

Where Environmental and Social Justice Meet

Steve Scott – July 17, 2016

We have just sung the words, "...skies are everywhere as blue as mine" – but we need to ask, for how much longer? And is it true everywhere now? Almost every day we see news about how climate change is accelerating. What can we do to prevent climate catastrophe, and how does that relate to social justice? That's my focus this morning.

As those who have heard me speak before may recall, I love our UU Seven Principles. As a recovering Presbyterian, they speak to me in a way that traditional Christianity never did. Embedded in the seven principles are five that speak directly to social justice and environmental sustainability, namely:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Our church Ends Statements also speak to these themes, and I quote: "Together we move outside our comfort zones as we work for justice and to help heal the world. In particular, we lead in the struggle against racism and for LGBTQ rights, distributive justice, and environmental sustainability."

While some say that organizing UUs is like herding cats, my observation is that we tend to organize the heck out of ourselves. Witness the plethora of teams and committees in our own church, two of which are the Social Action Team and the Green Sanctuary Team.

Our Social Action Team focuses on advancing justice and peace, and it has organized itself into sub-teams dealing with economic justice, anti-racism and LGBTQ issues, whereas our Green Sanctuary Team focuses on environmental sustainability. I'm going to suggest to you this morning that putting social and environmental justice into separate "issue silos" like this may render our efforts less effective because social and environmental ills stem from common causes.

These common causes became apparent to me recently when I read Naomi Klein's 2014 book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. It's 466 dense pages of facts and argument, so I can give you only the briefest overview this morning – more a taste than a full meal.

Let's cut to the chase right away. Klein identifies the root cause of both social and environmental ills as deregulated capitalism. Beginning during Jimmy Carter's presidency and accelerating during Ronald Reagan's reign, the so-called neoliberal economic outlook has become the dominant ideology in the U.S. and other developed nations. Here are some of the aspects and consequences of that ideology that create both social and environmental problems:

- Providing public benefits to corporations while freeing them of regulations.
- Maximizing corporate profits at the expense of all other considerations.

- Increasing productivity while extracting labor from people at the lowest possible cost, and then relying on government to support impoverished workers.
- Extracting resources from the earth at the lowest possible cost, either without regard to consequences or relying on government to clean up the mess.
- Prioritizing economic growth over climate action.
- Privatizing public resources.
- Lowering taxes on corporations and the wealthy.
- Treating the free market as sacrosanct.
- Discouraging public investment that could reduce emissions, such as renewable energy, smart grids, mass transportation, urban redesign, etc.
- Resisting measures that would effectively reduce emissions, such as high royalties or a steep carbon tax.
- Promoting trade agreements that result in a race to the bottom for the lowest labor costs wherever they can be found and that actively discourage climate action in numerous ways.
- Maintaining an extractivist mindset that says we can continue to take resources from the earth that pollute our air and water without consequences worth worrying about.

As we think about all these features of neoliberalism, it's readily apparent that this dominant ideology not only creates social injustice, but also causes climate change and prevents effective climate action.

In the context of climate change, the most obvious beneficiaries of neoliberal ideology are the fossil fuel companies that rape the earth to mine coal, drill for oil, dig up tar sands, and frack for natural gas. Those companies are, naturally, adamantly opposed to effective climate action. But it's not just the extractive industries that oppose climate action – it's all the large corporations that benefit from the culture of deregulation, low taxes, free trade, and the other pillars of neoliberal ideology – because they foresee that once we start regulating the fossil fuel industries, they will become targets as well.

And that raises an interesting point. Those on the left of the political spectrum like to feel that they see the world more clearly than those on the right. They agree with Stephen Colbert's riff that "Reality has a well known liberal bias." And so the left is disdainful of the right's climate change denial because it flies in the face of obvious facts.

But here's what the right sees more clearly than the left – that effective climate change action means the end of deregulated capitalism as we have known it since Ronald Reagan's presidency. And that is the main reason the right denies global warming – aided and abetted by massive campaign contributions and advertising campaigns by large corporations.

So why has the left been slow to appreciate the radical economic transformations necessary to effectively address global warming? Klein says the biggest reason is that all of us have been enculturated for the past 40+ years to accept the premises of neoliberal economics. Excepting present company, that enculturation leads people to define themselves by what they

buy, to worship wealth and fame for their own sakes, to compromise, to accept change as something that is handed down from above by their betters, to believe that humanity is hopelessly selfish and greedy, and generally to not get overly excited about anything.

