

Religion and the Environment

An address by the Rev. Sally Bingham

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Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God. It is the road itself. --Martin Buber

It is, indeed, an honor to be here today to speak to you. I am so particularly delighted to be on the same stage/podium as the Bishop. His remarks are to be taken seriously and I have the deepest respect for him and his words. It is a humbling experience to share the day with The Rt. Rev. John Chane. Thank you, also to the people that made it possible for me to be here today, Reid Detchon, Rich Killmer and others. A thank you, too, to my friends who are hosting me and for the friends who came a long distance to be here this morning.

I was introduced as an environmental minister which may sound strange to some of you and leave a question as to what that means. So, let me explain. First, I am not part of a liberal conspiracy, nor do I love trees better than people. I grew up in the country with a strong sense of God in nature and that love and connection to God through nature has never left me. I have been blessed with the good fortune of being able to bring those two things I love together on a daily bases and I call it work. My ministry is focused on deepening the connection between religion and the environment both for me and for others. It is really about saving what God loves which is all of life not the least of which is human. Without a healthy environment we will not be a healthy species.

When I was preparing for this talk, I had the challenge of the pending election: a very important election that in many ways would shape what I had to say. I knew I couldn't wait until November 3rd to write my remarks. So, what to do? I could have struggled with three different speeches. One if Bush won, one if Kerry won and a third, what if we don't know who won. Would it make a difference in my presentation? I made the decision to talk to you today as if who is in the White House doesn't really matter, because as I reflected on my subject I realized that religion and the environment is about religion and the environment, not politics, of which I know very little anyway. Then Nov. 3rd came. I read the papers, listened to the news, and was sorely tempted to trash my prepared talk and change the focus to moral values. It may be too soon, however, and I wasn't brought here to talk about that, but as people of faith, here today, we may need to hunker down and redefine values for the folks who think that moral values are only about same sex relationships and abortion. The values that I aspire to are love, peace and justice: love for all of God's Creation, peace over war whenever possible, and justice that helps to close the gap between the rich and poor. I value inclusion, not exclusion, acceptance not discrimination. But, today it is religion and environment. I will refer to morals and values because they define who we are, and values cannot be left out of a conversation about those two things. I can leave out politics however.

We, as people of faith, are called to live into our faith, not to live into current politics. Sometimes politics and our faith can be directly opposed to one another and its then that our faith gives us the courage to choose God over politics and do the right thing. We have to do some self-reflection into our values and most importantly explore our faith to figure out the proper response to environmental destruction and pollution. Our moral and spiritual decisions and choices mustn't depend on a president of the US.

The way we live our lives should be dictated by our relationship with God and not our relationship with our administration. When there is conflict and our faith takes us in a direction opposed to the administration, we may have to become more visible and active in our behavior because we matter, each of us matters. One of the most important ways to make a difficult decision is to remember that we are

called by God to look after each other, to serve each other, to love one another. Our behavior needs to reflect that. Nowhere is it more important that we behave according to those values than when we focus on how our behavior affects our air, land and water: our support, without which there would be no life.

At its core, Care of Creation isn't a political issue; it's a spiritual issue. Therefore politics should not mandate what we, as people of faith, do and say about stewardship of Creation.

What makes it spiritual and something every person in every faith should take seriously is that how we treat the planet, our fragile island earth, is a manifestation of our relationship with God and one another. Let me say that again. How we treat the planet is a manifestation of our relationship with God and one another. In the Judeo Christian tradition, God created all that is and called it sacred. This makes all of life, human and non-human, sacred. It makes the sun, the moon and the stars sacred. For the Buddhists and religions that understand and teach interconnectedness it is about how you treat others because we are all connected and interdependent. God called all people of all religions to take care of each other and created us out of love, giving us every opportunity to help each other. Scripture lessons are about looking after the poor. Love one another as I have loved you, share your wealth, and love your neighbor as yourself. Looking after one another has not been something that heretofore people of faith thought applied to the environment. The "environment" has been in a department all by itself. It has been left to the liberals and tree huggers to defend. We have learned, however, that poisoning the air or water is harming your neighbor and an insult to the first and great commandment and ultimately an insult to the Creator.

