

Sermon

Good morning. Thank you for welcoming me into your sanctuary.

Well, this is sort of a surprise. Me, standing up here

This whole church, faith, religion thing is sort of new to me. I've certainly gone to church throughout my life, and as I tell people, I've read parts of the Bible. I've even given a sermon before. But I find myself standing in front of you not simply delivering a sermon, but standing here as a leader in a movement based on faith. Didn't see that one coming when I voluntarily left my job last year as CEO of groSolar, the national solar company I founded.

Your Pastor Peter, and Tom Stevens, asked me here to preach about the symposium we held in Strafford this summer. Called Our Children, Climate, Faith, we sought to bring focused thought and discussion to the concept that increasing climate disruption leads to increasing social injustice (especially for our children), and that since fighting for social justice is the cornerstone of all faith movements, fighting the causes of climate disruption becomes an imperative for any life of faith or spirituality today. Simple, right?

My Pastor, Byron Breese, and I conceived of the original germ of this idea while sitting around our dining room table over lunch one day as we discussed what action the church could take on climate. I said that after working on communicating the issue for over a decade through science and rational thought, that I felt that maybe we needed a new language to communicate and reach a new, larger audience. In my time off after groSolar, I had been trying to figure out what motivated me. And I have come to recognize that my own ill-defined faith and spirituality provides at least some of the inspiration to drive myself relentlessly to work on stopping climate change. And then THE thought occurred to me. Maybe speaking to people from the point of view of faith would provide the motivation, awaken the passion, that we need to unleash, to reign in climate disruption.

Byron said to me "We should hold a symposium, you know, get Bill McKibben to speak, and talk about how climate change will affect our kids." After denying three times that we could pull off getting my friend Bill McKibben, let alone holding a conference in our sleepy town, I relented. Well, we snagged Bill, and then formed a steering committee because suddenly we realized we were going to put on a conference and only had 5 months before the curtain opened! We formed a steering committee with three Unitarian Universalists, a Catholic, a self-described Pluralist Christian, and me (the CEO / engineer), with the least theological background. And since no one else would write a meeting agenda, I appointed myself as Chair. Then the magic happened which made the Symposium more than just another conference.

We realized first, that most people had not made the connection that climate disruption causes increasing social injustice. (For example, hurricane Irene destroyed homes without prejudice,

but people's ability to rebuild varied widely, widening existing social inequities, and creating social injustice.) We also realized, and this was news to me and a revelation to many, that fighting social injustice / fighting for social justice, is at the foundation of all religious and spiritual movements. For example, this week when I asked your Pastor, Peter, to choose a gospel verse for today, which related to social justice, his reply was that "the charge to find a new testament reading related to social justice is both easy and difficult. Easy because that's all Jesus was about..." Fighting for social justice is core to the revelation that was Christ's life. Similarly, as we recruited speakers from all faiths and spiritualities, and explored this topic with them, their uniform responses were stunning.

- yes, fighting social injustice / working for social justice is at the foundation of the understanding of their religion or spirituality, almost before their important texts, what I term "pre-theological".
- yes, they would be glad to speak and help in any way they could.
- they knew of no one else anywhere who had created and raised this conversation connecting climate, social justice, and faith.

As I said, this response was uniform, across Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhist faiths, and across Shamanic, Native American, and Earth spiritualities. Since we've worked on the symposium, I have found other groups that are working to connect the two issues of social justice and climate disruption. And this is good and important work, but I do not believe it is enough. Through the symposium I have come to believe that we cannot win the battle with science and purely rational thought and action. Nor can we win it with purely theological arguments. We need passion, strong passion, rooted in love. For most people I know, passion has some root in spirituality.

Another thing we heard, and this relates directly to Martin Luther King, Jr's words, we heard that tackling the issue of climate disruption may be what makes organized religion relevant again. In fighting climate disruption because it causes social injustice, organized religion may once again reconnect to its true roots and origin, and find its place in our lives, connecting our faith to a purpose outside ourselves driven by the passion for God's love inside ourselves.

