

DELIVERED AT THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AMHERST

Eaarth to Church: "Can I Get a Witness?"

The supreme reality of our time is the vulnerability of our planet.

John F. Kennedy

SCRIPTURE:

Listen for the word of God, as it is found in Genesis 9:9-13:

^[9] "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,^[10] and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.
^[11] I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."^[12] God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:^[13] I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Acts 1:8 ... Listen for the word of God:

[8] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Luke 10: 25-29. Listen for the word of God:

^[25] Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"^[26] He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"^[27] He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."^[28] And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

^[29] But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Still Speaking God – who loves us just the way we are, and loves us too much to let us stay that way!

In addition to thanking Vicki for inviting me to share in the ministry of God's word today, let me begin by lifting up a few of the things which I celebrate about your congregation:

- I celebrate your "team" approach to ministry which encourages passionate commitment and allows you to remain nimble and flexible.
- I celebrate the remarkable transparency that is evident in your newsletters!
- I celebrate your Earth Ministry Team – and the lives you've changed since your congregation passed your Earth Covenant Resolution almost 10 years ago.
- I celebrate that you are one of well over 100 Open and Affirming Congregations in the Mass. Conference!
- And I celebrate your pastor for encouraging me to speak boldly this morning and not to hold back!

I pray for your ongoing witness, because I am certain that there are hundreds of people in this community who would never imagine that a church like the United Church of Christ exists.

Be bold and invite those seekers to join you. They need the blessings you have to offer!

And don't be shy about sharing with those seekers that you are part of the United Church of Christ. At nearly 400 congregations, we're the largest Protestant denomination in the Commonwealth. And while you're at it, let them know that:

- You are part of a denomination that plotted the original Tea Party;
- and launched the Abolitionist movement;
- And founded the first Sunday Schools along with the first school for the deaf.
- Tell them we are the ones that ordained the first woman since New Testament times;
- And that because your denomination listens to a "Still Speaking God" – we became the first to welcome gays and lesbians as ordained ministers, and have persistently advocated for civil rights, human rights and equal marriage rights for all.

In these, and in so many other ways, your spiritual forebears have pioneered numerous moral revolutions. Today, we to continue that work and witness in a variety of ways, and especially in our Pastoral Excellence Program, which I'd be glad to tell you about after worship.

Our efforts to enhance the vitality and faithfulness of our local congregations – our efforts are made possible by congregations like yours:

- Thank you for your generous gift of \$ 8,000. to the United Church of Christ through Our Church's Wider Mission;
- Thank you for your faithful contribution of Fellowship Dues
- Thank you for your annual participation in the UCC's special appeals
- And thank you for encouraging numerous members to share their gifts as leaders in the Massachusetts Conference and as participants in our Pastoral Excellence Program,

In all of these ways, you are expanding what all of our churches can accomplish together.

Now let us join in a spirit of prayer:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable unto you O Lord; our strength, and our Redeemer. Amen

I titled this sermon, "E-a-a-r-t-h to Church: "Can I Get a Witness?" ... because – as all of us know – humanity has put our planet in peril, and I believe that people of faith from every tradition represent the earth's best – and last – hope.

Now — I could have said those very same words at the first Earth Day in April 1970 and they would have been true – even then. But if you've read your bulletin carefully, you've already noticed that, at my request, the word "e-a-a-r-t-h" has been spelled with two a's.¹

That's my way of signaling that the earth is not the same as it was in 1970. Something fundamental has changed. Let me get at this by asking a question:

What do Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Luther and Jonathan Edwards all have in common?

The air which each of them breathed – and in fact the air which EVERY ONE OF OUR

FOREBEARS breathed before about 1800 – no matter where on God’s good earth they lived – contained about 275ppm of carbon in the form of carbon dioxide.

But over the past 200 years, as the burning of coal and oil has built the modern world, the parts per million of carbon in earth’s atmosphere has gone from about 275 to its current value of 392². In less than 60 years, it will shoot past 450ppm. And before our grandchildren reach old age, it will likely be over 600ppm.³

The science is in⁴. Reputable climate scientists agree with lead NASA climatologist, James Hansen, who wrote in 2008, "If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted, . . . CO2 will need to be reduced . . . to at most 350 ppm."⁵

So when we hear the lawyer ask Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” — we need to say to him: You know what: every person on the planet (along with every creature) is your neighbor because the distinctions between this neighborhood and that one – between this country and that one – are insignificant compared to the fact that we all breath the same air. Or to put it another way (and this is important): we all live in the same neighborhood, at the same address. Our common, shared address is – at the moment – 392 parts per million.

