

So, What Would You Preach?

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Earth Day, 21 April 2013

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Every sermon begins with a question—
a question about what one hopes to be changed,
of how the world might be different
on the other side of uttering the final “amen” at the end.

This sermon, though, is a question itself.

As many of you read in First Light this weekend, I was vexed,
when I began planning today’s service many months ago,
about what I could possibly say on yet another Earth Day Sunday.

Frankly, in the spirit of recycling,
I thought of recycling my sermon from two years,
or three years, or four or five years ago. . .

There’s a timeless preacher’s story that argues for this.

It’s the story of a minister arriving in a new congregation.

On her first Sunday in the pulpit,
she preaches a dynamite, barn-burner of a sermon.

On her second Sunday, she preaches the same sermon.
The congregation is stunned,
but wants to give her the benefit of the doubt.
So no one said anything, generously assuming
that writing a new sermon had somehow slipped her mind.

After she preached the same sermon three Sundays in a row, though,
the leaders of the congregation gathered to ask their new minister
if she was planning to ever preach a different sermon.

And, it was in that moment the minister promised to preach a new sermon as soon as the members of the congregation got serious about taking the lessons of her now familiar sermon to heart.

Now, it wasn't long before that congregation decided the easiest way to get a new sermon was to get a new minister...

I don't really know why, but that story came to mind as I was preparing for yet another sermon for Earth Day. . . !

After all, there comes a point when it's all been said.

When only willful ignorance explains anyone not being fully aware of the need to reduce, reuse, recycle, of the ongoing degradation of the environment, of the short-sighted exploitation of the earth's resources, and our destructive dance with climate change.

I don't think there's anything I can say this morning, that you've not already heard a hundred times before.

So, as I said in First Light this week, my sermon title isn't merely rhetorical.

What would *you* preach, if you were the one speaking from the pulpit this morning?

What sermon would you deliver, knowing that we've already heard it all before?

What would you say, if you're doubtful most of us have made substantial change since last year's sermon on Earth Day?

I hoped my question might spark a response, but I was a bit surprised at how quickly I heard from a good number of you.

One person wrote to say:

One of my difficulties is trying to find a yard-stick [by which] to measure my own actions. . .

We take the train and TTC; we eat mostly organic.
But we own a car. [And] it's four-cylinder.

How do I measure my environmental footprint?

Against others who consume more,
including some First [Unitarian] members,
or against really committed North Americans
who live in super-insulated off-grid houses,
buy used clothes and walk everywhere?

Or against people in India or Africa
who consume a tenth of what I do?

Is there some standard—either one that doesn't harm the earth,
or more realistically, one that I might actually achieve?

Another person wrote to say:

I am looking at myself.
Even though I have been involved over the years,
I still think I 'preach water and drink wine.'

My animal instinct seeks comfort and in the moment
[my] actions are not overridden by what my brain tells me
about the long-term consequences.

It has been said that the 'mind is strong but the flesh is weak.'
We do not really like to give up something we can afford.

And another member of the congregation said:

Good luck [on] Sunday with the environment.
Some solutions are so obvious that we [don't] recognize them.

So long as we honour materialism
and an economic system based on growth,
environmental destruction will continue.

In the famous words of Pogo, he says,
"We have met the enemy and [it] is us."

I'm grateful for these and the other responses I received.

They remind me of the essential dialogue between pulpit and pew,
and reassure me that so many of us wrestle
with what a life of integrity requires of us
in the face of our ongoing environmental crisis.

They remind me that we live our lives
moving back and forth along a continuum
that runs from despair and hopelessness and total resignation on one end
to the almost obsessive compulsive drives of present-day Puritans on the other,
dutifully recycling every last scrap of paper,
but who still feel defeated and ridden with guilt
for leaving behind any trace of human consumption upon the earth.

It's a difficult and it is an exhausting way to live,
and yet it is where we find ourselves, here and now.

Wanting to do the right things,
though we aren't always sure exactly what that means.

Wanting to make better choices,
though better options are not yet or not always available.

Wanting to be assured we're not part of the problem,
though, of course, to some extent, we are.

Fundamentally, wanting to make a vital difference,
though we know that, ultimately, we can do only so much
without major involvement and investment
at every layer of government around the globe.

What, then, are we to do?

Ronald Heifetz, the marvelous teacher on leadership and change-theory,
would say that our society is largely taking the wrong approach.

He would argue that we're fixated on solving "technical problems"
rather than facing up to the "adaptive challenges"
that impede real progress.

Let me try to make that a bit clearer by explaining his approach.

