

For the Wonders of the Earth

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 21, 2024

Nearly every Sunday my husband and I go on a hike, immersed in the wonder, awe, and reverence of the natural world. Streams below us, offering sweet whispers of water flowing through rocks and moss covered, fallen trees. Birds above us, each singing to its own tune, filling the air with a gentle orchestra of chirps, tweets, and cries. Trees are now transitioning from winter's death towards spring's abundance as baren, brown limbs come alive with life-giving greenery. And yet immersed in this most sacred of environments, we are keenly aware of the destruction of the streams, the birds, the life-giving trees and ferns as our climate crisis serves as the detriment of all creation. Throughout the world, temperatures fluctuate greatly, storms grow stronger and more deadly, pervasive droughts wreak havoc. And we – the children of creation – are causing this disastrous shift.

Why, you may ask, are we causing this catastrophe? In so many ways, it is the destructive force of capitalism. Capitalism is a system driven by profit with a focus on growth and consumption. In this system, short-term answers are prioritized over long-term sustainability – over the environment. The system values profit and growth beyond all other concerns as the focus remains on “consumption, production, and resource extraction.” As a result of this system and its inherent greed, habitats are heedlessly

destroyed, basic resources are depleted, and the production of greenhouse emissions becomes a common, routine practice.¹

These actions run counter to so many of our values as a people of faith. We work to cultivate holy wonder, awe, and reverence for the natural world that many of us hold divine. These practices destroy our focus on sacred interdependence – that knowledge that before and after this brief life our atoms were and will be part of the natural world – we and the world are one, shared entity. These actions destroy those cycles of nature that mirror our own cyclical woes and joys. Nature serves as a reminder that the sacred is so much greater than our individual lives. It becomes significantly more important than commodities and money. May we not destroy that which gives our planet life.

And yet greed distorts these wonders into capital. What, then, if not sacred divinity, are we prioritizing as a country? What do we value instead, both as corporations and as individuals? Profit. Wealth. Careless, unnecessary abundance of the tangible and the extravagant. We amplify a greed that is intimately connected with the use of fossil fuels and the consequent abundance of greenhouse gasses. For those large-scale corporations, this dependence that has become inherent to capitalism will continue in perpetuity as the most profitable decisions continue to deplete environmental health and sustainability. Through written word author Wendell Berry highlights those questions that speak truth to the conformity and obedience and passivity of the masses. Why are we allowing this destruction? Why are we rewarding the destroyers? Why are we

¹ “Profit Over Planet: Capitalism’s Impact on Climate Crisis” by Abdul Rehman Nawaz and Ali Asad Sabir

participating in this destruction?² Could the response be wealth, consumption, a desire for the status quo, indifference, and greed?

Yes, and because of this we each face fundamental loss. What are we losing that is felt most intimately? We spoke of this earlier. We are connected with nature: sharing atoms as we cycle, together, through life and death. We share oxygen and carbon dioxide as each creature, each plant, breathes in and out. What are we losing to the detriment of the world? We depend on nature for sustenance, for survival. Three species become extinct each hour of each day. We are entering the world's sixth greatest mass extinction – an extinction unique as it is caused by one, solo species.³

(https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population_and_sustainability/extinction/#:~:text=We're%20in%20the%20midst,are%20being%20driven%20to%20extinction.)

Every living thing is affected.

Our views on the climate crisis are distorted as we are fed a single story from those in power. A recent survey found that when asking those of the general population what the greatest factor for river pollution is, the overwhelming response was “litter and plastic.” In actuality, the biggest source of water pollution is farming and sewage. And yet, “litter” is the story we know.⁴ This single story diverts any political pressure from the producers of greenhouse gasses to consumers, increasing wealth of corporations while misrepresenting the truth that is fed to the masses. Corporations are destroying

² “Compromise, Hell!” by Wendell Berry

³ “Human Population Growth and Extinction” from *Center for Biological Diversity*

⁴ “Capitalism is Killing the Planet – It’s Time to Stop Buying into Our Own Destruction” by George Monbiot

the planet and are not being held responsible; they are the detriment of our home, this earth, and yet they are able to avoid the blame. Our precious, only world is falling apart.