And there’s one thing more. This place in which we are all living – this place with the number 392 emblazoned on every door and dwelling – this place is no longer “home.” Home is a place where the number on the door is 350; or (as it was for Mozart, or Mary and Joseph, or the earliest humans living in caves) 275.

Most of us haven’t quite figured outthat we’re no longer living in our home. We still spell earth with one “a.” But if we were living in our “home”:

- Arizona and Texas would not have experienced the worst fires in centuries.⁶
- If this were our home: The northeast would not be awash in several 100 year floods in only a few years;
- If this were our home, America’s insurance industry would not be dealing with 14 distinct extreme weather events in 2011—each causing over a billion dollars of damage.⁷
- If this were our home: food prices would not be soaring world wide, causing the number of hungry people to edge towards 1 Billion.
- And if this were our home: Glacier National Park – which had 150 glaciers when it was named – would not be counting the years – now less than ten – when all the glaciers will be gone.⁸

So amidst these profound changes – on this new e-a-a-r-t-h – what is required of us? What does our Still Speaking God ask of us?

Well – I don’t think it’s all that complicated. We need a re-purposed church for a new Eearth. And we can begin by embracing two enduring theological principles.

First of all, we need to remember what we learn in Genesis: our covenant with God is an everlasting covenant. God is not only concerned about us! In addition to us, God covenants with all future generations and with every living creature. (Genesis 9:12)

Secondly, we must take seriously the most basic moral instruction of both the New Testament and Hebrew scriptures – a moral instruction found at the core of every world religion. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves; and on this new E-a-a-r-t-h, we must recognize that future generations are no less our neighbors than those who live next door to us today. You might think of this as the Golden Rule 2.0.⁹

These two theological principles prompted the Massachusetts Conference to become the first church-body in America to pass a resolution calling upon our elected leaders to commit to policies that will reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to below 350ppm¹⁰. (We did it in 2009)

And last year, UCC General Minister and President Geoffrey Black thanked our conference as he declared to our national synod gathering that one of the UCC's five "Big Holy Audacious Goals" would be: "To become widely known in the United States as the faith-based leader in the preservation and stewardship of God's creation."

So what would it look like for us as people of faith – and for us – for this generation of the human community – to accept that future generations are no less our neighbors than those who live next door to us today?

Well, I imagine that across the world, wherever two or three are gathered, disciples would embrace earth-preserving and earth-redeeming behaviors as spiritual practices every bit as much as prayer. Let's become "Golden Rule Activists," as we live-into new behaviors:

- consuming less – sharing more;
- curbing our desire to acquire by expanding our inner world;
- promoting our imagination while flying and driving less;
- eating a low-carbon life-affirming diet

and doing these things for no ideological or political reason — but as Holy expressions of covenant with all creatures alive and yet to be born.

And what would it look like for us to recognize that wrecking creation is a sin?¹¹

Well, imagine our congregational churches before the Civil War. Many wholeheartedly engaged the anti-slavery movement because they understood slavery to be a sin.¹²

Or maybe it would look like devoting half the church's budget to alter our behavior, adapt our buildings, and alarm our politicians. "Half the church's budget for that(!)" you might wonder... Well, 200 years ago, many of our congregations here in Massachusetts spent half their budget sending missionaries across the sea to convert people they themselves would never meet.

Maybe it would look like your church providing leadership for your town – the way it was 380 years ago when our churches inspired democracy by insisting, as John Winthrop did, that our towns become “cities on a hill”¹³ – clusters of interdependent people willing to sacrifice for one another to promote the common good. Imagine your town’s houses of worship joining together to motivate your town to become resilient in the face of the most profound changes the earth has suffered since the Cretaceous extinctions 67 million years ago. This work – developing resilience town by town – is a movement called “Transition Town”¹⁴ – and your neighbor – Tina Clarke (from Turners Falls) – is organizing this effort along with the UCC’s national environmental staff person.

Maybe it would look like churches throughout the South in the 1950s focusing their resources, their sermons, their meetings and even their social lives on changing the laws of the nation so that African American citizens would be guaranteed civil rights.

And what might it sound like for us to keep an everlasting covenant?

Well, imagine this: What if the first announcement at every worship service – whether in a church, synagogue, or mosque – went something like this:

As we do every week, I’d like to ask those who contacted either their congressperson or the White House this past week to advocate for new laws that will make our earth sustainable.... would you please rise as you are able and receive our applause.... Thank you, and I hope to see all of you rise next week¹⁵.

If we pray for one another, why would we not encourage one another – every Sunday – to advocate for laws that will preserve the beauty and wonder of a gracious world where the meeting of the divine and the human can be achieved in its full expression?¹⁶

And if we claim to be disciples of Jesus, then we are called to be advocates for the common good. And one thing more, we are called to proclaim the good news – not by ignoring the fact that we have been pillaging the earth and privileging corporate profits – but by putting our bodies on the line.

