our every day thinking. And even longer before the most significant of actions would be promoted: prevention. It really wasn't until Bill McKibben "took-on" the supply end of things, urging divestment in fossil fuels (as opposed to emphasizing what we as consumers could do) that the Earth Care movement assumed a new dimension.

Today's scripture lesson addresses the greed and avarice that climate activists are up against: **"but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful."**

Shortly before the Paris Climate Accord in mid-December 2015, I had occasion to attend, through my role in the Presbytery, another church's session meeting. A pastor made an appeal for the church to support the United States agreeing to commit to fighting Climate Change on a global level. (You will recall 195 nations signed-on to that universal, legally binding climate deal). What stymied the church's support was one individual, a businessman, who maintained it was **ARROGANT** to believe that humans could have such an impact on destroying mother earth!!!

So let's talk about arrogance for a minute:

Is it not arrogant here in the to use a quarter of the world's fossil fuel resources, while having only 5% of the world's population? Or, to create half of the globe's solid waste?

Is it not arrogant for the 12 percent of the world's population that lives in North America and Western Europe to account for 60 percent of private consumption, while the one-third living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 3.2 percent?

Is it not arrogant for one-third of the food packaged for human consumption to be lost or wasted, while globally 10 percent of people are chronically undernourished?

And, is it not arrogant to allow the concrete industry to "pave paradise", while pumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and damaging fertile layers of our earth, causing soil erosion, water pollution and contributing to flooding?

Is it not arrogant to witness the droughts, fires, floods, hurricanes and melting glaciers connected to our emissions, excesses and inaction, and then deny these scientific truths?

Finally, Is it not arrogant (and down-right bullying) to silence others through leveraging one's position of wealth AND power!

Our lists could go on and on. But, let us consider for a moment what is often said to be the most quoted verse in the Bible:

My guess is most of us know it by heart. John 3:16 - **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that who so ever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life"**. But, how many of us recognize the verse that follows? **John 3:17: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"**

While few children today are raised learning these or similar verses, what they do know, and understand to their core, is that how we are living today, and the relationship we have to mother earth and to our fellow inhabitants, cannot be sustained. And, they "get" that it impacts the entirety of the planet!

The timing for today's message has **EVERYTHING** to do with the Climate Action Summit to be held at the United Nations in NYC, convening on September 23rd. It has **everything** to do with the Buffalo Youth CLIMATE STRIKE to be held this Friday, September 20th, 2:00 p.m. at Niagara Square. At that time, youth and adults will strike all across the United States AND the world to demand transformative action to address the climate crisis.

AND, it has **everything** to do with preparing for the February visit of Jim Antal. Jim, the author of *Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change*, was a friend of Tom Yorty's when both attended Yale seminary. His book was the subject of our summer Adult Education program and his winter visit will help prepare us for the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day next spring on April 22nd. His seminal work underscores how people of faith can address the most urgent moral crisis of our time; and, he has prescriptions for action and recipes for **HOPE**.

Just what is the role of youth in all this? This past March 15th, in what may have been the largest youth-led protest in history, an estimated 1.6 million students in 300 cities around the world walked out of schools to march for climate action.

Greta Thunberg, now 16 years old, is a Swedish teenager who is credited with raising global awareness of the risks posed by climate change, and with holding politicians to account for their lack of action on the climate crisis. To come to the United Nations summit she and a crew traveled on a zero-emissions racing yacht.

Yet, before Greta, there was Severn Cullis-Suzuki, a 12 year old from Vancouver who spoke at the United Nations Earth Summit in Brazil in 1992. She was subsequently referred to as "the girl who silenced the world". Representing a group of 12 & 13 year olds, called ECO, the Environmental Children's Organization, she appealed to the delegates with an impassioned plea. Her oft repeated refrain went like this: I'm only a child..... Here are excerpts from that speech:

"I'm only a child and I don't have all the solutions, but I want you to realize, neither do you! If you don't know how to fix it, please stop breaking it.

I'm only a child..... yet I know we are all part of a family, five billion strong, in fact, 30 million species strong and we all share the same air, water and soil – borders and governments will never change that.

I'm only a child..... yet I know we are all in this together and should act as one single world towards one single goal.

I'm only a child..... yet I know if all the money spent on war was spent on ending poverty and finding environmental answers, what a wonderful place this earth would be!"

Severn addressed the **interconnectedness** of **ALL** living things, AND the **interdependence!** Notably, Ms. Suzuki refers to the world's population as 5 billion in 1992. Back in 1965 when we were reading *Silent Spring*, the world's population was 3.3 billion. It is NOW 7.7 billion!!!!

Upon further reflection, looking back on our years at that small Presbyterian college in the heart of Michigan, I suspect our wise elders, the professors of religion, philosophy, science, human sciences and the arts who were shaping our curriculum, really did know what they were doing in their selection of campus-wide reads.

After all, Steinbeck had warned us of a sense of directionlessness and he had expressed concern about our moving into an uncertain future marked by huge population shifts, racial tensions, technological and industrial changes, AND unprecedented environmental destruction.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1962, he expressed this concern stating: "We have usurped many of the powers we once ascribed to God; fearful and unprepared, we have assumed **lordship** over the life or death of the whole world—of all living things."

So, our esteemed faculty may have had not just the concrete goal of adequately preparing graduates for professional careers, rather they were consciously shaping and cementing our core beliefs and values. In fact the stated mission was to prepare graduates who think critically, serve generously, lead purposefully and live responsibly as **stewards of the world they bequeath to future generations**. They would undoubtedly have agreed with what Jim Antal has referenced as “bending the moral arc of justice” **to ensure hope for the future.**

When 12 year old Severn Cullis-Suzuki spoke to the UN delegates in Rio, she concluded her speech, confronting the delegates, by saying, **“You grown ups say you love us. I challenge you, please make your actions reflect your words.”**

Amen