

St. James Episcopal, Pewee Valley June 13, 2010

I have a confession to make. When I was young I often fought with my brother, Tony. Not just yelling and screaming, but real fighting. I hit him, I kicked him. I hurt him. And to make matters worse, I often lied to cover it up. Maybe this doesn't seem like a big thing to you, but I am sure it was big to him. When I make public admissions of guilt I get embarrassed. I am worried about how it makes me look. I don't like the way it makes me feel. I would rather feel good about myself. I would rather act like it didn't happen. I guess that's human nature.

Today's Old Testament reading from 2nd Samuel is about David who lusted for his neighbor's wife then arranged to have the man killed in order to take her as his own. God then sends Nathan to teach David a lesson by telling a story about a man who treats his neighbor unfairly. The story plays upon David's sense of justice and enrages him until Nathan tells David that "He is the man!" Today when someone says "You da man!" it's a good thing. But not when Nathan said it to David.

In the Gospel reading Jesus told a story to the Pharisee to help him see his wrong doings.

I am here today speaking to you like Nathan spoke to David, like Jesus to the Pharisee. I have a story to tell you:

There once was a family that lived in the mountains. They loved the mountains. The land they lived on was passed down to them from their ancestors and the mountains took care of them. The mountains gave them clean water to drink and air to breathe and food to eat. They praised God for creating the mountains and all the creatures of the land and all the birds of the air. Then, one day, men came and blew up the mountains and hauled them away. They poisoned the waters and defiled the soil. They killed the birds of the air and the creatures of the land and made the people sick. The children that were born to the mountains died.

This story that I tell you, like Nathan's story, should touch upon your sense of justice. I am here to tell you that "You are the man!" Yes, we are all the men. We hired those men to destroy the mountains. In Appalachia, over 450 mountains have been destroyed and over 1000 streams have been filled in. An area the size of the state of Delaware has been destroyed. This is an environmental disaster on scale with the Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico. And one that cannot be cleaned up. And we are to blame. Like me when I was a child, we don't want to talk about it. We don't want to take blame for it. We don't like the way it makes us feel. We would rather act like it didn't happen or we are not to blame. But we are all guilty. We consume electricity at alarming rates. We do it in the name of economics. We demand cheap electricity, so we go to coal. Blowing up mountains and trucking away the coal is cheaper than deep mining. Coal provides about 95% of our electricity here in Kentucky. But coal has a price that we don't pay – the people of the mountains do.

In addition to the problems with mining coal, there are the problems from burning coal. Coal is the dirtiest of the fossil fuels and therefore causes the worst health problems. Coal fired power plants are the single biggest polluter in the country. Annually coal plants emit:

- 10,000 tons of sulfur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>), which causes acid rain and forms small airborne particles that can penetrate deep into lungs.
- 500 tons of small airborne particles, which can cause chronic bronchitis, aggravated asthma, and even premature death.
- 10,200 tons of nitrogen oxide that leads to formation of ozone which in turn burns through lung tissue making people more susceptible to respiratory illness.
- 720 tons of carbon monoxide, which causes headaches and places additional stress on people with heart disease.
- 170 pounds of mercury, which have made much of our fish unsafe to eat.
- 225 pounds of arsenic, which will cause cancer in one out of 100 people who drink water containing merely 50 parts per billion.
- 114 pounds of lead, 4 pounds of cadmium, other toxic heavy metals.

About 5 million children in the United States now have asthma, according to the CDC. Asthma is responsible for one-third of all pediatric emergency room visits. It is the No. 1 cause of school absenteeism. Treating childhood asthma now costs the United States an estimated \$2 billion annually. Even more troubling is the increase in childhood asthma rates in recent years. The number of children who have asthma has increased by 58%

I realize all this sounds really depressing. But remember God forgave David for murdering his neighbor and taking his wife and Jesus forgave the woman with the alabaster jar, so I am sure God forgives us. And the good news is we won't have the severe punishment that God gave David. God will not make our children ill and kill them.

Jobs for coal miners is usually the reason we use to justify our coal consumption, but is it coal jobs we need or simply jobs. Coal jobs pay well, but there are less than 13,000 coal miners employed in the entire state of Kentucky. Communities that have had mining jobs for decades continue to be plagued by poverty. Coal has not brought long-term prosperity for these communities. We need to pressure our leaders to stop mountaintop removal coal mining and it is time that we transition away from coal like we transitioned away from tobacco. As coal miners retire, don't replace them. Instead let's provide jobs for solar installers, energy auditors, and insulators. We can build solar panels in here in Kentucky; we already make Tedlar, an epoxy used in solar panels, at Dupont in the west end of Louisville.

As I mentioned earlier, Kentucky gets about 95% of its electricity from coal. This makes us vulnerable to increases in coal costs whether they come from market increases, legislation to regulate carbon emissions, or costs of carbon sequestration. Is there anyone here who has 95% of their retirement invested in one company's stock? We need to diversify our energy portfolio. As power plants reach their useful life, don't replace them with coal plants, but solar or wind instead.

Germany has less sunlight per year than Kentucky and yet they are world leaders in solar energy. They decided to transition away from coal even though they had a strong coal industry. They knew that coal was not a renewable resource and moving to something cleaner and more sustainable was inevitable. They passed laws to make solar more economically feasible and people all over the country started buying in.

China is growing its solar capacity quickly and has surpassed the US in alternative energy production. Ohio recently passed a law to increase its renewable energy sources and it has put them well ahead of Kentucky in alternative energy expertise.

Changing where we get our energy is only part of the solution. We need to reduce our electricity usage and be more efficient. We need to change our light bulbs and change our hearts. How many light bulbs does it take to change a Christian? We need to buy energy efficient appliances and reduce our use of air conditioning. We can buy programmable thermostats to keep our AC at a minimum when we are away from home and have them cool the house before we get home. We can make changes at our church and work place. Do public places like stores and malls really have to be so cold?

We can add insulation, plant shade trees and close the blinds to keep the sun out. We can unplug appliances that use energy when they are turned off. Hang our laundry on the clothes line. Disconnect the automatic ice maker. Put motion sensors on our outside lighting. The solutions are many.

We need to do this because God calls us to love our neighbors, including our neighbors in Appalachia. We need to do this because burning coal pollutes our neighbor's air and if we continue, our children will get ill. This is a moral issue. The 70<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the Episcopal Church declared that Christian Stewardship calls on us to live our lives with responsible concern for the sustainability of the environment and urged "all Episcopalians to reflect on their personal and corporate habits in the use of God's creation." We have the technology! We have alternative ways to make electricity. It won't be easy, but doing so we will fulfill the job that God gave us in Genesis 2:15 to protect the earth. And when we make choices to use less energy, we can do so with love and intentionality.

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