
Environment Sunday
Martin Grove United Church
Sept. 30 2018
by Rev. Dr Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 John 2:15-17 and Mark 9:38-50

Who here believes in magic? Nobody? Really? Well I hope that's right. But we will find out, because today is "Environment Sunday". And there is an interesting connection between "environment" and "magic". The word "environment" is a very broad term, so let me start by asking what it means to you. And in particular, what do you expect a sermon on Environment Sunday to be about? What are you hoping I will speak about? What are you hoping I will NOT speak about?

[descend: what does the word "environment" mean to you?]

The Bible gives us a conflicted picture of how to value the environment. We have both a positive and a negative image of the world - our home - within the Bible. In Genesis, it says that God created the world, the land, the waters, the plants, the animals - including us - and declared that it was good. We were told to manage the earth and its resources. In other parts of the Bible we are told to love everyone as we love ourselves, so clearly the earth's resources are meant to be shared. The earth should be sustained for all people, including future generations, so conservation is important. That's a positive image. A negative image appears in the Bible too - one example being our reading from 1 John 2 this morning. In those passages, faithful Christians are seen as "not of this world", and the world itself is seen as the enemy, full of evil desires, something temporary that is passing away, so conservation is seen as a waste of time. Those texts drive a theology that says that heaven is important and permanent, but the earth is disposable.

So the Bible cannot directly answer the question as to whether we should care about our environment. And of course, we should not expect the Bible to address that

issue anyway. None of the biblical authors could have imagined what we now call “environmental change”. There are passages in the Bible that describe great destruction of course. Al Gore famously said that “every night on the evening news is like a nature hike through the Book of Revelations”. But the essence of the today’s conversation on environmental change is that human actions are causing this change. It is not the will of God, as it is described in Revelations.

Given that I have been an environmental scientist, and given that Marjorie is a climate change policy executive, you probably expect a sermon about climate change - the impact on our climate caused by human behaviour. You probably expect a focus on blame, guilt, perhaps even shame. You probably expect me to tell you what we can do about it. Well, we might get there in the end, but I want to start somewhere else. I want to start by saying that I love history. I love learning about history, and in particular the “big” stories of human development. We usually use the term “narrative” to talk about social development in the big picture. And what I love about learning about history is seeing the broad narrative at work. It reinforces both my belief in - and my disgust at - human behaviour. Understanding our own narrative often gives the best answer to the question “how did we get into this mess in the first place”.

One problem with any narrative is deciding where to start the story. All narratives are built upon the myths and realities of the past, so in some sense, narratives never have a beginning. But we have to jump in somewhere. I want to jump in at the end of the Second World War, right here in North America.

Having the Second World War end was undoubtedly a good thing. But the cessation of hostilities was partially responsible for the next phase in our own narrative. Post-war, we believed that our system of government was superior to fascism, and moreover that democracy really worked. And perhaps it even did. But that belief, coupled with the fact that so many people had made great sacrifices during the war led to our next stage of development, where there was some sense that individual people had done their part to make the world safe, and we could now just go back to normal life. Honest people that we were, we were just required to vote every few years, pay our taxes and allow our elected officials to run things. And of course, things would run well

because we had a great system in place. We ourselves could sit back and let ourselves be taken care of by our government. We paid for everything after all. We were happy to pay our taxes, but, many of us stopped thinking for ourselves at a time when life actually became more complex.

If you don't believe me, consider this. How often do you wonder why your financial investments are not doing better? Are you frustrated that when you have a mutual fund the fund managers get 2.5% every year while you don't necessarily do much better than that yourself? It's your money after all! When did we decide that spending 1 hour per year with our financial advisers should get us a 10% return on our investments? When was it the we - as a society - came to see that we should get positive results with no real effort on our part? We have stopped wanting to think for ourselves and feel that others should take care of us just because we pay them to do that.

