



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“No Clean Hands,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on February 12, 2012

I love that hymn we just sang¹--it's a love song to our blue green planet earth. Who among us has not sensed the sacred in the things of this earth? In the vastness of the heavens, in the sky and the the sea, in the hills and valleys and plants and creatures of this earth? I could preach a hundred sermons about finding God in nature, how the seasons and the cycles of light and dark nourish and inspire me.

But if a blissful appreciation of nature-based spirituality is what you're seeking today, you're going to be disappointed. Because our earth is in trouble. Population is expanding at an unsustainable rate. We are using up resources and creating waste like there's no tomorrow. We're fouling our own nest. The gravest threat is global warming--the fact, long accepted by most serious scientists, that climate change caused by human activity has far-reaching and drastic consequences for our children and grandchildren, for people around the globe. You see signs of this already, in unusually severe storms, in floods and droughts. Polar bears have less ice to live on, and if you want to see the famous snow atop Mount Kilimanjaro, you'd better go now.

If you find all of this incredibly discouraging, you're not alone. I look at the enormity of the problem and ask, “What can I do?” There is not even a consensus in our country, or among our political leaders, that climate change is a problem. Might that be because the petroleum industry spends millions on lobbying and making contributions to our elected officials? You must have seen the “green” adds that the big oil companies produce, talking about how they care for the environment. Before that awful oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, British Petroleum had re-branded BP as “beyond petroleum,” and spend \$200 million dollars in a PR campaign promoting their sunny new image. If they were beyond petroleum, then what was that black stuff pouring into the gulf? And if they are beyond petroleum, then why is BP one of the leading companies behind the tar sands project in Canada?

But before we mount a protest against the evil oil companies, let's take a look in the mirror. Making this bad news worse is the fact that we, the people of the United States, are the ones most responsible for this mess. We who represent about four percent of the world's population have put into the atmosphere forty percent of the world's greenhouse gases. These oil companies are only successful because we buy their products, and own their stock, and elect politicians who do their bidding.

¹ “For the Earth Forever Turning,” #163 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Before pointing the blame somewhere else, let's take a minute to confess our own sins. I live almost thirty miles from here, and drive back and forth a lot. My car gets decent mileage, but it's not a hybrid. I'm aware of the problems facing our planet, but too often I look away, because it makes me tired and sad to think of these things.

What about you? What do you need to confess?

In our country, the environmental movement can take on an attitude of self-righteousness and purity. As if they are completely good and the polluters are all on the other side. This ignores the fact that if you live in this country then you are part of the problem. I'm reminded of a verse from Psalm 24, and Annie Dillard's response to it. The psalmist asks, "Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" And responds, "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts."

But Annie Dillard sees it differently. "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?," she asks. "Or who shall stand in his holy place?" Then she says, "There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead—as if innocence had ever been—and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been."²

Who among us does not have struggles and troubles? Who among us doesn't, at least sometimes, feel unfit, unready, a failure? When you find yourself in that place of discouragement and brokenness, look around--there's plenty of company in this broken world. But I hope you won't decide to live there, because it can become a place of victimhood and blaming others, of waiting for someone to come and rescue you. I hope you'll find companions who will encourage you to do your own work. Annie Dillard is right--that we are unfit and unready, inadequate to the task we have been given. There are no clean hands. And she is right, there is no one but us. We are all we've got.

So I ask you, as our reading³ did this morning, what team are you on? Are you on team cynicism, that says no matter how hard you try, you are bound to fail? That says we'll always have injustice and people will never change, so you'd would be foolish to try?

Or are you on team hope--that group of people who "admit they don't know how things will turn out, but have decided to work for change"? That group of people "always telling stories of faith being rewarded, of how things could be different, of how their own lives have changed." The ones who will "give you reasons why you shouldn't give up, testimonials why we've yet to see our full

² Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper a Row, 1977).

³ "You Have to Pick Your Team," by Sonya Vetra Tinsley, as told to Paul Rogat Loeb, available online at <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0420-22.htm>. The quotes following in the sermon are from this essay.

potential as a species. They believe we're partners in God's creation, and that change is really possible."

Sonya Vetra Tinsley says there are times when each team seems right, and we never know who's going to prevail. She says, "I just have to decide which team seems happier, which side I'd rather be on. And for me that means choosing the side of faith. Because on the side of cynicism, even if they're right, who wants to win that argument anyway... I'd rather stick with people who have a sense of possibility and hope... that's the side I want to be on."

I want thank Demet Haksever for this reading, which she shared at our Board meeting this week, and for her work in social justice, which gives me hope. I want to thank the members of our Green Sanctuary Committee, who are offering a paper-free, local food coffee hour today. I love how you are putting your faith and values into action.

Renay Allen encouraged me to go up to Exeter a couple of weeks ago, and I did, in order to hear Bill McKibben speak at the Congregational Church there. Bill McKibben is a writer who lives in Vermont who has become an unlikely warrior in the fight against global warming. He says he's not an activist by nature. What he wants to do is stay home and write. But his awareness of how bad things are getting, on the global scale, compels him to do all he can to make a difference.

With a small group of students at Middlebury College, where he teaches, he started the group 350.org. He said they had seven students, so each student a continent and worked to expand consciousness and action there. Can you imagine taking responsibility for communicating with an entire continent? The number 350 represents the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that scientists think is sustainable--350 parts per million. We are already past that level, but the hope is that with effort and sacrifice we can get that number down. It's like going to the doctor and being told you need to lose some weight or lower your cholesterol if you want to survive. For our planet to survive, we need to bring that number down.

I hope you will check out the 350.org website, and take action to be part of the solution. I hope we as a congregation will ask our Green Sanctuary folks what we can do to help. What kind of difference might be be able to make, if we join together? Might we be able to reduce our own negative impact on the environment? Might we be able to get our leaders to finally take these issues seriously?

If you choose to be on that hope team, you won't be alone. There are already groups here, the Social Justice committee and the Green Sanctuary committee, that are doing great things and can help you to get involved. We are part of a group of congregations all across the country, from a wide variety of faith traditions, participating this weekend in a national preach-in on global warming, sponsored by a group called Interfaith Power and Light. We are not alone.

At this point, it's not clear whether we can reverse the climate changes we have set in motion. Our human tendency is to not respond to a problem when it doesn't affect us directly, or until it becomes too painful not to respond. But if we wait any longer, it will be too late.

The other night, before he talked about the perils of global warming, Bill McKibben said “we’re at a remarkably beautiful moment in our history.” He talked about the rise of the local food movement, and the fact that, last year, for the first time since the Civil War, there more farms in America than there were the previous year. That trend, of the number of farms declining every year, since the Civil War, stopped and turned the other way. He said we could make the same transition with energy that is happening with food, producing more of it locally, making it less highly centralized. He sees inspired local communities creating local solutions that not only solve problems but do it in ways that help us to connect with one another and live lives that are happier and more whole.

There is plenty of bad news, and we would be foolish to ignore it. We have created the problem of global warming, and it belongs to all of us. There are no clean hands, and no one coming to save us from ourselves. Might we begin to confess our faults and get on with cleaning up the mess we have made?

The future is uncertain. There are plenty of reasons to give up. The question is, will you? You have to pick your team. What you decide will make all the difference.

Amen.