

The Coming Simplicity

This sermon is an attempt to look honestly at one of the the moral problems of our consumerism -- namely global warming-- and our spiritual responsibility to respond as individuals but more importantly as a community. I offered this as a teaching (sermon) at our Eighth Day Faith Community on April 20, 2008.

Bible text: Acts 2:36-47

“They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person’s need was met.” Then later on in Acts:

And so it turned out that not a person among them was needy. Those who owned fields or houses sold them and brought the price of the sale to the apostles and made an offering of it. The apostles then distributed it according to each person’s need. (Acts 4:34 – 35)

It’s easy to miss how radical these early Christian communities were. They lived within the corrupt and overwhelming Domination System of Rome and the religious authorities. Peter exhorts them, “Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture.” It’s tempting to blunt the radical nature of their response by assuming that economic sharing only happened in the earliest communities and then died out. But recent scholarship indicates that economic sharing was a distinguishing characteristic of Christian communities for several centuries.

It was part of getting out of that “sick and stupid culture.”

In a teaching several weeks ago, John Mohr suggested we need to wipe clean our windows of perception to see the ecologic, economic, social, and political storm that is coming. In the discussion that followed, it was pretty clear, I thought, that many of us already perceived the outlines of that storm and have been thinking about it. And many of us, it seemed to me, shared John’s belief that we needed to respond to what was coming as a community rather than as individuals.

I'm not going to look much at economic sharing today, but I do want to talk about the need for a radical, community response to our "sick and stupid culture." I'm afraid, though, that I'm going to need your help. As is my wont, I've sort of gotten stuck on the dark side of things and haven't really found a good way out. Since one of my fundamental faiths is that the Gospel doesn't need to sugarcoat the bad news in order to transform it into good news, I'm sure there are some "good-news-things" I'm missing. So, I'd appreciate your listening with an ear to finding them. There'll be a chance to share some of that later.

Our mission group recently read a book that impressed on me something I'd previously only vaguely intuited. And that is that our American consumerism is not only theologically idolatrous, not only ecologically irresponsible and dangerous, but also—from the point of view of the developing world—*theft*. We're violating our 8th commandment: Do Not Steal.

What do I mean? Well, as long as resources are considered infinite, it's possible to use more than other people do without any moral problem. Or as long as other people at least have enough of those resources to live with dignity, it's possible to use more than they do without too great a moral issue. Indeed, good capitalists would say that my consumption *helps* others by creating jobs that "will lift all boats." But if resources are finite and if others already don't have enough to live with dignity, then my taking more than my share creates serious ethical and spiritual trouble. In other words, if I take so many of the world's resources that others can't get enough for their basic needs, that's stealing.

Take as a powerful example the case of carbon dioxide emissions. We're now realizing that the atmosphere and oceans can hold only so much carbon dioxide, that there's a limit to their capacity as "carbon sinks." Since carbon dioxide persists in the atmosphere for over a century after it's released, the carbon emissions of the industrialized nations (which have given us our level of affluence) have already taken too large a share of the available "carbon sink," and our continued disproportionate use only exacerbates the disparity. Everyone here already knows that as a global society the options before us are either

- to drastically curtail emissions or
- to suffer the disastrous consequences of runaway global warming (which will most disastrously affect the world's poor).

Therefore, I have to look upon my current carbon usage for what it is: theft that's part of the

continued denial of basic subsistence to billions of others. Virtually everything we depend upon economically *and* that the global poor will depend upon for their subsistence—including energy, transportation of necessities, manufacturing, and fertilizer for basic agriculture—all require dumping carbon into the air, which (if the globe isn't to overheat) requires space in the carbon sinks ... which are full.

The recent increase in food prices around the world, for instance, has been staggering: The price of wheat has more than doubled in the last year. Rice producing countries are hoarding their produce for fear of not having enough to feed their own people, causing food riots elsewhere around the world. According to the United Nations World Food Program, of the four primary causes of the recent deadly spike in world food prices, three of them are:

- competition between bio-fuels and food,
- higher energy prices and
- increased climatic shocks like droughts and floods due to global warming.

So the recent food shortages and (much of what's to come) are directly related to our taking more than our share.