So, what happened at the symposium?

I won't go into the details, the planning, logistics, fundraising, website, media outreach and other work involved. That's logistics and planning, not motivation and passion. For the two months leading up to the event I worked almost 40 hours a week on it, while others worked less. I don't say that to toot my horn, but to show that a small committee with one or two people dedicating significant time can put on a major event. The steering committee was critical for the thought leadership and connections that each person brought, not for their long hours. Except of course during the event when everyone and more worked many hours to put

on what many attendees said was the best run conference of any kind that they had ever attended.

We had attracted speakers of national, even international standing. Bill McKibben, Mary Evelyn Tucker of Yale, who with her husband basically invented the study of the ecological thought of major religions. Rabbi Michael Cohen, of Manchester Center and Israel, who is doing groundbreaking work with youth from Israel and Jordan and Palestine, teaching them about working together on the major environmental issues. And then we had Shyla Nelson from Burlington. In brief, Shyla has taken, with permission, a song of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, and has sought to have people sing it to draw them together over concern for the Earth. You heard this song earlier, Ise Oluwa. How did Shyla decide to popularize this song, turn it into a movement? Why, she took a 14" glass globe (the Earth is fragile) and traveled to 14 destinations around the world, carrying the globe in her hands, meeting people, and teaching them the song so that they could all sing it in unison on December 21, 2012. She went to places like Nigeria, the Yoruba homeland, twice. Imagine a tall blond-hair blue-eyed American woman, alone, with a 14" glass globe in her arms, traveling to Nigeria. That's what I call naïve... Or maybe she just has faith. I've always said that naïveté is my strong suit, but I've come to understand that it may have been my faith showing itself without me knowing. Shyla sought to change the world through song, in the tradition best shown by the singing revolution of Estonia. She has given us a shining example of how to use our naïveté and faith to start great change.

Shyla's story was powerful in many ways, and both captivated and motivated the audience. As Bill McKibben put it in his talk, he is the "professional bummer-outer." Shyla is the professional booster-upper.

But the single most powerful speakers of the symposium were the kids. While we named the symposium "Our Children, Climate, Faith", we expected that the adults in the room would figure out the answers and create the solutions. That's our job, right, take care of the children and solve the problems? Well fifteen year old Leah Booher and seventeen year old Margaret Gish, were our Youth panel on Saturday after lunch. Filling that time slot well, they kept everyone awake and alert with their knowledge, poise, and articulate answers to questions such as "What should I say to my grandchildren?" (To which they answered: Teach them about the value and beauty of the world when they are young, and as they grow, let them know that it is imperiled, and what they can do to help.)

In my summary remarks of the event, I asked the audience if they had heard the despair in the voices of the two girls. I asked if they had seen the lack of hope in their gestures and in their eyes... Slowly across the crowd I heard "no, no, no". No one had heard despair because the girls did not voice despair. In all their words and thoughts the girls had voiced... hope. I said that perhaps they voiced hope because they were naïve... except that these two girls knowledge on

climate issues exceeded the knowledge of most of the audience. So then I said perhaps they voiced hope because... they have faith. Faith in the future. Faith in their own ability to change the world. Faith that they can teach us, give us hope, bring us along to save our world. Faith that it's not too late. Faith in their deep love for the world and the people of the world. Who here is willing to stand up and say they are wrong?

Who thinks these girls are right? This is the participatory part of this sermon. Who will stand up, right here, right now, and say these two girls are right? Will you all stand up with Leah and Margaret?

(Thank you, for taking a small action today. You may sit now, for a bit)

Climate, social justice and faith. Separately, each one is insurmountable or irrelevant. I suggest that faith without earthly context, which has been the path of faith for too many in the US for too long, is irrelevant. That's a strong word and a strong thought, I know, but God put us on the Earth. Thus, faith, without earthly context, is irrelevant. Likewise, climate disruption seems insurmountable, and social injustice seems like an intractable problem. Even tackling climate change with the lever of increasing social justice does not provide sufficient hope for success to motivate us for what is, realistically, the hardest thing humanity has ever attempted.

