

Our Power Bill Is A Moral Document

A Good Faith Response to An Inconvenient Truth

A sermon by John Pitney, First United Methodist Church

September 24, 2006

Good morning and welcome to the sermon. Next Sunday, our church will hold the first event in Eugene's addition of a national initiative called "Spotlight On Global Warming," sponsored by the Interfaith Power and Light network to which we belong. During the month of October, at least 10 faith communities in Eugene, 150 in Oregon and 4,000 churches, synagogues and mosques nationwide will sponsor showings of Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" and have discussions. Next Sunday, as part of our new 1st Sunday format, we will worship at 10am and immediately following, we will gather in the fellowship hall for a one hour forum. We will see a few clips of the film. An exciting panel of people will respond through the language of their faith and lead all those gathered in a discussion. We hope all adults and youth will feel compelled by faith and conscience to attend. I'm excited to tell you that Ibrahim Hamide of the Muslim faith, Lisa Arkin from Temple Beth Israel and our own Tyler Radke will form the panel. Anticipating all this I share my faith response with you.

I want to begin with 5 of David Letterman's top 10 good things about global warming (drum roll?):

5. No more pesky weeds. In fact, no more pesky plants.
4. Nile Encephalitis: not just for Egyptians anymore.
3. Furnaces convert easily into tornado shelters.
2. Golfers only need a putter and a sand wedge.
1. Why pay for tattoos when melanoma's free?

Oh how we need to keep our sense of humor when we explore these things together. When Debbie and I saw Al Gore's film this summer, I experienced many of the same emotions others report from an overwhelming sense of powerlessness all the way to abiding hopefulness. But what I have observed in many of us who have seen "An Inconvenient Truth" is just plain grief. We feel grief. We are grieving a loss. We are anticipating future loss.

When my mother died my grief was pretty natural. At first I was numb and disoriented. Then I was in denial that she was really gone. The hardest time for me was a long period when I was afraid I would forget how she looked and talked and touched when she was vibrant and alive.

Over the next few weeks and months I hope many of us will take the chance to talk seriously about how this newest round of information and challenge to action in response to global warming is affecting us at the deepest levels. That's part of what it means to be church. I strongly believe it is the responsibility of each of us to see this film and talk to our children about the kind of world they want to inherit, about the world we would like to pass on. There is no more important matter facing us today. Whether or not you have seen the

film, when you think of what you know about the reality of human-caused global warming what sticks in your mind, weighs on your soul, pricks your conscience, fills you with grief?

Is it knowing the science?
That CO₂ levels are higher than any time in the past 650,000 years?
Is it knowing the loss of diversity
of frogs without breeding ponds in the Cascades for lack of snow
and snow melt
of higher freezing levels diminishing river flows for salmon and
intensifying water wars
Do you grieve polar bears and baby walrus drowning for lack of ice flow?
Is it the brown evergreens we see in our mountains and wonder what
that's from?
The thought of no glaciers in Glacier National Park, no more snows of
Kilimanjaro?
Is it the certain impact on people?:
Do you grieve the loss of Himalaya ice, half the water supply for 40% of
earth's people?
Is it the urgency? Is it knowing that certain events set off a chain reaction
of connected events
Like thawing tundra that triggers decomposition releasing the methane
that accelerates warming?

How does this assault on God's innocent Garden hit **you**? When do you experience the most denial? Do you wonder if you will ever be able to remember how certain places looked or smelled or moved you before they got sick or vanished?

And is your grief deepened knowing that our way of life bears major responsibility, that we 4.5% of the population of the world create 25% of greenhouse gases? I tried to imagine what my grief would be if I had felt responsible for my mother's death. Like I was the driver in an accident and all the other passengers died and I alone was left? Would it drive me insane or transform me so I would give everything to see a safer world?

By now most of us understand the science of the greenhouse effect, that the atmosphere of earth is like an immense greenhouse. When we are in balance, rays enter the atmosphere from the sun and warm the earth. Rays of heat are re-radiated into the atmosphere where a portion of them are trapped by heat trapping gases. This keeps the world hospitable while the rest escape into space. With a buildup of human-caused emissions, more of the reflected heat is trapped than is needed and then we are out of balance. Most of us understand the science but more of us need to understand the faith of it.