You – I – would assume anyone's response to this crisis to be far different than our current reality. An assumption would be that we respond to this catastrophe by immediately and decisively changing our relationship with the natural world. And yet, as rivers become toxic, as glaciers melt into the sea, as our car exhaust infiltrates the atmosphere, little is being done to reverse our relationship with Mother Earth. If we take, may we give in return. If we take, may we acquire only that of which we truly need. May we not focus on profit, but on the sacred gifts offered to us by all things natural and divine. May we offer thanks each day for the beauty of abundance, reshaping our relationship with all of creation from one of extortion to one of awe and gratitude.

How does all of this run contrary to our Principles? Let us reflect, first, on our interdependent web of life. Each extinction, each extortion, each greedy act, is felt by every being dependent on the natural world – it affects each of us; it intimately influences all that is and all that ever will be. The descendants of all creation will feel these losses acutely. We rely on the earth working in harmony; ecosystems supporting one another; species sustaining one another; plants offering nutrition and oxygen and shelter, animals offering sustenance, spreading seeds, and pollinating plants. All of these things intimately depend on one another. We are likewise connected to our human siblings – feeling the detriment of life lost in fires, hurricanes, droughts, and

floods. Our web is being torn apart at the core as our sacred balance, maintained throughout millennia, is transitioning to chaos.

Let us focus on the inherent dignity and worthiness of each individual on this planet we call home. In our faith, everyone is deserving of care, compassion, empathy, and love. Everyone is entitled to basic human rights, with an ability to flourish. And yet, the climate crisis tied together with capitalism overwhelmingly causes detriment to the marginalized of this world. The least of these feel the food and water scarcity fueled by the climate crisis most poignantly, to the detriment of entire communities. Money overpowers personhood as developed nations exploit cheap labor of the world's impoverished and use developing countries as a dumping ground for hazardous waste – people lose personhood. Imagine living in thirst, in hunger, traversing one disaster to the next while living alongside of garbage of the world.⁵ Those in marginalized communities lack financial resources to recover from floods or hurricanes which are becoming all the more frequent. Whole communities are destroyed. What more leads to detriment? What more differentiates rich from poor, a flourishing world from a broken one? These aching beloveds reside in communities most susceptible to natural disasters such as flooding. Further, the poor are more likely to work at jobs that depend on a stable climate, whether in “agriculture, forestry, or fishing,” all directly affected by damage to the environment.⁶ All of these – increasing the wealth gap between wealthy and poor through detrimental discrepancies. Author Robin Wall Kimmerer offers, “The

⁵ “Profit Over Planet: Capitalism’s Impact on Climate Crisis” by Abdul Rehman Nawaz and Ali Asad Sabir

⁶ “How Capitalism is a Driving Force of Climate Change” by Lauren Pollock

very earth that sustains us is being destroyed to fuel injustice.”⁷ This blessed planet provides us all we need to survive and thrive. And yet we are demolishing this gift, this sustainer, this culmination of all things holy. In doing so, we sustain and feed systemic injustice, the wealth gap perpetuating world-wide poverty and likewise the disease of excess and greed. The poor become poorer, the rich become richer. Inherent dignity is pushed to the wayside as greed out ways the livelihood of the masses. Inherent worthiness is dismissed as money and power become more important than life. People are seen as commodities, not as siblings. Things, not as breathing, living, mothers and fathers and sisters and friends.

