

TOUCH THE EARTH LIGHTLY  
Creation Care Sunday

The Eliot Church of Newton  
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Third Sunday of Easter  
April 18 , 2010

Texts: Genesis 1:11-25; Matthew 6:25-33

**Leviticus 19:10** commands,

“You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard;  
you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.”

**Proverbs 29:7** says, “The righteous know the rights of the poor;  
the wicked have no such understanding.”

**Proverbs 31:8-9** admonishes us. “Speak out for those who cannot speak,  
for the rights of all the destitute.  
Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

This week is the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original Earth Day,  
declared on April 22, 1970.

Since that time, there has been some growing awareness around the world  
about the fragility of our planet’s ecosystem,  
and the horrific effect our consumerist lifestyle is having  
not only on the environment and the climate, but on the people of the earth.

Today I would like to focus a bit on that: on the relationship between  
our consumerist lifestyle and the rest of the earth’s people.

Gordon Aeschliman has an introductory essay in **The Green Bible**,  
which he titled, “Loving the Earth is Loving the Poor”

Much of what I will say this morning comes from his research and insights,  
as well as those of the Rev. Peter Sawtell,  
who is a staff member for Eco-Justice Ministries in the UCC.

Some of this you’ve heard before.

We here in the United States constitute roughly 4 percent of the global population,  
but we consume almost one-third of the world’s resources  
to support our modern convenience and expectations.

Our lifestyle of consumption puts a heavy burden on the earth.

Or as Theologian Daniel Maguire puts it

“For the first time, humanity's power to destroy  
has outstripped the earth's power to restore.” For the first time.

We are in a situation that those who came before have never encountered  
-- the overloading of entire planetary systems.  
Our local and global impacts are far beyond what people knew,  
or could have imagined, 50 years ago.

But that is where we are, and things are getting worse.  
We have reached a point where the very rules have changed.  
Because our power to destroy has outstripped the earth's power to restore,  
we can no longer assume that our abuse and exploitation of the earth is a viable option.  
We can no longer assume that we'll be able to find other resources, or move to some other place.

In this new situation, we must "touch the earth lightly".  
We must recognize that we are part of a fragile and interdependent web of life.  
We must live within the limits of our resources and systems.

But that's not what we are doing.  
– especially we in the United States and the Western world  
Instead, we are taking from others to bolster our way of life.  
We go to another's valley, well, river, forest, mine and even sky  
to supply our high level of consumption.

Our high level of consumption also means a high level of waste  
– from all the effluence of manufacturing and packaging  
to the toys that last for barely a year  
and the clothes that are quickly out of fashion.  
The United States produces more than a quarter of the world's greenhouse gasses  
and is responsible for more than 30 percent of the garbage, toxins, and other kinds of waste  
that make it into the earth's rivers, lakes, oceans and landfills.

And here's the harsh reality for the poor:  
it's usually their resources we are capturing to support our lifestyle,  
and their land, rivers and lakes where we are dumping our waste.  
Quite literally, the poorest of the earth live on wealthy people's garbage.  
In the United States, close to 85% of all toxic landfills are in neighborhoods  
comprised of people of lower economic means and people of color.

Native American reservations often agree to accept landfill waste  
as a means to increase their income, sometimes with life-threatening consequences.  
For example, the Spokane Indians in Washington state  
agreed to create a landfill for the Dawn Mining Company,  
which meant they would receive waste from 13 of its sites throughout the United States.  
What they did not realize was they were accepting dangerous toxic tailings  
from gold and silver mines, waste that brought harm  
to both their environment and their bodies.

For the Dawn Mining Company, this was a good economic transaction. It was able to bypass federal requirements for toxic waste management by going to a poor community on a reservation.

West Africa has often been the dumping ground for toxic waste from the United States, although the local communities were not aware of the dangerous nature of the substances they agreed to “store” for a lucrative fee. They were literally trading their children’s health and the health of their land for a commercial payoff.

In the wealthy West, we live in what is called a “phantom” lifestyle. Rather than relying on the earth around us, we almost invisibly (like a phantom) rely on the earth of others. Our water comes from faucets for showering and bathing, from bottles for drinking. Our food comes from grocery stores; our fuel from pumps on any number of street corners; our heat, air conditioning, lights and power, from little switches on the walls. We don’t look to see if there is water in the well, to see if our goat has enough milk to share with us, to see if there are enough trees left to provide us warmth through another bitterly cold winter, to see if the rain has brought enough moisture for our crops.