As a species, humans do help each other in times of stress and disaster. We see it all the time after hurricanes or earthquakes. Money comes in from all corners of the earth, along with food and clothing. As we come to realize that every one of our behaviors matters; every one of them, we are redefining what love thy neighbor means. The choices we make about food, the cars we choose to drive, the clothes we wear, the coffee we drink, the electricity and energy we use. All these things matter. Think of the waste.

I love what environmental writer, Bill McKibbin says, "There is no more AWAY". Remember when we could throw things away, well, there is no more "AWAY". "Away" is gone. Everything we discard goes to someone else and if it is waste, it is often destructive or polluting. The seas have started to spit back our waste. Fish are showing high levels of toxics. In many parts of the country, water is undrinkable. We have more days every year when the air quality board tells people to stay inside. And a really scary reality.... Breast milk is contaminated. We are doing this to each other and ourselves.

Every one of our behaviors counts and nowhere does it count more than in the energy we use. But before I get into energy and climate, which I will talk about later, I want to be sure that everyone understands that this subject (religion and environment) and the solutions to many of the problems, belong with us. You and me and in the hearts, minds and actions of other religious people who call themselves faithful. We are the moral voice of society. The real moral voice. We are expected to show the way and do what is right for the sake of the common good, not what serves us personally. We were created in the image of God. That doesn't mean we look like God, it means we share some of God's qualities and responsibilities such as love and compassion.

Yes, we are self-oriented and it may be our nature, but the shift from personal self-interest to corporate self-interest is not a huge one. It's a regeneration of our core values as Americans and our vision for the future. It's a serious look at the importance of a religious presence in finding solutions to environmental problems. Once we can accept that it is our own collective wellbeing that is being affected by

environmental degradation, we will shift our behavior. If we preserve air, water and ecosystems, we are serving God, others and ultimately ourselves.

One of the examples that I have used over and over again is that of the engine oil that greases the motor in your car. I use this because most people can relate to it. Even if women don't traditionally change the oil in cars, we know people who do and we have seen what happens to it.... Sometimes! If that old oil is poured down the storm drain behind the house or into a drainage ditch, where does it go? To a neighbor, yes and often floats right out into a river, a bay or an ocean with all the contaminants going with it. The rivers and streams are affected and so are the fish. The fish pick up the toxic waste, and we eat the fish. Just like with the air, what we put into the air, we breathe; what we dump into the ocean, we swim in. If we were more conscious of every one of our behaviors we wouldn't be making such a mess of things.

But the spiritual part is very important and I don't want to leave that until I have exhausted the subject because I believe it makes an important difference. The religious community has a responsibility to care for and protect Creation. It isn't a hobby for us because we love nature. God gave us dominion..... Take care of this Creation that I've put you in charge of. Deeply immoral practices have been changed because the religions viewed them as unjust and got the parishioners involved. It was the faith community that has led many successful movements in this country. While Episcopalians may not have been the leaders in the abolition of slavery, other denominations were. The faith community led in the education of woman and woman's right to vote. Most recently the civil rights movement was led and supported by religious people who understood that the inequality and suppression of blacks was unjust. It was immoral and therefore a spiritual issue. How we treat each other is a reflection of our relationship with God. If we love God we treat what God loves with dignity and compassion. The destruction of our natural resources is unjust and equally as sinful as any other social justice issue. Poor communities both here and around the world are hit first and the hardest when water and air are polluted. When we look back on those other social injustices, like woman not being able to vote, we know they were wrong. Some day everyone will see that destruction of our natural resources is wrong, too.