But working on the three together, climate, social justice, and faith, creates a triangle of strength, reinforcing the actions on each vertex. John Lewis of Georgia, a civil rights leader, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who studied with Myles Horton at the Highlander Folk School, said:

"The new theology (Myles Horton) studied posited that faith should respond not only to the ethereal needs of humanity, but it should have a holistic impact on the lives of believers and on the communities in which they lived. If faith had power, he declared, then its ability should be challenged to answer even our physical and material concerns and not be reserved for religious services and activities. If faith had meaning, its benefits should accrue not only after death, but it should have the capacity to answer the cries of humanity here and now..."

Faith gives us the hope and the energy and the love to fight for social justice, and for a sustaining climate. This work brings earthly relevance to the practice of our faith, "to answer the cries of humanity here and now..."

What next? A question for both me and for all who have been involved in the event.

Shyla Nelson has moved to Strafford, and we and others are working on a variety of projects. There will be another symposium on a similar topic in Florida in February, and a second annual

Symposium in Strafford. A dozen people are working on the Language Project, working to reclaim language to make it relevant and helpful in our work of faith and spirituality, to heal ourselves and our relationship with the Earth. Words matter. Gregory and Helen Wilson are leading development of Earth Recovery Groups modeled on the 12 step program. And I am working with Shyla on developing ARC. A R C. The letters do not stand for anything, but the word does conjure up many strong and powerful symbols across many faith and spiritual traditions.

ARC's Mission Statement is

ARC is an international initiative of song, story and celebration of life, addressing rising social injustice caused by climate disruption. ARC bridges global society by sparking profound individual connections through faith and spiritual traditions. Harnessing the power of online campaigning and grassroots community-building, ARC inspires and empowers immediate actions advancing a just and sustainable Earth.

Now let me tell you how surprising it is that a Type A, Engineer, CEO like me helped write this. Never would have happened before the Symposium. I have been transformed so that I can see where this mission can create the change we need.

In the middle 1800's, the Reverend Theodore Parker, later quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." But as Bill McKibben said at the Symposium, "***The arc of the physical universe is short, and it bends toward heat. And if we don't win quickly, we're not going to win.***" More of us locally have become active in current campaigns, including the anti-Keystone pipeline work. Quite a few of us have vowed that we risk arrest when and as needed to block this or other unsustainable projects. My wife, Dori, is leading one of those groups, creating an event that will purposefully lead to arrest. At the Symposium, Bill McKibben went on to say that he was glad to see us all there, but he will be gladder if he sees us the next time in jail.

We have also taken up the campaign to Divest from Fossil Fuel companies. Understanding that it is immoral to take money from companies who are destroying our planet and who are driving the increase in social injustice, we are working with our congregations to divest their endowments from fossil fuel stocks. The Unitarian Universalist Church in Strafford has just ratified this. As the newly elected Moderator of the United Church of Strafford (another outcome from the Symposium) I have personally pledged that my church will also publicly take this action within the year. I hope that this church will join us.

In summary, the things that stay with me from the symposium are:

- The hope and faith expressed by our youth speakers
- The idea that we need direct, personal, visible and immediate action to shine the light on the crisis.
- The understanding that faith can, and must, drive the motivation, the passion, and the ability to undertake the actions needed
- My connection to my faith, which has grown 10-fold through this work, and continues to grow.

What you have heard today has largely been my story. In this building today there are 50 people who could do the same or more, by simply deciding to do it. It is that easy, and it is that hard. That's how all movements are born, by people deciding to take personal responsibility and action, now. People who put their faith, their beliefs, their love, into action, into relevance.

Just as love becomes visible by our actions, there is an African Proverb which says: "When you pray, move your feet." Come move with me.

Amen

Benediction

Now, move out into the world, into the light, with the love of God surrounding you. Know that the great burden we must carry becomes light if we carry it with love, if we carry it with faith, in our hearts.