

A Sermon by John R. Claypool
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Scripture Reference: Romans 8:18-23

Two years ago I am not even sure I had heard the word "ecology," and I certainly did not realize the gigantic proportion of the problems this word stands for. Since then, however, we have all been inundated about what may happen very shortly to this planet earth; and whether we like it or not, we have to make some kind of response to all of this. It is part of the mission of the church that she should be involved with you in such an endeavor, which is why we are offering this particular emphasis at this time. It is appropriate both to our spiritual and historical lives, and in this sermon I would like to set the stage for what is to follow by trying to put the issue in as clear a perspective as possible.

The ecological problem, as I see it, is basically one of man's relationship to the various support systems of the world on which he depends for his life; specifically, the air, the earth, and the water. Both in quantity and in quality, this relationship is in trouble, which is why the dire threats of suffocation and starvation in the immediate future are being made. Perhaps we can grasp it more readily if I try to scale it down and illustrate it by something I once personally witnessed happening.

It occurred to a farmer in middle Tennessee who fixed up a dwelling on his place to house the tenant who was to work for him. This farmer went far beyond what many did in that area, for he saw to it that the house was not only wired amply for electricity, but he also installed a water system at no little expense that included a large cistern and inside plumbing. He "made a trade" as they put it in that community, and the new employee moved in, and right away my friend had his first misgivings, for the man turned out to have more children and relatives living with him than the farmer expected, and from the first, the five-room house was badly overcrowded. Two days after they moved, the owner was called and told that the water system had stopped working, only to find that the tenants had let the faucets run indiscriminately, and the whole cistern had been used up. Three nights later the house burned to the ground, and it was subsequently discovered that the electrical system had been overloaded by too many appliances. I remember standing in front of the remains of that house with the farmer as he expressed both his frustration and anger. "This was a decent place to live -a workable set-up -and look what they have gone and done. With a little judgment and insight, a family could have lived here for decades."

That scene comes to my mind when I hear of ecological problems, for here in tiny microcosm were some of the same dynamics. For example, part of the difficulty in this situation was a quantitative one -there were simply too many people trying to live in too small a space and off too few resources. No wonder that the water system and the energy system gave way. And of course, this same factor is basic to so many of our environmental problems today. There are simply too many people trying to inhabit this

spaceship called earth. The medical revolution that has made it possible for more people to be born and survive and live longer now threatens to turn on itself and destroy all life. The population explosion, unless somehow brought under control, will cause every problem we have so to escalate that they will be unmanageable. The quantity question, then -to my farmer friend and to the world -is basic.

But there was also a qualitative dimension to this little tragedy that cannot be ignored. This tenant family did not try to understand the support systems which made that house the livable unit it was, and out of such understanding to collaborate with them. Rather, they arrogantly acted as if their desires were the only factor to be considered. They never thought of a cistern that held only so much water or wires that could carry only so much electricity. It was as if these things were looked on as so much "stuff" to be treated any way they pleased, and thus the problem. They found out too late that these support systems had a life and structure of their own, and that they could strike back when abused. The same thing can be said about our treatment of the universe and its many support systems. We have related to the air and the earth and the water pretty much like those tenants related to the cistern and the electric wires, and this is why the whole thing is starting to collapse all around us. The quality of our relation here -that is, thinking we were all that mattered and that the universe has no life or structure of its own -has been our undoing.

To talk like this is to take a page straight out of the Bible, for if you look at the early chapters of Genesis, this is exactly the perspective you will encounter there. This world is pictured as being fashioned by a joyful Creator, and -to use a modern slang expression - this Creator really knew how "to put it all together." While what we have in Genesis are not scientific essays but religious poems, nonetheless they depict how masterfully everything fits together and works hand-in-hand with all else. There is an incredible balance between the various aspects of nature. For example, we humans need oxygen to survive, and we inhale this from the atmosphere and exhale carbon dioxide. However, many forms of plant life need carbon dioxide to live, and they inhale it and exhale oxygen. This is but one example of the fantastic balance built into the way God put it all together, and Genesis indicates that man's place was to be a knowing partner in this finely balanced process. He was called on to name the animals; that is, to understand their structures and penetrate the mystery of their lives, and then to collaborate with them in a reciprocity that flowed back and forth. Man was part of the animals' and plants' support system, just as they were part of his, and so life was to be.

