

“Global Warming and the Stewardship of Creation”

Date: July 20, 2014

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Genesis 1:26-31; Isaiah 24:4-6

Theme: Global Warming

Occasion: Sermon series, social issues

Of all the topics I have chosen to preach upon this summer, this one has caused me to question my beginning assumptions. Since I was a Boy Scout and worked on my Conservation merit badge, I have been an advocate of ecology and working to preserve nature. I love the outdoors and it grieves me to think that we may be doing irreparable harm to our planet.

However, in doing research for this sermon, I discovered that a lot of people are questioning the science and the motives behind the global warming outcry. At first I thought they were a fringe group, fearful of anything intellectual and bent on discrediting anything that “so-called experts” had to say.

Then I discovered that at least 40% of the American population *doesn't* believe that humans are the cause of changes we're noticing in the climate. One report revealed that there is a tremendous disconnect between what the scientific community proclaims and what the public believes. I wondered why and it made me think.

You might be wondering why we're even talking about this in church. Isn't the business of church “saving souls?” Why should the church get involved in a political debate about global warming? This morning I hope to share with you a theology of stewardship of creation, a way of thinking about this - from a faith perspective.

In Genesis 1:28, God tells the human race: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of

the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Imagine that! God the Creator trusts us to care for the creatures and the creation God has made. To have dominion, or to rule over, does not necessarily mean to dominate it. It also carries the meaning to care for it. God has given us the responsibility to care for everything God has made.

In Isaiah 24, we learn that even the earth is subject to the consequences of sin. Verses 5 and 6: “The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. *Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear the guilt.*”

But there is hope. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 we read: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin *and will heal their land.*”

For me, the key verse is found in Psalm 24, verse 1: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” God is the owner of all that God has created. God is the One who can claim ownership of all the land, no matter what the deed to our properties may say.

But out of love, God has given us the privilege and the responsibility to care for the Creation. We are to use it wisely – yes – to harvest the resources for human consumption, but to do so in a way that cares for the earth and for future generations. We are to be stewards, caretakers, of the environment and of all God’s creatures.

Those are some of the Scriptures that I would use in developing a theology of stewardship for Creation. But what does the tradition,

the teaching of our denomination have to say? Actually, it has to say a lot, and so I'm not going to read you everything that I found, but just a few sentences. In *the 2012 Book of Discipline* it says:

“All Creation is under the authority of God and all creation is interdependent. Our covenant with God requires us to be stewards, protectors and defenders of all creation. The use of natural resources is a universal concern and responsibility of all, as reflected in Psalm 24:1, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.”

In our Social Principles, under the paragraphs dealing with the Natural World, we as United Methodists are told: “We acknowledge the global impact of humanity’s disregard for God’s creation. Rampant industrialization and the corresponding increase in the use of fossil fuels have led to a buildup of pollutants in the earth’s atmosphere.” It goes on:

“These greenhouse gas” emissions threaten to alter dramatically the earth’s climate for generations to come with severe environmental, economic and social implications. We therefore support efforts of all governments to require mandatory reductions in greenhouse emissions and call on individuals, congregations, businesses, industries and communities to reduce their emissions.”

Scripture and Tradition, that is the teaching of the Church, call upon individuals and governments alike to reduce greenhouse emissions so that we can slow down the threat of global warming, and thus a catastrophe impacting the entire planet.

But when we turn to the evidence, what I’ve been referring to in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as *Experience*, we begin to have a divergence of what the evidence is, and what it means. There are

hundreds of articles pro and con that argue for and against the scientific evidence. Let me read you one summary that I found online on the webpage Wikipedia:

“The scientific opinion on climate change is that the Earth’s climate system is unequivocally warming, and it is extremely likely (at least 95% probability) that humans are causing most of it through activities that increase concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.”

In contrast, listen to this quote from Martin Durkin who made a documentary entitled “The Great Global Warming Swindle.” After critiquing much of the science that has been used to support the world-wide panic about global warming he says:

“Global warming has become a story of huge political significance; environmental activists use scare tactics to further their cause; scientists adding credence to secure billions of dollars in research money; politicians after headlines and a media happy to play along. No one dares speak against it for risk of being unpopular, losing funds and jeopardizing careers.”

And so, back and forth it goes. Those who doubt global warming calling the other side “Chicken Little,” for fear that the sky is falling when it’s not. Those who advocate for conservation methods calling the other side “deniers,” putting them in the same category as those who still believe the earth is flat and we never went to the moon. Experience, or evidence, is not the final arbiter.

Can we find a reasonable response that is faithful to the biblical mandate to be caretakers and stewards of Creation? I believe there is. In my research I ran across a book review in the periodical

Christian Century. They were reviewing an author by the name of Michael Northcott, the title of his book *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*. In his book he argues that we should be concerned about the environment, but for different reasons than those usually given.

Instead of arguing based on the consequences (if don't do something now we, or our children, or grandchildren, or the people of poorer countries will be in deep trouble. Instead, he argues we should change our behavior simply because it's the right thing to do.

Quote: "The rituals encouraged by the recognition of global warming – turning off lights, turning down the heating, cycling or walking instead of driving, vacationing closer to home, buying local food, shopping less and conversing more with others – these are good things to do because they are intrinsically right, not just because they have the consequence of reducing carbon emissions."

I don't know whether you believe or disbelieve the arguments made by scientists about global warming. I happen to believe them. But I respect your right to disagree with them. But on this one thing, as Christians we must all agree – God calls us to be good stewards of Creation.

We must use our best thinking and our best practices to protect and care for the planet that is our home. We don't get another one. Perhaps global warming isn't as bad as the deniers say. But what if the scientists are right?

Each of us, in our own way, must do our part to help protect the planet. Ecology, conservation – they're not just for tree-huggers. It's for all of us, for God has given us that responsibility. Amen.