

A Radical Love to Remake the World

May the words of my lips, and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, my Creator and Redeemer.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, speaks much about how as followers of Christ we need to follow in his Way of Love. You may have seen him preach on this topic at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle a year or so ago. Bishop Curry wrote in his 2018 Easter message of “an unselfish sacrificial love that can remake the world”. It struck me that maybe, just maybe, this is the answer to the climate emergency we are facing.

Climate change has progressed so far, we need radical action to avoid its worst effects. Could love be the basis for that radical action?

Love and climate change? In the words of that other great philosopher Tina Turner: “What’s love got to do with it?”

So let me start at the beginning.

The human race has remade the Earth. From the moment our hominid ancestors first picked up two pieces of flint to create spears and axes, we have been using more and more of the resources of the planet. This has brought tremendous progress, comfort, and freedom. This has allowed humankind to build great civilizations, write great symphonies, invent all sorts of conveniences, and to cure diseases so we can grow old with our children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren.

But in my youth, we began to see the unintended consequences: rivers catching fire, species being pushed to extinction, and pollution so bad it needed a new name: smog. Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, the air would often have a sulfurous smell, and we’d joke “The wind is coming from Gary tonight” when Gary Indiana was a major steel making city. More ominously, Rachel Carson warned that this pollution was driving us toward a future in which there would be a Silent Spring. And Senegalese conservationist Baba Dioum understood the importance of love in responding to these problems, writing in 1968, “In the end, we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught.”

Environmental issues caught momentum that we Boomers had previously put into the great social protest movements of the '60's: Civil rights and ending the Vietnam War. On the first Earth Day in 1970, 20 million people across the country gathered to demand change. As a country we summoned the political will to establish the Environmental Protection Agency, pass the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, remediate toxic waste dumps, and protect endangered species.

As an idealistic 14-year old I was caught up in the excitement and promise of solving these problems and the passion for environmental issues was planted deep in my soul and while my career took a different path no matter how far I’ve been pulled away by the events of life, the still, small voice of that idealistic teenager always nudges me back.

And we've made progress. The bald eagle, once down to only 400 animals is no longer on the endangered species list. The Charles River is swimmable again. The nations of the world cooperated in a global treaty that has made demonstrable progress in repairing the hole in the ozone layer.ⁱ We've proven that we can correct course, and reverse environmental damage while we still live a modern, comfortable life, and grow the economy.

But while we focused on these problems, another environmental effect began to remake the world. As we continued to burn coal, oil, and natural gas to maintain this life, we set global warming in motion. Dr. James Hansen first raised alarms about it in the 1980s and we are now seeing the kinds of impacts he warned about: an unprecedented 3 category 4 hurricanes hitting our country in 2017...Houston experiencing 500 year floods in each of the past 3 yearsⁱⁱ, February last year here in Boston was colder than the Arctic where above-freezing temperatures meant a near-record low for the sea iceⁱⁱⁱ.

To reverse these trends we will need to remake our energy system and we see hints of that happening: from the solar panels more and more common on our roofs to the Tesla's in our streets, the potential to transform our energy system away from fossil fuels is evident. Major environmental groups like the Rocky Mountain Institute, Union of Concerned Scientists, Natural Resources Defenses Council and others have laid out the path for how we can cut our carbon emissions by 80% with existing technologies.

And in a March 2018 poll conducted by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 73% of Americans said they believe climate change is real, 59% say it is caused by humans, and 63% are concerned about its effects, and 70% -- including a majority of Republicans -- say we should reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, and 77% believe we should stay in the Paris Climate Accord -- again including a majority of Republicans^{iv}. Belief in the seriousness of climate change has been on an upward trend since 2000, and yet we are at a stalemate when it comes to the policies needed to respond. Even though a solid majority of Americans understand this problem and we have the tools and technologies we need, we cannot summon the political will to attack it as vigorously as we did the environmental problems of the '70's. What is missing?

We all recognize the polarization in our civic life but I don't believe the opponents of action on climate change are any more numerous or louder than the followers of George Wallace who advocated for segregation; or the Archie Bunkers that demanded that anti-war protesters love America or leave it; business leaders that direly warned that putting catalytic converters in cars would destroy the industry.

I believe a large part of the explanation is simply human nature. It is one thing to express concern in a research poll, another thing to be motivated enough to demand action from our politicians. Human beings get that kind of motivation from things we see and that directly affect us. When breathing causes our lungs to burn, or we see rows of flag-draped coffins coming off a military aircraft, or we see signs saying that only whites can drink from this water fountain and blacks have to go to the back of the bus, we get enraged and engaged.