However, Genesis records that a breakdown occurred in all this, and it pinpoints the problem with man and his refusal to be himself and to plan the part he was meant to play. Instead of being an insightful collaborator with all these support systems, man decided to assume the stance of an arrogant manipulator. Just like those mindless tenants, he refused to learn the "names" of what supported him, and chose rather to treat them any way he wanted to. As a result, all creation was thrown out of kilter, and instead of being collaborators together, everything assumed an adversary role -man began to have to battle his mate and brother and the animals and the earth and everything. The root cause here is

this quality of relation we have spoken of earlier, and it is the poison spring that contaminated all else.

This attitude of mindless arrogance toward the physical universe is why we have come to such an ecological impasse. By not realizing that the air and the earth and the water have lives and structures of their own and cannot be treated any way we please, we have seriously disrupted the balance of life and imperiled our survival. For example, by wiping out vast areas of plant life and covering them with inert concrete, or defoliating large segments of greenery so we can kill the enemy' better, we have threatened the oxygen-carbon dioxide balance and could well wind up suffocating. Or again, by dumping indiscriminate amounts of waste into our rivers and oceans we have unsettled the vital processes there. Lake Erie is today like a tank of poisonous chemicals, and many say it is a prophecy of what all our bodies of water will become. On and on I could go, but the evidence is clear. We are in big trouble with our environment -bigger trouble than we have known -and the problem is our human relation to the support systems of the air and the earth and the water on which our survival depends. In terms of quantity and quality, we are in trouble, and the question arises: what are we going to do about it? In light of this apocalyptic sword of Damocles hanging over our future, what response are we going to make?

Some people with great faith in man's rational power say: get out the facts. Tell people the situation! The problem, they feel, is basically one of ignorance, and if man can just be apprised of the situation and how he got into these straits and what the consequences are, then he surely will adapt and find ways to solve the problems. And I, for one, would not want to underestimate what this approach can accomplish. After all, our Lord himself recognized that much of the evil of life is rooted in blindness as well as in badness, and thus prayed from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Surely it is important that the alarm be sounded and that the facts be disseminated, for we would not even be as aware as we are now of this threat were it not for heralds of truth like Rachel Carson and many others.

Yet having said that, I must confess a real doubt of my own that information alone is going to be our salvation here. The problem is that man is not just a rational creature for whom knowing is the same as doing. He is, in fact, a complex creature of many facets, like, for example, emotions, fears, defenses, habits and other things. And for this reason getting men to change radically, even when their own self-interest is at stake, can be extraordinarily difficult. The way most people have responded to the link-up between tobacco and lung cancer is a revealing case in point. The evidence is now overwhelming that excessive smoking, particularly of cigarettes, is hazardous to health. Yet I know many people who do not contest this fact at all, but go right on smoking and intend to do so even if it means cancer and a shorter life.

And this is a side of the problem we have to face in terms of the ecological situation. It is not just a question of information or education for the simple reason that man is more than a mind. There is a darkness deeper down in us than that of not knowing. It is the

darkness of not wanting to be, of not wanting to live, of not wanting to grapple with existence as it is given to us in freedom and responsibility.

I am deeply impressed by the question Jesus asked the lame man who had lain helpless for thirty-eight years by the pool of Bethesda: "Do you want to be healed?" (John 5:6). On the surface that may sound like a ridiculous question, for we naively assume that everyone wants to be well and never sick. But Jesus realized it was not that simple. You see, paradoxical as it may sound, sickness has its own strange consolations. To be sick is to be exempt from responsibility and complex decision-making. It is to be taken care of instead of having to care for another. And after a while, it can become a habit, a way of life. Take this man by the pool for example. Thirty-eight years is a long time, and having grown accustomed to certain routines, a change, even back to health, would have involved costly adjustments. This is why Jesus was so right in asking the question: "Do you really want to be healed?" He meant by this: are you prepared to change and accept the new challenges of health? Are you willing to pay the price that must be paid if healing becomes a reality?

I contend this is the question facing all of us as far as ecology is concerned. Do we really want to be healed? That is what we have to ponder, and we need to think about what it involves. A simplistic "yes" may not truly represent the way we really feel about this matter.

For example, wanting to be healed means admitting openly and honestly that there is a problem and that we are sick and are partly at fault. Some of the hardest words a human being ever has to utter are: "I am wrong. I have sinned. I have made a mistake." And our capacities for denial and evasion here are massive. In fact, I know many people right now who refuse to believe there is an ecological crisis, and dismiss it as another Communist plot or a fad that is soon to pass again. Our ability to choose fantasy over actuality and accept only what we want to be true runs very deep, and this is part of what has to be faced in wanting to be healed. We have to have reality-perception enough and courage enough to admit: we are sick. We are ecological sinners. We are at fault.