One can make similar arguments for other of the world's resources that we Americans consume to the detriment of others.

Now, I must admit that this language of theft seems a bit unfair; I mean I didn't mean to do anything wrong and, until recently, have hardly been aware of the problem. It's sort of like discovering that your financially comfortable upbringing and solid education were made possible by a grandfather who made his fortune as a slum landlord. You sort of wish you could give it back, but, in fact, you can't. The only direction is forward.

Perhaps the language of theft is unhelpful because it implies punishment. While punishment from the developing world is certainly one possibility, it isn't inevitable. Nevertheless, that there will be *consequences* from our years of excess carbon dumping is virtually certain. As John suggested several weeks ago, there are huge changes coming.

One problem for many of us, especially those of us steeped in Western Enlightenment thinking, is that it's hard to get our minds around our moral responsibility in a situation like this. We understand viscerally the wrong of harming another person directly, yet when the responsibility for global warming is so diffuse and the worst victims so far away in both time and space, it's hard to feel my personal moral obligation to do something about carbon consumption, especially when the consequences for *my* life will be so drastic and I don't see my sacrifice helping anybody else very much. But if we begin to understand that the historical Christian response to this "sick and stupid culture" is a coming together in community and a radical realignment of priorities, then we can begin to see a path that we can follow.

Let me get specific. There is, of course, disagreement about the exact degree of the global warming threat, but many of the most informed scientists give us only ten years or so to make very significant changes in our carbon emissions. They're speaking of the eventual necessity of a 90% reduction within the developed countries in order to make room for the developing countries to increase their per capita usage to something upon which they can live with dignity. To say the least, a 90% reduction will necessitate drastic changes in our lives.

This won't be a matter of changing our light bulbs, buying a hybrid car, turning the thermostat down, or writing letters to Congresspeople. While those kinds of steps are certainly important, I'm afraid they're a minor prelude to what's required.

The highly unrealistic hope that everyone seems to be counting on is technology: Solar power, wind power, geothermal power, houses that don't leak heat, and so on. We want to cling to the illusion that it can be done without a radical change in our habits. Now, maybe *eventually* technology will allow everyone to have lifestyles like ours, but we're deluding ourselves to think that that's going to come anytime soon ... like within our lifetimes.

So, it comes down to that question of theft again. If it's really our lifestyles that are the problem, then we have the obligation to change them. Let me list, in no particular order, some of the changes that seem to me absolutely necessary.

- Vegetarian diets: According to British scientists, "producing 1 kg of beef (about 2.2 pounds) results in more CO₂ emissions than going for a three-hour drive while leaving all the lights on at home." [\[1\]](#)
- Getting rid of most of our cars and using walking, biking, sharing cars, and public transportation.

- No more flying in airplanes ... at all.
- Living in smaller homes or, if we have larger homes inviting people in to live with us.
- Buying almost all of our food from local sources.
- Retrofitting our houses to reduce energy consumption and adding energy generators (eg solar panels)

Now, I'll be the first to admit that this very partial list seems overwhelming. On hearing it, the most understandable emotional response is to feel either guilty or angry, figure it's unrealistic, withdraw from the conversation, and not do much about it. That's pretty depressing.

I do have some idea of the directions we need to head. In his sermon on Palm Sunday, Fred Taylor quoted a psychologist who suggested that the ordered, bounded, strictly rational thinking that we were taught works pretty well in a stable society with predictable rules and outcomes. Fred suggested, however, that when drastic change comes to society, there's a need for a "vertical dimension" in our souls that allows us to remember who we are and what we're about.

I think it's fair to say that such a drastic change in society is now in the relatively near future. I suspect that a significant aspect of that change is going to be economic disruption, in part stemming from the need to start giving back to the developing world what we've been taking from them for the last centuries. In other words, many of the changes I mentioned above are probably going to be forced upon us economically, anyway. We are going to become much poorer as a country and that'll have many difficult consequences.

And if we're stuck in that ordered, bounded, strictly rational thinking, we're going to find it very difficult and feel very deprived. But what if we allow the vertical dimension of our faith and the horizontal dimension of our community to provide the opportunity to deepen our sense of walking with God as God's people?