Climate change demands that we consume less, but being consumers is all many people know. They are taught to create themselves through their consumer choices, so shopping is how they form their identities, find community and express themselves. Quoting Klein, "... telling people that they can't shop as much as they want because the planet's support systems are overburdened can be understood as a kind of attack, akin to telling them that they cannot truly be themselves."

And Klein thinks there's another reason the left has been slow to grasp all the implications of global warming. Most on the left see themselves as children of the Enlightenment, which centered on reason as the primary source of authority and legitimacy, and advanced ideals such as liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state. But there's a downside to the Enlightenment as well – its prominent thinkers believed that humanity had the duty to dominate the natural world, a world they believed to be both limitless and entirely controllable. That is the root of extractivism, and we have been slow to abandon that thinking. The extractivist mindset was perfectly illustrated by Republican Congressman Steve Stockman in 2013 when he said, "The best thing about the Earth is, if you poke holes in it, oil and gas comes out."

Thus, the right rightly sees that effective climate action challenges everything they hold dear. And make no mistake about it: Effective action to halt global warming means the extinction of the richest and most powerful industry the world has ever known – the fossil fuel industry.

The challenge of extinguishing the fossil fuel companies is particularly daunting when we recognize, as Klein notes, that the only comparable historical economic precedent is the abolition of slavery. In effect, the climate justice movement is demanding that an existing set of political and economic interests be forced to say goodbye to trillions of dollars of fossil fuel wealth. While not morally equivalent, the dependency of the early U.S. economy on slave labor is comparable to the modern global economy's reliance on fossil fuels. In today's dollars, the value of the slaves was roughly comparable to the value of worldwide carbon reserves that must be left in the ground if we are to have any chance of keeping global warming below 2 degrees Celsius – a limit that science tells us we cannot exceed without climate catastrophe.

So the right correctly fears that the fossil fuel industries would only be the first dominoes to fall once the unsustainability of extractivism becomes apparent to all. Here is how Klein describes extractivism:

Extractivism is a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking. It is the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking, but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue.

Extractivism ... is the reduction of life into objects for the use of others, giving them no integrity or value of their own

It is also the reduction of human beings either into labor to be brutally extracted, pushed beyond limits, or, alternatively, into social burden, problems to be locked out at borders and locked away in prisons or reservations.

In an extractivist economy, the interconnections among these various objectified components of life are ignored; the consequences of severing them are of no concern.

But the end of deregulated capitalism as we know it is just one of the reasons climate change is so deeply frightening, both to the right and left. Quoting Klein again:

...to confront this crisis truthfully is to confront ourselves—to reckon, as our ancestors did, with our vulnerability to the elements that make up both the planet and our bodies. ... we should not underestimate the depth of the civilizational challenge that this relationship represents. ... facing these truths about climate change means recognizing that the power relation between humans and the earth is the reverse of the one we have assumed for three centuries.

... the deeper message carried by the ecological crisis – that humanity has to go a whole lot easier on the living systems that sustain us – acting regeneratively rather than extractively – is a profound challenge to large parts of the left as well as the right.

So by now I hope it's apparent to you that the root causes of the climate crisis and most of our social ills stem from a common source – neoliberal economic ideology. This ideology needs to be confronted by a united movement of climate and social activists to demand:

- regulation and appropriate taxation of corporations and the wealthy
- a high tax on carbon to force abandonment of fossil fuels, clean up the mess from mining and drilling, and move toward renewable energy sources
- higher wages for workers so they can receive their fair share and government does not have to pick up the slack
- public investments to reduce emissions, such as renewable energy, smart grids, mass transportation, and others
- dethroning of the "shareholder value" mentality that drives maximization of short-term corporate profits at the expense of all other considerations
- opposition to trade agreements that result in a race to the bottom for low labor costs and that discourage effective climate action
- support of cooperative and other worker-owned forms of business
- recapture of privatized public resources to maximize public benefit at lower cost
- desanctification of free market ideology and the extractivist mindset
- reduction of the rampant consumption that actively discourages climate action

Please note that none of this is a call for socialism. On the contrary, socialist countries have also proven to be highly extractivist – witness China's horrendous air pollution problems. Rather, it is a call for changing the current system to one that works for all – one that provides everyone a decent living and does not attempt to solve its poverty and racial problems with mass incarceration.

It's certainly tempting in the face of these challenges to throw up our hands, to think we can't possibly have an impact, and to lapse back into comfortable consumption. And we may console ourselves by thinking that all we have to do is buy a hybrid or electric car, bike or walk to work and church, install solar panels on our roofs, raise vegetables and chickens at home, and buy non-polluting soaps and other home products.

Sorry, but that's not enough. While it's important to model good consumption habits, what is needed is a mass social movement, both locally and worldwide.