And this attitude has had a huge impact on our current environmental crisis. Even people who recognize that we are in an environmental crisis are waiting for other people to solve this problem. Perhaps we are waiting for the government to take care of the problem. Perhaps we are waiting for some genius to develop a car that runs on tap water or whatever. Are we waiting for someone else to solve the environmental crisis?

Pick any environmental issue, and I guarantee you can make progress on that issue without any help from the government, or from anybody else either. Are you worried about emissions from power plants? Use less electricity yourself, and you will make a difference! Are you worried about the massive environmental damage that comes from the production of livestock? Eat less meat, and you will make a difference. Are you waiting for fast food outlets to ban plastic straws? Just stop taking those straws - today - and you will make a difference!

Jesus said, "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire." Now if Jesus was here today, he might say, "If your fuel-guzzling car is causing you to stumble, take the bus or find a better car. If your single-use plastic water bottle is causing you to stumble, get a re-fillable water bottle. If your fossil fuel-based diet is causing you to stumble, learn to eat better. Choose to enter life in a new way rather than to go to hell

and to take the whole planet with you”.

But of course, we would rather that someone else solves these problems for us. To me, this does come from our post-war narrative that says we want our government to take care of us. And speaking about issues isn't enough either. I saw a quote this week that said, “Spirituality says, trust yourself to change yourself. And if each one of you do it, the world will change. But if you just sit down, and lecture, and write articles to the newspaper, and talk wisely of how the world must change, how the atmosphere must change, how politics must change, nothing will change!” Presumably this would extend to preaching too. Preaching a sermon on the environment changes nothing. Listening to a sermon on the environment changes nothing. Change only happens when individual people change. Jesus does not say, “If your right hand causes you to stumble, complain about your hand to everyone you meet.” Jesus does not say, “If your right hand causes you to stumble, wait for someone else to fix your hand.” Jesus says, “If your right hand causes you to stumble ... do something about it yourself.”

One current crisis in Toronto is recycling. I don't know whether you've noticed or not, but the rules around recycling have changed. The big problem with recycling has always been what is called “contamination”. Contamination is any material in a recycling bin that cannot be recycled or separated out. The current contamination rate in Toronto is about 25%. In the past, the standards were not very stringent, but Toronto's rules changed recently because the recycling plants in China and other places have changed their standards. Yes, that's what I said. The changes happened in China. Are you telling me you didn't know that we burn fossil fuels to ship some of our recycled materials to China. And whatever China does with our recycling takes more fossil fuel of course. And then we can just burn some more of that fuel to bring products back over here.

Most people don't know that because - once again - we have stopped thinking for ourselves. You don't have to be an engineer to know that the environmental costs of recycling are huge. We - and this includes me - would rather just believe the delusion that our blue boxes are magic. You put a plastic bottle into the blue box and - whoosh - problem solved. But we all know - if we think about it - that those blue boxes are picked

up by fuel-burning trucks that take the material to fuel-burning plants for processing, shipping, sorting, etc. The blue box program in Toronto now takes even more fuel because Toronto is sending teams of inspectors to inspect your blue bin before it gets collected. Blue bins consume a lot of environmental resources - the very things we believe that blue bins are preserving!

If you didn't know that, perhaps you do believe in magic after all!

Some environmental advocates are now saying that we should stop recycling altogether. Some say that recycling is just a subsidy to bottled water companies because without the myth that recycling is magic, the bottled water market would shrink significantly. That sounds a bit extreme to me. But I do believe we should make every effort to NOT recycle. Recycling is better than making garbage. But recycling is still MUCH worse than the other 2 R's, reduce and reuse. We need to stop thinking that recycling is magic. We need to stop thinking that recycling is good. Recycling is bad for the environment. Yes, garbage is even worse, but recycling is still bad. Reduce/Reuse is what we need to be doing, as much as possible. And to be honest, I want to add another R to the list too - Re-think. Re-thinking should perhaps be the first one on our list.

The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference. Indifference says that the world - and its people - are disposable. Love says that the world and its people matter deeply. Let's choose love!

If your hand causes you to stumble, ...

Amen.