Heifetz says there's a very big difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges, yet it's a difference we so often fail to see.

A technical problem is one that's easy to identify and typically has a clear and easy solution.

They're problems that can be solved with a bit of focussed expertise, requiring limited change and minimal consultation with others.

And adaptive challenge, though, is an entirely different beast.

Adaptive challenges are difficult to identify—though easy to deny.

Solutions involve making significant changes in our values, beliefs, roles, and relationships.

An outside authority can't simply bring his or her expertise to bear, as the situation is more complicated than that; adaptive challenges require that the people involved be part of the solution itself.

Whereas people usually easily embrace fixes to technical problems, we tend to be very resistant to taking up the work required of us by adaptive challenges.

A couple of examples:

The brakes on your car aren't working properly—again, for the tenth time in two years.

You can take the car to a mechanic, who can investigate and replace the worn-out brake pads.

That's a technical fix. You pay the bill and you're good to go again. Yet, there's also an adaptive challenge here.

If the brake pads are repeatedly being worn down, the driver needs to modify his behaviour,

to change the way he drives.

The technical fix is handy, but it doesn't solve the underlying issue.

Another example: a woman is diagnosed with high-blood pressure.

Her doctor prescribes medication, which is a technical solution, but also suggests changes in diet and exercise habits, which are, of course, highly adaptive challenges.

Heifetz says the biggest mistake in leadership is treating adaptive challenges as though they're technical problems—acting as though the new meds or the new brake pads have really solved the problem, once and for all.

If we apply this to the challenges we're facing on this planet, it feels to me that we are too quick to embrace technical fixes, without being willing to engage the adaptive work we need to do.

Now, don't get me wrong, there's much that can and must be done to find technical solutions that are innovative and game-changing.

Cleaner and sustainable forms of energy, more efficient modes of travel, healthier production of food and household goods are all having a real impact.

There are numerous technical solutions that give me great hope that we can eventually think our way out of the dangerous corner we've painted humanity into.

And, yet, there is this other work to be done—work that is ultimately adaptive in nature.

Many of us are already doing this work, or are trying to. We've been changing our habits for years, even when it has meant overcoming long-standing habits.

We all make different decisions today than we once did, mindful that the ways we choose our food,

our clothes, our travel, and our toys,
the way we invest our financial future,
the way we heat and light our homes,
and even the ways we live and function as a congregation
all have a meaningful impact on the planet.

Adaptive challenges require that we evolve,
and people around the globe are slowly starting to do just that
when it comes to managing climate change and reducing our footprint.

We should celebrate that we have ceased or curtailed many of the practices
that were and are most damaging to the fabric of life on this earth.

Tremendous progress has been made.
We are overcoming ignorance with information and innovation.
And yet it will likely be insufficient to the challenges we face
without our making a commitment to do more.

For the greatest adaptive challenge we face
requires bringing about a profound change of the human heart.

It asks that we make an abiding commitment to this planet
out of an unquenchable love for life itself.

While the work to find technical solutions needs to carry on,
while adaptive changes in our behaviour should continue to be made,
there is this deeper work of the heart that must,
I think, increasingly take centre stage
in our conversations about the future of life on this planet.

I say that because I believe both the problems we face
and the solutions we seek are ultimately spiritual in nature.

We live in paradoxical times.

At this very moment in history
when humans are most connected by technology,
we are also the generation most disconnected from our relationship
with this planet that gave us life and sustains us still.

The problem in this is that with disconnection comes danger.

As we lose sight of where our food comes from or where our garbage goes,
as we struggle to see the people who make our clothes or our computers,
we fail to grasp the true impact our way of life has on the future,
and we risk breaking covenant with the amazing dance through time
that has brought us from stardust into being, and into being here.

To keep that sacred dance going
will require nothing less than a change of heart—
a revolution of the soul—to see and cherish
the radical interdependence of everything.

We will have to practice reverence like we practice breathing.
We will have to give ourselves over to wonder and awe
at the miracle of it all, that we might not destroy the greatest gift ever given.

We will have to find our way to love, to love the earth,
like we never have before.

I leave you with these words from Denise Levertov, called “Beginners”:

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
—so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
—we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision

how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river

cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.

In this reluctant spring, when so much remains firmly in bud,
may we open ourselves to cherish the ground we walk upon.

May we celebrate the epic of evolution
that brought us to bear witness to this moment out of the vastness of time.

And may we live to love the earth, with all of our being,
that we might preach of its wonders, with reverence and with awe,
and pass along its great gift of life to all who will follow after us.

So be it.

Amen.