We were given clean resources on which we could depend for health and wellbeing. At the same time, we were given the freedom to enrich them or destroy them. Some day we will have to reckon with how we treat these gifts. My friend and scientist, Jane Lubchenco calls these gifts "free ecosystem services". These are the wetlands that filter the water going from land out to the sea. We have filled in some 90% of them. Coral reefs act as buffers so coastal areas will not be eroded during storms. We are rapidly destroying these necessary ecosystems. The huge and magnificent forests all over the world are being cut down before we even know the medicinal value of what God placed there. The depleted forests are making it impossible for the planet to absorb the carbon dioxide that is naturally created not to mention the CO2 that humans are creating. When we upset and destroy these services, aren't we insulting the Creator? Aren't we saying we know better than God on how to run things and isn't that why Adam and Eve got thrown out of Eden? Isn't the destruction of a natural resource a direct insult to God? I think it is. God gave us these resources as gifts and we are saying with little gratitude: I'll take it! No thanks, no appreciation, no generosity of spirit or sharing, but just saying, I'll take it. Take it, use it, waste it, dump it.

But stop, religious people aren't like that. We share, we help others, we think of the others interest, not just our own and we stand up for what is right. We fight for justice and peace and we care for Creation so that it will be here for our children and their children. We love our neighbors and that includes the generations that come after us. We aren't exploiters of Creation. We are the stewards.

Here's another way to look at this issue of our legacy or what we leave behind. We give personal treasures to our children when we die and if we have ranches or farms or big portfolios of stock we pass them on. Why don't we do that with clean air, water, open space, rivers, and the things that will ensure preservation of life? Why not leave some oil for the next generations? We seem to live on this earth as if we cared more about ourselves than our children. This cannot be true, but it is the behavior we demonstrate. But not any more.

If there is any doubt in your mind about people of faith playing a role as stewards of Creation, let me assure you that Stewardship of Creation belongs front and center with justice, peace and love. Listen to the words from John. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God." Not one thing came into being that didn't come through the "Word". All things will be reconciled to God through Jesus

And in Paul's letter to the Colossians, he wrote the remarkable conclusion, that nothing in the whole of the Universe was left out. He wrote: "Through the son, then, God decided to bring the whole Universe back to himself. God made peace through his son's death on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven."

We are called, commanded and instructed to be stewards of Creation. We ought to be leading the environmental movement. Our job is to show the way, set examples of stewardship in all our behavior. It is up to us to ensure that our parishes practice conservation in order to show parishioners how to do it in their homes. We can get our electricity from wind and solar, and biomass rather than from sources that harm or exploit others. We can install compact florescent light bulbs and conserve energy. We can drive energy efficient cars and vote for legislation that promotes a more sustainable life style. Parishes and the parishioners who attend them can serve as beacons of light in the otherwise dark alley of waste and pollution.

Signs of Hope

So that those of you who are concerned about environmental issues taking a back seat to war or "moral" values, I want to give you some solid evidence of hope. And to say that I personally am very hopeful that things are changing. We must and will continue to do our part, but the signs of change are visible all around us now. More than ever we must put environmental values in the front seat. These values are the core of who we are because they reflect our relationship with God and each other.

First of all, some of you may be fans of Paul Tillich, as I am. He said that most often the answers are in the questions. Many times I have seen that when the questions are being asked, things will begin to change. Most of us in the environmental movement have known for a very long time that environmental problems are related to one another. The web of life, so to speak. You cannot talk about water without talking about energy; or climate change without endangered habitat; or toxic air and neglect human health. Finally the question of how these things relate is getting into mainstream thinking. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus came out with an article recently and asked the question.

Why is a human-made phenomenon like global warming — which may kill hundreds of millions of human beings over the next century — considered "environmental"? Why are poverty and war not considered environmental problems while global warming is? What are the implications of framing global warming as an environmental problem — and handing off the responsibility for dealing with it to "environmentalists"?

Maybe the notion of environmental issues as isolated ones or that the solutions should only be addressed by tree huggers will soon be a thing of the past. Maybe we can solve an environmental problem and create jobs at the same time. I see signs of that kind of thinking in this question.