Our Biblical faith, for instance, points to the virtues of radical material simplicity. We've tended to take that imperative pretty lightly because ... well, because we like our stuff, and we don't really believe (or want to believe) that it's spiritually damaging. But if our consumption leads to the theft of carbon sinks from the world's poor, then the importance of the Biblical imperative is clear. We must gather only as much manna as we need so that no one has too much and no one has too little. Do we take seriously the Gospel belief that such a life of simplicity is actually richer than one of affluence? What if we're being called by God to this radical change and God's promise is a radical deepening of our relationship with God?

Add to this the horizontal dimension of community. While it might theoretically be possible to make these changes in consumption as individuals, it seems to me that we're called to meet them in community. What are the possibilities? One obvious one is sharing cars. If folks who live within walking distance of one another were to share a single vehicle, getting rid of a car or two becomes more feasible. Marja and I have been able to get rid of our car much more easily because Patty, Gail, and a few others make their vehicles available to us when we need them. Another is sharing living space. A number of the younger people do already. Some of us have taken in TASSC refugees who need housing. But a lot of us probably don't need the large space we're using and might examine the possibility of sharing our home with someone else from this community.

One of the intermediate steps we might take is ask to be held accountable for our carbon emissions, perhaps by our mission group, perhaps by our spiritual director, or perhaps by a special group convened a couple of times a year just for that purpose. Sometimes, I think, we're afraid to share with others our own discoveries in simpler living for fear of seeming "holier than thou." You may have noticed that many of the suggestions for cutting carbon emission that I made earlier were things that Marja and I have done or are working on. But I suspect that many of you could suggest other things that you've already started that don't occur to me. One problem is that some things that work for one person just aren't going to work for others. Marja and I have been able to give up our car because we live in the city close enough to everything that we can walk and bike, plus our children are grown. It's been easy for us. It might not even be possible for someone else at this point in their life. So, perhaps we've been afraid to suggest to others things that we've discovered for fear of appearing self-righteous. By asking others to hold us accountable, though, we might encourage the sharing with one another of what we've discovered and moving forward together.

I mentioned at the beginning deeper economic sharing. Through our tithes and offerings, of course, we already have some version of it, especially as we've gradually increased our scholarship and our compassion funds, to share in small ways with each other. This could be greatly increased. There are also times when someone has a need, it gets announced, and other people help by sharing some of their own abundance. If there are some difficult economic times coming, then we might want to begin exploring with each other what a deeper economic sharing could look like. Many of us are in or nearing retirement. I suspect that if we began to look seriously at economic sharing, much of the anxiety we feel about retirement might be alleviated ... and it would deepen our community life enormously.

I should make clear that the environmental changes that will be necessary are not all, or even primarily, personal. Structural change is absolutely necessary, and we will have to be part of

advocating for it. But personal changes will allow us to advocate with less fear and more integrity, and it'll demonstrate to others that these structural changes are feasible.

Well, it still feels like the middle of the sermon, but that's it. And it still seems to me a pretty dark place. So, I'd like us to take some moments of silence and then perhaps a few people would like to come to the mike and share your responses.

These are some of the shared responses after the sermon:

- Buy carbon offsets.
- Develop relationships with the global poor (much like we in our community have with local poor) so that those who are most deeply affected have a face.
- Take part in the food coop organized by Seekers Faith community.
- The big picture is that capitalism will inevitably lead to the increase in inequality. The "little picture" is that our consumerism is primarily an addiction (not *like* an addiction but an addiction itself).
- Perhaps we have a fear of naming all of this, but there is a real joy in suffering that we need to learn about. The Bible promises "abundance," which is very different from affluence. Perhaps what we would like to work on is developing that sense of abundance.
- Technology certainly will not save us ... ever. There was an objection to the community emphasis in the teaching because it can lead to tribalism (nationalism) and exclusion.
- Let's all e-mail each other or post to the list serve the different things that each of us have done to simplify and reduce our carbon consumption.
- Would it be possible to develop the carbon footprint for the entire faith community and then work on reducing it?

[1] Sample, Ian, "Meat production beefs up emissions," *Guardian*, Jul 19, 2007.