If we run out of vegetables, we import them from another country. If we need more electricity, we import it from another state or river or region. If we need more petroleum, we import it from abroad. The same is true for water, minerals, fruit and meat.

Very often we lose our innocence in the capturing of those resources. We take land that belongs to another group of people; we invade countries; we destroy rain forests. The true cost of living the modern lifestyle is not measured by what we pay at the cash register. Rather it is measured by what we have done to other people’s rivers, valleys, oceans and land. And, more precisely, what we have done to the poor.

Let me ask you this: What is the true cost of a glass of orange juice at breakfast? A team working on poverty issues in Belize was confronted with intestinal illnesses and rashes affecting Mayan kids in a little village of six hundred people. These Mayans used to live in the rain forest for thousands of years, but had been kicked out in the early 1990s when their ancestral land was sold to a large orange producer. (The Mayans never kept title to land; they didn’t believe you could personally own it.) These six hundred people are what we call “environmental refugees,” the real poor of the earth and the “least of these” shut off from God’s creation.

While investigating the source of the illnesses these kids had,  
the workers discovered that there were toxins in the river  
they were using for drinking water and washing,  
As it turns out, when the rain forest where they used to live was cut down  
to grow oranges, pesticides and fungicides leached into the river.  
Not only were these people kicked off their land,  
but they were poisoned by the cultivation of the crops that replaced their rain forest.  
The oranges that were produced were converted to concentrate  
that showed up in orange juice throughout the United States.  
One could say that the true price of a glass of orange juice is the rain forest,  
the river, the home of the Mayan community in Belize'and the health of those children.  
And they are the ones paying the price,  
while those who are wealthy enjoy the nourishment of the orange juice.

That's the real cost of a glass of orange juice in today's world.  
And that's just one small example.  
The same story could be told about the cup of coffee, the hamburger,  
the running shoes, the baby's toy, the blouse ... the list is endless.

In this new world, an old ethical guideline takes on a new form.  
"Love your neighbor" has always been a core principle of our faith.  
Love for our neighbor goes beyond charity and compassion;  
it calls us to give voice to the voiceless, and power to the marginalized.  
But now we need to expand our sense of neighbor in three important ways.  
We've always cared about those other folk around the world.  
But recent years have brought a big change -- those are not people "over there"  
who are rather removed from us.  
We are deeply and intimately connected.  
In our globalized economy, our choices and actions have far reaching consequences.  
Our food comes from Florida and California,  
Central America and Chile, Brazil and New Zealand.  
When we go shopping for clothes, the tags on the clothing are a geography list  
of the countries that pay the lowest worker wages around the globe.

We're all in this together.  
Caring about people on the other side of the world is not a matter of compassion  
for those who are isolated from us.  
We have a very direct relationships with people and communities all around the world.

This global awareness should do more than increase our compassion  
and commitment to help others.  
It should make us look honestly and confessionally at our own lives and lifestyles.  
We are not the enlightened, caring helpers who can bring better living to the less fortunate.  
We are embedded in the problems.

Our ethics are reshaped when we expand our circles of consciousness  
to realize that what is local, is global, and what is global is local.  
It is one thing to give voice to the voiceless in our own communities.  
But now we find ourselves in direct relationship with those around the world  
with little power to voice their needs.

Who are the voiceless?  
Indigenous people in Brazil, whose rainforest home is destroyed for cattle and gold.  
Underpaid and overworked laborers in China who make our standard of living possible.  
Fishers in Nigeria whose fishing grounds have been ruined by oil.

The prophet Isaiah heard these words from the Lord:  
“When the poor and needy seek water,  
and there is none,  
and their tongue is parched with thirst,  
I the LORD will answer them,  
I the God of Israel will not forsake them”.(Isaiah 41:17 )

If it's not too mundane for God to worry about  
where the poor will get water and food,  
neither should it be too mundane for us.

By God's original intent, all creation was to flourish.  
All the beasts of the earth, all flying things,  
all people were instructed to multiply and fill the whole earth.  
The vision of the garden back then was a place of nurture and goodwill for all its members.  
All of it was perfect.  
Neither God's character nor mission has altered since those founding days of our good earth.

“The righteous know the rights of the poor;  
the wicked have no such understanding.” Proverbs 29:7;

“Speak out for those who cannot speak,  
for the rights of all the destitute.  
Speak out, judge righteously,  
defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Proverbs 31:8-9

“Whatever you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do to Me.” Matthew 25:40