Another facet of being healed is a willingness to become involved in the cure and not expect it to be done for us without any cost or effort. There is a childishness that likes to sit and wait and have some super-power solve all his problems for him. In religious terms, this is called "quietism," and can be seen in the people who say: "God must do it all. We are to wait, sit passively, and let Him intervene." While there are probably millions like this, there are even more whom I would call "secular quietists"; that is, they do not expect God to intervene, but they do expect our vaunted technology to come up with some innovation that will solve all of this without any pain. You have heard people talk of the mythical "they" -"they" will come up with this or that, and pretty soon all will be well. And as a result we do not have to change a thing, but can go right on as we are. Really wanting to be healed is putting aside this kind of childishness and recognizing that because we are the ones who are sick and have made ourselves sick, we must be involved painfully in any cure. A theme that runs through all the Bible is the assertion that

"without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin," and this means that salvation or healing always involves suffering or it never happens.

And right here is where I have my greatest uneasiness about all of us and this question of healing the ecological wound that runs so deep. What is going to have to change is our style of life, the way we have become accustomed to living and consuming and acting. Are we willing to adapt at the level? The Good Life -however vaguely it may be defined -has most of us securely in its clutches, and this glut of affluence is one of the main culprits to our environment. Do you realize that in 1969 our country alone produced 48 billion cans and 28 billion bottles to be disposed of, to say nothing of the 7 million cars that had to be junked and the 142 billion tons of pollution we emptied into the air? It is estimated that the average American is anywhere from 25 to 500 times as destructive of his environment as the average Indian peasant, which is why the ecological night of total extinction may well come to America first. These are the apocalyptic facts, and Jesus' question is the real issue: "Do we want to be healed?" Which means, are we willing to undergo the radical alteration. of life style that will be called for if the balance of man and air and earth and water is to be restored? Nothing less than this will really touch the depths of the problem. Yet, nothing could be harder than to get people to change what they have grown accustomed to having and spending and consuming. I must admit that I fluctuate between pessimism and optimism at this point. At times I have very little hope, for I realize how deeply ingrained our habits are and that nothing is harder to alter than habit. As the *Threepenny Opera* puts it:

For even saintly folk will act like sinners
Unless they have their customary dinners.

And this is not just other people's problems; this is a problem for me personally. In preparing this sermon, I was forced to ask: what real change have you made in your life style since learning of the ecological crisis? We have changed soap powder, take shorter showers and try to buy lead-free gas, but I still have two eight-cylinder cars, have done nothing to work for mass transit systems, still buy plastic milk cartons, and have yet to write that first public official in either support or disagreement. If I am to do my part in the healing, one hundred times more radicality than I have shown thus far is going to be called for. And while a few are doing more, I do not see many people aroused, and thus my pessimism. Are we willing to pay the price?

But then I pick up the Bible and read in Romans how "the whole creation waits in eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God ... "; how "all creation is groaning in travail together" until at last it is "freed from the bondage of decay" and "obtains the glorious liberty of the children of God." And then some optimism rises in me, for I realize that God is on the side of health and wholeness and is at work for good in all this as he always has been. This does not mean he is going to do everything for us so that without any pain or effort what is crooked will come straight. Even for God, "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin." But it does mean that we are not alone in our efforts. The promise of God applies to ecology; if we will confess our sin, he will do something in faithfulness and justice to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all

unrighteousness. If we will just be sons of God with all the responsibility and freedom that implies, things could be different.

There is hope, then, but it is not automatic. We do not have to be saved in this area or in any other. It is the ultimate dignity of man to decide finally whether he wants to be healed or not healed, or more profoundly, whether he wants to live or to die. I talk occasionally with people who are threatening suicide, and while I do everything in my power to persuade them against it, I remind them that the choice finally is theirs. To live or not to live, and how one shall live, these are decisions no one can make for another. Which is where the question of ecology finally leads. I am convinced we can be healed and save both the earth and ourselves, but in order for this to happen, we have to want to be healed and to be willing to undergo the treatment that this involves. And to want to be healed means you must want to live and not die. So the question is: do we want to live? Deuteronomy pictures Moses as standing before Israel for the last time and saying: "I call heaven and earth to witness this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life" (30: 19) . This remains the challenge to every generation, and to us.

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