

## Sustained by Love: Caring for the Earth

John 21: 15-19

Sunday, February 7, 2016

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This month I want to offer you a sermon series on “Who we are” – this community of faith, the Congregational Church of Needham, a church of the United Church of Christ, and an Open and Affirming church. It is my hope that this series is part of preparing us for the work we are about to do as suggested by the Rev. Hayes in November with a new Interim Senior minister. In order for us to find out where we wish to go, we need to take a look at where we are and what inspires us. What we do and how we live into our faith, says a lot of where our passions, where our love is.

So I have picked four areas of our church work that I want to take a closer look at which I believe are most important for us as a church; and not just for us. They are the four corners of any solid house of faith. And they are: Creation Care, Radical Welcome, Education, and Outreach. We care deeply about the environment, about being a welcoming and inclusive community, and we value education – for ourselves and for our children, and I think we would not hesitate to give away our “last shirt” so those who need it more than we do when it comes to Outreach.

And yes, not everyone cares equally strongly about all these areas. But that is the beauty of a church like ours. People have joined this church for all kinds of reasons, and hopefully they find a place or a ministry that speaks to them. Here, in this church, there is room for all different kinds of passions and energies that are put into the expression of our faith, different and diverse ways to follow Jesus and to find the best ways, most meaningful ways to do the ministry in Jesus’ name that he has set before us for our lifetime.

So with that said, let’s dive in. The Bible does not anything about the dangers of Climate Change, Global Warming, the dangers of pesticides, melting glaciers, warming oceans, the dangers of the increase of carbon dioxide due to all sorts of air pollution, but the Bible talk incessantly about loving neighbor as self, respecting and taking care of creation, seeing and using earth like a precious gift.

Jesus says nothing about the protection of the environment. Zero! But he says over and over again to love our neighbor, to love and to take care of the stranger. And he told us how: to feed them, to heal them, to love them unconditionally, to protect them, to include them, to teach them, to pay attention to them.

And because of that, we might think that Climate Change is not a religious and spiritual issue. It sure is a political and economic issue, even a justice issue. But a religious one? Some might question that. Politically, climate change and all the issues included, is a highly divisive topic. Let's just put it out there. And that is not where I want to go.

But if the basis of our faith still is to "Love God, and love neighbor as ourselves," we need to have the courage to bring our faith into this conversation about Climate Change, and to realize and admit that our bonds of mutual affection are stronger than any disagreement that may arise. For all that I know about our faith, we are called to enter into a prayerful and caring conversation about climate change and climate justice.

The Rev. Cannon Sally Bingham, who is the founder of what is today known as the Interfaith Power and Light, has said that "Climate change is the biggest moral issue of our time because it affects everybody and everything living on this earth. It will affect us now, today, and it will affect future generations, including our children, our grandchildren, our neighbors, and every living creature. What we do or not do, small or big, matters, and it will have a long-lasting effect on this planet."

Even though the signs are all over that our climate is changing, there are times when we have a hard time believing and caring about it. It is hard to care about something when we don't feel it, or see it, or it doesn't have a direct impact on us.

For example, looking back at last winter and what a bear it was, the news people get overly excited, and they can wait to tell us, if we have broken some sort of record. Big snowy winters have happened before 50 or 100 years ago, so what is the big deal?

When islands in the Pacific disappear because of rising sea levels, it does not have an immediate impact on us. It matters though to the people who had to leave their home. When wheat prizes shoot up because there is less of it due to droughts, our cereal costs a few pennies more, big deal? It matters though to those who don't have those extra pennies, or to those countries who depend on that wheat and can't afford to buy it. Climate change, for the most part does not affect us – yet, it does, and already has affected the vulnerable and poor countries and people who don't have the resources to fix things.

Bad weather, natural disasters, ice ages, earth warmups have happened throughout human history, and humankind has managed so far, right? So what is the big deal? Why should we care? Why should we make climate change a matter of our faith?

Jesus' words to Peter seem to have nothing to do with Climate Change, either. Feed my sheep; Feed my lambs! If you love me, feed my sheep! Jesus says to Peter.

These words come at the very end of John's gospel. The risen Christ appears to Peter. Jesus could have said, "Go back to fishing! We had a good run, but we did not succeed. We did not change the world. So, go back to fishing, and take care of your loved one." But instead, Jesus tells Peter to continue the work.

We know that ministry of the early church was marked by feeding people, taking care of the poor, the sick, widows, orphans. There was no shortage of the poor and needy people. But they also began to feed people spiritually – sharing with them the good news of JC, his love for people, his focus on finding a close relationship with God which in turn would inform one's whole life; enacting the golden rule.

Feeding people has always been a struggle for humankind. There have been plenty of famines that have decimated the world's population. Droughts have always existed. And the occasional agricultural disaster (issues that led to dust bowl in the Great Plains) has driven people to the brink of death. At this very moment some 795 million people have not enough food to live a healthy life ([www.WorldFoodProgram.org](http://www.WorldFoodProgram.org)). Again, this might be hard to feel because you and I have plenty to

eat. Most of us sitting here do not know what it means to starve, or to really go hungry. God forbid we miss a meal, right?

We know that climate change has a big negative impact on food production. Feeding people is becoming more and more difficult, and the only way to counteract that is to make sure that we explore ways that make it possible to feed everybody but keep this earth healthy and whole. That is a challenge, but it is possible

Jesus' words to Peter go beyond that literal/practical meaning. Jesus says more. When Jesus said "Feed my Sheep! he says, "Take care of them. Every one of them." Taking care goes beyond just feeding people, as important as that is. Taking care means that all people should have clean air to breathe and water to drink, a safe place to live, health care, education, equal opportunities.

And what is the motivating factor in all of this? What will sustain this hard work of caring for ourselves, our neighbors, and for the earth? Jesus answers that question. "Feed my sheep, if you love me!"

Love is and always will be our motivation for pretty much everything we do. Lots of voices want to fear us into changing our ways. But fear has never been a good, sustainable motivator. Love is.

Dean Ornisch, MD said the following in an article on How to fix Climate Change: "Love is more powerful than fear as a sustainable motivator. If it's meaningful, then it's sustainable. If it feels good, then it's sustainable... Love, Not Fear, Will Help Us Fix Climate Change!" (1)

Needless to say, we, as people of faith cannot close our eyes to climate change, and I am grateful to our Environmental Ministry Team that has done great work for us over the years and continues to keep our "feet to the fire."

We have done a good amount of work: energy audit, insulating walls, energy-efficient light bulbs, composting efforts, recycling, new boilers that will leave a smaller carbon footprint, new windows in

the sanctuary, setting thermostats to the actual need, cleaning radiators – all that matters. Can we do more? Of course we can, and should.

It is important to remember that every little step we take as individuals, as a community of faith, as town, and country matters. To take on Climate Change as a whole seems like an unsurmountable task while in fact, every little bit we – you and I – do, matters, now and for the future.

Loving our neighbors, loving the earth, loving ourselves, is our moral, religious, and spiritual responsibility. And it will have the biggest impact and will only be sustained when it is done out of love – true, genuine, caring, respectful love.

Amen.

Sources:

- (1) See the full article at: <http://time.com/3450002/love-not-fear-will-help-us-fix-climate-change/>
- (2) For further reading: Rev. Cannon Sally Bingham message to the Austin Interfaith Power and Light address, Oct. 22, 2011  
*[txipl.org/.../rev-sally-binghams-message-austins-interfaith-community](http://txipl.org/.../rev-sally-binghams-message-austins-interfaith-community)*