The only thing politicians fear more than losing donations is losing elections, so we need to mobilize to elect legislators who will fight climate change.

And we need to get out of our "issue silos," such as labor, environment, racism and poverty, and build a genuine social movement that is democratic and has a coherent narrative. This is all hard to do, because neoliberalism teaches people to see themselves as little more than singular, gratification-seeking units, out to maximize their own narrow advantage, which severs them from the broader communities whose pooled resources and skills can solve big and small problems.

The task of fighting global warming means we have to recognize that the profits from our dirtiest industries must be diverted into the project of cleaning up their mess. This won't happen on a voluntary basis or on the honor system. It will have to be legislated – using the kinds of tough regulations, higher taxes and steeper royalty rates these industries have resisted all along.

I admit to my own uncertainty about practical steps we can take here in Columbia, but I have a few suggestions to consider. First, I think Klein's book is so important our church should consider making it a common read. In any event, I strongly encourage you all to read it.

An immediate step we can all take is to attend the Forum Discussion Group at 9 a.m. next Sunday, when our own Dick Parker, a member of the Columbia Water and Light Advisory Board, will discuss "Reducing Columbia's Greenhouse Gasses." We can learn there what the city is doing and what more can and should be done.

And don't forget that one of our members, Ian Thomas, is a very progressive City Council member who supports policies needed to effect social change and fight global warming. He needs vocal support from us and others in the community if he is to be successful in his efforts.

Here's something else: The Grain Belt Express project is gearing up for another attempt to get Missouri's approval to build a power transmission line across the state. This smart grid project is worthy of our support because it would carry wind-generated electricity from Kansas to the East Coast and would benefit 67 Missouri municipal utilities that have agreed to purchase

service. It was defeated in an earlier go-round because of NIMBY-type objections in Randolph and other north-central counties.

Still on the subject of electricity, let's ask our local Boone Electric Cooperative for its position on the Obama Administration's Clean Power Plan to limit emissions from power plants. The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association is one of the groups challenging the plan in court. Does our cooperative support the Clean Power Plan, or is it on board with the lawsuit? If it opposes the plan, can we mobilize its customers to support the plan and have the cooperative disavow the lawsuit?

And how about the University? It is doing everything it can to reduce emissions? Although we can see solar panels going up around campus and the wind turbine on Stadium Boulevard, what about that ugly, fossil-fuel-burning power plant that still dominates the landscape on Providence Road? Can the University be pressured to take more steps? And faster?

And what about a campaign to divest the University's investments in fossil fuel companies? Student- and faculty-led divestment movements elsewhere have put the fossil fuel companies' core business model on trial, arguing that they have become rogue actors whose continued viability relies on radical climate destabilization – and that, as such, an institution claiming to serve the public interest has a moral responsibility to liberate itself from these odious profits. Divestment won't bankrupt the industry – at least not immediately – but it chips away at the social license with which these companies operate.

While mass action clearly is essential, individual action also can help. Become an active voice in the community against global warming. Write letters to the editor. Assert your beliefs on social media. Consider working on building resilience by supporting spaces that are growing food, going off the grid, or supplanting the capitalist model in providing for basic human needs. If you're able, consider building these spaces yourself.

You may have noticed that most of my suggestions focus on environmental justice, and that's because I'm like most other folks who are not sure how to blend environmental and social justice action. Klein says that, ultimately, the most important thing to do is join groups of other people taking action and to break out of the mindset that the related issues of climate change and social injustice can be overcome through individual actions. Individual actions are important when they model change, but they are no substitute for organizing.

Quoting Klein, "We must imagine and then actualize a powerful social movement – a robust coalition of faith groups, trade unions, immigrants, students, environmentalists, and everyone else whose dreams are getting crushed by the crashing neoliberal economic model."

And that brings me back to the beginning of these remarks. I suggest that recognizing the common sources of most of our social and environmental ills means that in our own church we must break out of our own "issue silos" by asking our Social Action and Green Sanctuary teams to meet together and brainstorm about how they can collaborate to maximize their impact and how all of us here can become more involved in addressing the interrelated challenges of climate change and extreme social inequity.

I close with some final food for thought from Naomi Klein: "Our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on Earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity's use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature."

Worship Service Closing Words

Modernized Excerpt from 1967 Speech "Beyond Vietnam" by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons and daughters of God, and our brothers and sisters eagerly await our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of neoliberalism militate against success, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message – of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

And if we will only make the right choice, we will be able to transform this pending cosmic dirge into a creative psalm of justice. If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of togetherness. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to hasten the day, all over America and all over the world, when "justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."