The earth is crying out. Our planet is on the cusp of a “tipping point,” as author George Monbiot offers. Every complex system can reach a tipping point, a threshold, before destruction. The closer it gets, the more it “flickers.” Our earth is flickering as her systems begin to fail. What are those global flickers? Heat domes over our seaboards, fires engulfing the Mediterranean; floods inundating Germany or China or Sierra Leone – the earth is crying out for help, the tears of the atmosphere felt in the rain, a sigh of distress held in a hurricane.⁸ And yet we are still met with indifference. With complacency. With apathy. The wealthy focus on hoarding wealth, the masses focus on consumption – on unnecessary things or excess comforts. The news reports on frivolous distractions as floods destroy or wildfires rage. We use energy in excess – entirely indifferent to the effects on the world. And yet we can change our relationship. We can change our relationship with the world.

⁷ *Braiding Sweetgrass: Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

⁸ “Capitalism is Killing the Planet – It’s Time to Stop Buying into Our Own Destruction” by George Monbiot

What would this collective shift look like? How can we live with a change in mindset, listening to the cries of fires and floods alike? Producers and corporations would like us to focus on the small things – plastic straws and coffee cups, instead of themselves being held accountable. And yet it is the corporations fueling an overwhelming percentage this destruction.⁹ The most important thing we can do is to make sure our collective voices are heard. We need to help facilitate systemic change. How can we do this? We join together as a sacred, powerful group of dedicated individuals for large-scale collaboration – we cannot do this alone. We need to raise awareness of the detrimental harm being done, providing this knowledge to the general population and to the stakeholders alike. We need to make truthful information widely accessible. Together, we develop and implement sustainable solutions. We help to implement economic incentives, such as taxation or subsidies. All of this is not to overwhelm us, but to highlight what we can do as we join together with others committed to this necessary change.¹⁰

And yet may we not throw to the wayside those intimate changes we can make each and every day – may we love our planet and all she has to offer. May each decision be one of intention. We can change our diet to avoid meat and dairy, we can reevaluate travel and airplanes, depend less on cars, reduce energy consumption, respect green spaces, invest money responsively, cut back on consumption and waste. We can make a difference, beloveds. We can make a difference.

⁹ “Capitalism is Killing the Planet – It’s Time to Stop Buying into Our Own Destruction” by George Monbiot

¹⁰ “Leading Systems Change: Nine Strategies to Transform the Way the World Works” by Sally Uren

Nature truly becomes most sacred when she is understood as a “thou,” not an “it.”

Jeanne Foster writes, “I was unforgettably spoken to by this voice from deep below ground, the song of the redwood roots. The tree ceased to be an “it,” and the tree and I vibrated together... In the groaning of the roots, I heard the song of the universe.”¹¹ The swaying, budding trees, the towering mountains with caps of snow, the bubbling streams, the blossoming tulips – these become living, breathing entities, imbued with emotions of joy or compassion or gratitude or wonder. We inhale as one, we exhale as one – the divine breath of the universe. The honeysuckle, she smiles as we ingest the sweet scent that is her gift to the world. The mountain – he gleams with pride as we climb up his steep slopes, ourselves in awe of his grandeur. Nature tends to us, provides for us – offering sustenance, oxygen, shelter. May we in response offer an appreciation, a reverence, an awe that serves to lift and celebrate this divine spirit. May we offer prayers and wonder and murmurings of gratitude, offering joy and thanks to that which gives us life. The universe sings – may we hear her vibrato her in a bird’s song, in the sigh of the wind, the crashing of the waves. Each tree, each whale, each person intimately interconnected as the atoms of life’s ancestors cycle in perpetuity from life to death to life again, from person to starfish to the first daffodils of spring. May we say goodnight to the moon and hear “good morning” in the sunrise. May we say thank you from our very hearts, offering quiet, personal, genuine gratitude for the blessings of life all around us. An “it” becomes easy to destroy. It is harder to destroy a “thou,” a living, breathing, entity. Dear clematis you are my sacred, beloved redwood you are my

¹¹ “The Redwood” by Jeanne Foster

holy. May we treat nature as divinity, for that is where the eternal essence of the universe is held. That is the dwelling of unceasing love. So may protect her. May we nourish her. May we tend to her. May we love her.

Go in peace, and Amen