In his book "The End of Nature," United Methodist Sunday School teacher Bill McKibben writes:

The greenhouse effect is a more apt name than those who coined it imagined. The carbon dioxide and trace gases act like the panes of glass on a greenhouse---the analogy is accurate but it's more than that. We have built a greenhouse, a *human creation*, where once there bloomed a sweet and wild garden.

In the language of faith, we are in danger of losing our fullest experience of God. How many of us go to the mountain forest or to the coast where the sacred stillness or the sound of the waves crashing against a rocky beach bring us back in touch with our Creator, to feel the stunning smallness that puts us in our place, reminding us we're not God, returning us to our routine happy in the recognition that we don't have to be. Do we find the same experience of God in brown forests, infested with beetles because warming enhances their life cycle. Do we find the same God at the beach where coral reefs die and high concentrations of CO₂ in the ocean prohibit the formation of the very seashells that so often capture our imagination and help us feel part of something way bigger than our tiny moment?

The inconvenient truth for people of God is that there are few places we can go to experience the awesome as once we could. Bill McKibben writes: "We live, all of a sudden, in an Astroturf world, and though that world may have a God, that God can't speak through the grass, or even be silent through it and let us hear." We are created in the image of God. But that image is diminished for our children in the same way a zoo is not a jungle, in the same way we lost the stirring in our souls when the vibrant torrent of Celilo Falls became a silent, stagnant pool. And our children have no memory.

There isn't any place where our habits haven't diminished the once incomprehensible beauty that brought us transcendence and transformation. When God raged at Job from the whirlwind, the Creator asked the questions: "Were you there when I laid the foundation of the earth? Have you entered the storehouses of snow?" If the same questions were asked of us today, we'd probably say, "Been there, done that."

And along with the diminishment of God in our sight, there is a deep wound of conscience. We now know to expect more intense weather events, deeper droughts and more hurricanes like Katrina because warmer ocean surfaces lend more moisture to the power of these storm systems. The truth of Katrina exposed our racism, our acceptance of the growing gap between haves and have nots and our systemic indifference to poverty.

We have much to grieve.

And we have decisions to make. Some people of faith simply apply the formula: WWJD or "What would Jesus do?" In our tradition it's WWJWD? What would John Wesley do? Well John Wesley suggested a fourfold way to help us discern our choices. We can look at situations like ours through the eyes of Scripture, through the lens of our Tradition, in the Experience of the Holy Spirit and then we must use our heads, our God-given Reason.

Let's look at our situation of global warming through the eyes of scripture. Chapter 26 of Leviticus follows chapter 25 where it says the community of faith must make sure that the earth gets a sabbath from the habits and demands the human community places on it. Every 7th year, the policy reads, all human activity must stop so we give the earth a break and we remember who's name is on the deed to the world and her living systems. Chapter 26 follows and says, if you follow the commandment to observe the sabbath earth will thrive. If you don't, you are in deep doo. I remember reading these words for the first time about 20 years ago: "I will turn your heavens to iron and make your earth like brass, so finally the earth will get the sabbath you wouldn't give it while you lived there." And I said to myself---that's about global warming. It's not that this is God's doing for punishment exactly, it's that there is this fundamental equity and reciprocity in the way the world is put together and there is a fundamental propensity to sabbath that requires a balance of productivity and rest, like breathing in and out. When we violate these fundamentals of God's realm, the feedback loop gets ugly. In short there are natural consequences to our behavior. We are accountable to a community of common good. We answer to a higher power.

The James scripture, of course is just rude. Where does he get off telling us we're merely mist. James takes what he knows of Jesus Christ who died because he would not renounce his love of humility and he would not deny his stand for those without power and he comes right after our arrogance. It might just be that there's an inconvenient truth in the attachment to material wealth that's rotting a hole in our souls and it's that same allegiance that allows the permafrost to thaw and decompose and send us spiralling into ruin. And would any dispute that we've fattened our hearts and lived in luxury while the rest of earth seems to be living a day of slaughter? In short wealth and how we use wealth is always a part of the problem and redistribution of wealth either by personal transformation or public policies like the sabbath law, must be part of the solution.