Climate change is not like this. It has happened slowly over decades. Its effects are not the kinds of simple, visible cause-and-effect that we learn in high school chemistry and physics

classes. It is a complex system where the ultimate effects are several steps removed from the cause. We can't entirely blame climate change for hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria – 2017 would likely have been an active hurricane season anyway, and you have to look at the long term trend to understand that these kinds of events aren't some random fluke, but the next step up of a decades-old trend. Climate change is at once a problem so big that it seems beyond our ability as individuals to affect while at the same time being abstract and amorphous so its effects don't press on us.

The human race is not wired to respond to these kinds of threats. We need to summon abilities beyond our instinctive responses to the world around us.

So far we have tried to reason and persuade our way past this nature. But scientific and technical arguments have fallen short and the political arguments have become more entrenched and polarized. It reminds me of Paul's words in his first letter to the Corinthians, "if I speak with the tongue of men and angels, but do not have love, I am sounding brass or a clanging cymbal."

Love – there is that word again. How could love help us to overcome this innate limitation in our ability to take seriously a threat that requires us to look beyond what we personally experience and think about far-removed impacts of our actions?

I don't think it will be some hippie dippy "peace, love, and grooviness" of the Summer of Love from 50 years ago. It is a radical love that will embrace people we will never meet, and places that we'll never go.

It will take the radical love Jesus talks about in Matthew Chapter 25 when he speaks of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, tending the sick, saying "as you did to the least of these my brothers, so you did it to me."

This love is radical because Jesus calls on us to fight another aspect of human nature which concentrates our love primarily on our families, our tribe, those like us, and our nation. Jesus calls us to transcend this nature and to extend our love to our neighbor. To those unlike us, even our enemy. That is radical love.

Hear now the words of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Climate change impacts are expected to exacerbate poverty in most developing nations. People who are culturally, socially, economically...or otherwise marginalized are especially vulnerable."^v

Jesus time and time again called attention to the marginalized people of his day: the lame, the blind, the leper, the prostitute, the tax collector, the poor, the hungry. I don't believe it is a stretch to say that he would call on us to feed those who are hungry because a climate-change induced drought has caused their crops to fail and their livestock to die.

Like Marião Tede, a woman in east Africa that a New York Times article profiled a few months ago. The story described how a series of devastating droughts in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia over the past two decades has pushed this already arid region over the edge. Over 7 years, droughts decimated Ms. Tede's herd of goats, dwindling from 200 goats to only 5. As the journalist wrote: "not enough to sell, not enough to eat. And in the dry season, not enough to

get milk" for her grandchildren^{vi}. These effects of climate change mean that 12 million people in the region live with food insecurity and 650,000 children, are severely malnourished.

This radical love that will also encompass all the earth and every beast of the field, bird of the air and fish of the sea. About a year ago a YouTube video went viral showing an emaciated polar bear who, because the sea ice has been at near record lows, was unable to hunt seals and quite likely died shortly after that video was made.

A radical love that will extend beyond the limitations of our lives and consider that unless we make changes now, these effects will be even worse for future generations.

A love that will compel us to fight our human nature to look at our decisions only from the standpoint of how they will affect Trinity church, or the town of Stoughton, or the commonwealth of Massachusetts, but look at our decisions in this global, intergenerational context.

It is love that will move us to go beyond responding to the aftermath of these catastrophes, make us mindful of our role in these problems, and look for ways to reduce our contribution.

It is the love that John the Evangelist writes about in his first Epistle: How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.^{vii}

As Bishop Curry said it is a sacrificial love. Jesus, of course, gave us the ultimate example of sacrificial love, dying on the cross. But, fortunately, we also know from Jesus' example that radical love can be as simple as washing someone's feet. Or a word of peace to his disciples in hiding after his crucifixion.

And if these simple acts are examples of radical love, why not turning off the lights, keeping our houses a few degrees cooler this winter and a few degrees warmer next summer, installing solar panels. Not taking energy for granted, but being more thoughtful in our choices and their effects on those distant brothers and sisters is an act of radical love.

I hope you will bring this kind of radical love to your discussions about your solar project. Because while the financial considerations are important, this radical act of love is worthy of making some sacrifices and to go outside your comfort zone, to make it happen.

I hope I've shown that love is intimately linked to our response to climate change. But Baba Dioum was only partly right. His quote implies that love is the result of learning and understanding. But we know that love, God's love, is the beginning of everything.

My prayer is that we find that love that leads us to see the need of our brothers and sisters and moves us to action to remake the world.

ⁱ <https://www.space.com/39315-nasa-satellite-shows-healing-ozone-hole.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/politics/houston/article/NOAA-study-could-redefine-100-year-storm-for-12387348.php>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/politics/houston/article/NOAA-study-could-redefine-100-year-storm-for-12387348.php>

^{iv} <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/politics-global-warming-march-2018/2/>

^v Source: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report: Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability

^{vi} <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/climate/kenya-drought.html>

^{vii} 1John, 3:17 - 18