A Greater Washington Interfaith Power and Light program is being launched this weekend and the congregations who join will have a resource for energy efficient technologies, help with audits and money saving techniques. There will be sample sermons and education material available just for the asking. This is a religious response to global warning and the movement has reached 16 states and the District in the last two years. It is like a league of conservation voters for the religious community. The enormous difference, and an important one, however, is that our roots are and will remain in theology, not politics or economics, or environmentalism. We will partner with these groups and rely on the scientist for facts, but remain theological or spiritual in our response. Congregations all over the country are responding with enthusiasm and vigor. They are serving their communities in new and important ways. A small Catholic church in Wyandotte, Michigan had electricity and lights, fed the community beans and met payroll during the black out in the summer of 2003 and why.?..... There is a small wind turbine and a solar panel on their church roof. That was the beginning of Michigan Interfaith Power and Light.

Another and perhaps even more telling transition from old ways to new is: and I say this because it is a real indication that conventional wisdom is shifting, the environment is being included in discussions about peace and security around the world. This is new for institutions and it is exciting. I am referring to the recent presentation of a Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai in recognition of her work in Africa fighting deforestation. Critics of her award, asked "what does tree planting have to do with peace?" And the answer from the Nobel Committee "can be found in the Amazon, Haiti, China, and Africa where deforestation, erosion and climate change have changed the condition of life for millions of people, led to hunger and need, created tensions between populations and countries. There conditions lead to an even wider gap between the rich and the poor, contribute to hatred and eventually become threats to security."

I read recently that The Conference Board and AAA convened a meeting because "this issue of Global Warming is a significant concern for business" and concluded that the climate IS changing right now, sea levels are rising and the trend is predicted to continue. The polar ice caps are melting and glacier melting is well documented. For example, on MT Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the ice pack has decreased from 4.3 square miles to less than 1 square mile since 1912 and is expected to disappear within 15-20 years if the current rate of melting continues.

It is noted and confirmed that spring is starting earlier now. The start of spring in the Northern Hemisphere has averaged 25 days earlier or about a month over all. Businesses are getting it and you know about the acts of God on your insurance policies. They will soon not exist because the storm's severity is due to humans, not God. Insurers are getting it.

New York Times, 8/25/04 Bank of America

The bank's new headquarters will open in 2008 and will showcase how clever design and technology can reduce pollution and operating costs while enhancing the health and productivity of occupants. And the project is already focusing more attention on the rapidly expanding influence of a group of green building standards known as LEED, for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

British petroleum and Dupont have announced that they will voluntarily cut their CO2 emissions. Fed EX is introducing a fleet of 6000 hybrid trucks. As an average consumer you cannot buy a Toyota

Hybrid Prius unless you go to eBay and pay more than the dealer is asking. The wait is six months. People are getting it.

Russia has ratified the Kyoto protocol setting carbon reductions regulation into play around the world. European and other nations are getting it.

And just in from Denver, CO. – Today - Nov. 2, 2004 Colorado voters put “the public” back into the Public Utilities. Coloradans overwhelmingly voted in favor of Amendment 37, that increases electricity from renewable resources such as the wind and sun.

I believe that we have our work cut out for us, but that we can and will make positive change. People of faith take spiritual issues seriously and once we realize that stewardship is part of who we are as Christians we will look after our land, air and water. We take risks, too. Jesus taught that it won't be easy and we may have to take risks when we stand up for justice. I drive a Toyota Prius and I take a risk, but.....

The beauty of Creation is magnificent to behold. The joy we experience in nature feeds our souls and calls to us for protection. People with a strong faith tradition have courage and strength to do what we need to do. We are creative and proactive and we know we can. We have done it before. With hearts full of grace and angels to help we can change our ways first and then gently persuade others. We must show our true values as Christians: values that honor all of God's children, values of inclusion, compassion and dignity for all, values that protect the very air, water and land that sustains us. There is an endless list of examples we can set and most of you know what they are and I am sure you are doing many of them. One of the churches in this diocese has switched to cleaner electricity and begun to educate the congregation on renewable green sources of energy. That is a major step. You know that Episcopalians don't like change. I have a joke on the wall in my office. How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? The picture is a man in a collar asking a woman. And she replies..... Change? What do you mean change? My grandmother gave the church that bulb.

I will close with a quote from Wendell Berry who wrote:

“To live we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully and reverently it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, and destructively it is a desecration. In such a desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want.”