

“Liberation for Future Generations”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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This Wednesday, April 22nd, is the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. On that first Earth Day in 1970, I was a senior in high school. I still remember aspects of that day. The founder of Earth Day was then U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin. In 1969, near Santa Barbara, California, Nelson witnessed a massive oil spill. That event inspired him to establish a day when people would join together to learn about and show support for approaches that would protect the earth's fragile environment. Some reports claim that as many as 20 million people, almost 10% of the nation's population, participated in events that were scheduled on that first Earth Day. Such events occurred across the country. As I think back on that day, it is hard for me to fathom that 50 years have gone by. It is hard for me to fathom because in those 50 years we haven't been willing or able to make the changes necessary to actualize the purpose for which Earth Day was originally established—namely, to insure a healthy and sustainable environment.

So today, we find ourselves facing a crisis. Actually, we are facing two significant crises. The crisis that is getting the most attention and action is the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is a very real and present threat to the health and even the life of many of us today. Because people at all levels recognize and are acknowledging the threat this virus poses, dramatic steps are being taken to slow the spread of the disease in the hope of saving lives. In response to the COVID-19 crisis major changes are occurring. We are experiencing changes to many aspects of our lives, including where we spend most of our time, the manner in which we connect with others, and even how or whether we are able to work. There are significant costs connected with these changes and yet the real and important benefits that are occurring make it clear that the changes are warranted and necessary.

The second crisis we are facing, human caused global climate change, is less obvious and not as urgent. But global climate change is more important and could potentially be considerably more devastating than COVID-19. It is less obvious for a number of reasons. One reason is that the signs and effects of global climate change occur over a much longer time frame than a disease such as COVID-19. COVID-19 has been infecting and killing people for a matter of only a few months. Human caused global climate change on the other hand has taken over two hundred years to develop. Two hundred years is considerably longer than any person's lifetime. Over this period of time we humans have been negatively impacting the earth's atmosphere and environment in many ways. Possibly the most harmful way has been through our extensive use of fossil fuels. Our use of fossil fuels has led to levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere that are considerably higher than at any time in the past 800,000 years. For decades scientists have been telling us that our use of fossil fuels was not sustainable and that it posed a significant threat to life as we know it. In spite of these ominous warnings, we humans, as a group, have not taken action as rapidly or as effectively to reduce CO₂ emissions as we have to address the COVID-19 pandemic. How could this be the case?

I can't possibly answer that question for all humans on this planet. But when I consider what the youth of today are saying, youth such as Greta Thunberg, I feel a responsibility to at least attempt to answer it for myself. As I compare my own responses related to these two crises, it is clear that my actions related to COVID-19 have been more focused, more intense and more consistent than my actions related to global climate change. And that is true even though I have been engaged in work on environmental issues for much of my adult life. So I ask myself, how could it be that my actions related to COVID-19 have been so much more robust than my actions related to global climate change. The answers I have come up with were and are unsettling. I am going to share some of my answers with you this morning in an attempt to prevent myself from ignoring or denying what I have discovered.

The first thing that came to my awareness is that COVID-19 poses an immediate threat to my life and to the life of the person I am closest to, my spouse. Because of our age—both of us are in our 60's—COVID-19 has the potential to kill either one or both of us in a matter of just a few days. I can't see the virus but I know it exists. I don't know anyone who is certain they have or have had the disease, yet I know it is present in the community. That means I could contract this virus and possibly die simply by being too close to another person who has it. Even more concerning is that I could contract the virus by making physical contact with something an infected person has touched, coughed on or even breathed on. With this awareness, I take precautions—precautions such as avoiding public spaces as much as possible, keeping physical distance from others, wearing disposable gloves and a mask over my mouth and nose when in public, and washing and disinfecting my hands multiple times a day. I do all of this because I know this virus could be deadly—deadly for me and for my wife.

Human caused global climate change on the other hand doesn't pose an imminent threat to my life. In fact, over the course of what is predicted to be my normal life expectancy, global climate change has only a minimal likelihood of causing my death. In other words the threat that global climate change poses to my life is modest at most. While my spouse is a few years younger than me, our age difference doesn't significantly increase the level of threat to her life. Going one step further, we don't have any biological children, therefore no grandchildren. This means I don't have a deep personal connection to the generations that will be facing a level of threat from global climate change similar to what I am currently experiencing in relation to COVID-19.

As I said a few minutes ago, the answers I arrived at were and are unsettling. I don't like having to face that my actions, or more accurately my inactions, relating to global climate change have been shortsighted and selfish. When I think about this in relation to what Greta Thunberg said, and I quote here, "You are failing us," I am guilty as accused. I have and I am failing the generations that are younger than myself. And I am failing all of the future generations that are yet unborn.

I believe it is important for me to recognize and to acknowledge this guilt. Yet from my years of training and experience in the mental health field, I also know that it is important that I don't get stuck in feelings of guilt. I have learned that guilt, and the accompanying emotion of shame, are not beneficial if they last very long. Over an extended period, these emotions lead to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Both of these emotions have the ability to immobilize a person. In order for me to take the actions I can to address global climate change, I need to shift from feeling guilt

and/or shame to feelings such as connection, caring, concern, commitment and dedication. Feelings such these will allow me to mobilize my energy and my efforts to do more to address the crisis that human caused global climate change is today.

So today, as I think about the crisis of human caused global climate change, I remember something my mother said to me many, many times as a child. “If you make a mess, you need to clean it up.” There is considerable wisdom in those words. When I was a child I had no doubt that she meant what she said. So as her words come to mind today they are accompanied by a sense of motivation—motivation to do what I know is the right and the responsible thing to do. It is time for me to get serious about cleaning up the mess I have participated in making—a mess that seriously threatens future generations.

But since I didn’t make the mess by myself, I can’t possibly clean it up by myself. I need help. Just like in our Story for All Ages, I need to engage as many people as possible in helping me to clean up the mess. So I am inviting you to join me, in whatever way you can, to take steps to address the causes of global climate change. You might think that there is little, if anything, you can do that will make much of a difference. You might think that but you are incorrect. Just like the women who joined Wangari in planting trees, when we join together, we can have a significant and positive impact. If you want to know actions you can take, I encourage you to check out the book, *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*, edited by Paul Hawken. This book lists 100 ways that a person can make a difference today. Working together, we can demonstrate to future generations that we care and we want them to be liberated from the responsibility of having to clean up the mess we and our recent ancestors created.

I realize there may be some who think my optimism is misplaced. I will admit that I don’t have the ability to know what the future holds, but neither do they. The government men didn’t believe that women could plant trees and have those trees grow to maturity. Similarly, those who believe we, the people, can’t make a positive difference when it comes to human caused global climate change could be wrong. Some of those naysayers are discovering that as we, the people, rise up and take action, institutions join us. One example occurred this past week. This example involves construction of the Keystone XL pipeline. Our former President determined that the pipeline should not be built. That decision was reversed by the current administration in the White House. And earlier this month, our Governor authorized construction to go ahead here in Montana. But construction of the pipeline hit a significant barrier. On Wednesday, in Great Falls, U.S. District Judge Brian Morris revoked an essential permit for construction of the pipeline.

The steps that are being taken to slow or even stop the spread of COVID-19 can be something we ought to keep in mind as we think about how to counter the demand for, and the use of, fossil fuels. We need to take the actions we can today to address the causes of global climate change. And we need to continually let our leaders know that we care about our environment, we care about the generations to come, and we, the people, are banding together to address the crisis that we know lies ahead.

So it is, and so shall it be.