In Wesleyan faith we see our situation through the eyes of Scripture, then we ask what our Tradition says. In a sermon titled "The Danger of Riches," Wesley defines riches as whatever is above the plain "necessaries and conveniences" of life. This is deep in our Tradition. He says, "Whoever has sufficient food to eat and clothes to put on, with a place to lay his head, and something over, is rich." This says to me we are all rich who sit in this room, but don't get all testy and guilty and squirmy on us this morning and shut down your mind and quit listening. In short, it's not about you, not you in isolation from the rest of us. Our scripture and our tradition, speak to us as a community living something over what we need, all living within God's covenant to share surplus for the common good. In our tradition, Wesley's class meetings met weekly to examine their lives and decide how their common surplus would be used for the wealth of the community. Maybe we can claim that tradition and get back to that kind of examination.

Then what does our Experience of the Holy Spirit tell us? I believe the Spirit in this time is working through our grief, because grief is a sign that we

care, that God has made us of pure goodness and there isn't a corpuscle within us that will rest until we find reconnection for our shattered lives and universe. We can either move from confusion and denial back into despair or, in our loss, just as when someone close to us dies, stop and see what really matters, reorganize our lives and change our world.

Finally, Wesley encouraged us to use our heads! With an ounce of common sense it should be abundantly clear that we are on the brink. The whole Creation groans for us to be decisive and our faith as we are discerning it this morning calls us to solutions that make us accountable to each other, that give us a chance to use our surplus for the common good and to act in covenant with each other. With these things in mind I want to make this proposal to you for your thinking these next few months.

Because solutions should keep us accountable, what if we as a church decided to reduce our total greenhouse emissions by 25%. We could decide to do that within 3 years or 5 or 10. Our governor is proposing the same for the State of Oregon to be accomplished by 2025. At the same time we support this policy, shouldn't we be at least as decisive as the State? Our Interfaith Networks have been challenging Congress to set a policy that would raise the average miles per gallon fuel efficiency rating for our U.S. fleet of automobiles. What would it be like for us to calculate the average fuel efficiency of the fleet of cars owned by our church families and work to raise it over time? It has been a real sign of hope to see all the hybrid cars showing up in the parking lot of our church these past few years. Help us think how we can build on that hope.

What I mean to demonstrate is that our power bills and our fuel bills are moral documents, because they tell us in graphic and measurable terms along with all the science of global warming, what our behaviors are doing to the beauty, integrity and productivity of the only home we have. If we know how much we use and we know that almost 40% of our power comes from burning of coal and natural gas we have given ourselves the eyes to see the real truth of our pollution.

I want you to think what it would be like for us to total up the number of Kilowatt hours of electricity we use together in the households of our congregation. It would be easy to do that without violating anyone's privacy. Then we could see how much we could conserve over time by offering workshops for families every year so they could set their own goals and we keep track together and celebrate the faith of our actions as a congregation each year.

Yes it's bold. We not so used to asking this much of each other and, God forbid, actually keeping track. And this will ultimately call for each of us to consider how we are using our wealth. For the price of a frapacino a month you could replace one energy hogging light bulb with a compact flourescent. For the price of a double latte and a blueberry scone once a month your household could commit 100% of your energy bill to clean wind generated power. All of us who own homes have received wealth beyond our belief from the inflated property values that deprive increasing numbers of our neighbors of decent affordable housing. What are we doing with that undeserved gift? For the cost of a

vacation cruise, you could invest in a solar system that would produce a third of the electricity you use in your home. For less than the cost of your son or daughter's college education, you could install a system that would produce all your electricity with some to spare for the rest of us. Then you'd be investing in the future of all the children of God's Garden. I hope you don't expect a Christian preacher to stand in front of you and tell you it's ok to use your wealth any old way you want. It's not and I won't.

I want you to think on this things the next few months. Plumb the scriptures, explore our tradition, pay attention to the work of the Spirit in our lives and then let us put our heads together. We are having a press conference here on Thursday morning to launch our initiative with 9 other churches in town. A radio reporter interviewed me about this for her radio show last Friday. She asked alot of questions and her final one was this, "Rev. Pitney, given all the evidence, do you really think there's any hope?" I don't remember exactly what I mumbled over the phone, but its never been about the evidence. As Bob Decker always says, it's about seeking first God's realm, all the other will follow.