Friends: our world needs a new moral trajectory. And it is impossible to contemplate how the citizens, towns, corporations and countries of the world will make the necessary changes unless they are inspired by religious leaders and communities who are responding to God’s call to live out Golden Rule 2.0.

We all know from past examples that this is how major culture-change unfolds:

- the abolition of slavery,
 - the end of child labor,
 - the winning of the civil rights act,
 - the reconciliation of post-Apartheid South Africa,
 - and the advancement of marriage equality and other GLBT concerns....
- All of these cultural transformations were the result of religious leadership.

I believe that now is the time for religious leaders to articulate this new moral trajectory, and that doing so represents a new vocation for the church (and not just the church but for all communities of faith). God's hope, and our challenge, is to lead this generation to value:

- resilience in place of growth;
- collaboration in place of consumption¹⁷;
- wisdom in place of progress;
- vision in place of convenience;
- accountability in place of disregard; and
- balance in place of addiction.

Without a vision, the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18 KJV) The world needs leadership – faithful and faith-filled leadership. God is calling us to be the change we long to see. Amen.

1. This spelling of Eearth with two a's is borrowed from Bill McKibben's book *Eearth* (Times Books, NY; 2010).

2. <http://co2now.org/> And for the science regarding human activity as the cause of climate change, see <http://www.skepticalscience.com/a-comprehensive-review-of-the-causes-of-global-warming.html>

3. McKibben; p. 20.

4. Naomi Oreskes, LA Times Op-Ed, January 22, 2012: "Scientists don't play the role of prosecutor trying to prove a case. Rather, they are the jury trying to evaluate the evidence. And they have rendered their verdict. The problem is not that scientists have become advocates, as some have claimed. The problem is that there is no judge, no recognized authority giving us instructions we accept, and no recognized authority to accept the scientists' verdict and declare it final." <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/22/opinion/la-oe-oreskes-judging-climate-change-20120122>
Also: <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/24/145732719/op-ed-the-verdict-is-in-on-climate-change> NPR interview: "The verdict is in on climate change"

5. Here is the full quote: "If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted, paleoclimate evidence and ongoing climate change suggest that CO2 will need to be reduced from its current 385 ppm to at most 350 ppm."
see also: <http://opa.yale.edu/news/article.aspx?id=6199&s=t>

6. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/12/us/12drought.htm?scp=3&sq=Texas%20drought&st=cse>

7. <http://www.noaa.gov/extreme2011/>

8. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/03/090302-glaciers-melting.html> "It's an oft-repeated statistic that the glaciers at Montana's Glacier National Park will disappear by the year 2030. But Daniel Fagre, a U.S. Geological Survey ecologist who works at Glacier, says the park's namesakes will be gone about ten years ahead of schedule, endangering the region's plants and animals. The 2030 date, he said, was based on a 2003 USGS study, along with 1992 temperature predictions by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). "Temperature rise in our area was twice as great as what we put into the [1992] model," Fagre said. "What we've been saying now is 2020."

9. <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/do-humans-need-a-golden-rule-2-0/?partner=rss&emc=rss> In this blog, Andrew Revkin tells of the 2010 PEN World Voices Conference which had a session on global warming. The show was stolen by a novelist, Jostein Gaarder, the Norwegian author of *Sophie's World*. On intergenerational

responsibility:

An important basis for all ethics has been The Golden Rule or the Principle of Reciprocity: you shall do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But the golden rule can no longer just have a horizontal dimension – in other words a “we” and “the others.” We must realize that the Principle of Reciprocity also has a vertical dimension: you shall do to the next generation what you wished the previous generation had done to you.

On the slow, steady, incomplete moral evolution of humanity:

The greatest triumph of philosophy to date may be the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights were not given us by the powers above. Nor were they pulled out of thin air either. They mark the end of a 1,000-year-long process of maturation.

Ten years into the 21st century, the question may be posed: how long can we speak of our “rights” without at the same time focusing on our responsibilities? Perhaps we need a new universal declaration? The time is ripe for a Universal Declaration of Human Obligations.

10. <http://www.macucc.org/news/detail/14>

11. Perhaps the best academic source for this claim can be found in Prof. Mary Evelyn Tucker’s work at Yale. An overview, and summary of each world religion can be found here: <http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/>

12. Wikipedia’s article on Abolitionism shows the link between the abolitionist movement and the view that holding slaves was a sin: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism#Calls_for_abolition

13. John Winthrop's "City on a Hill" sermon 1630 – “Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one ... We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. ... We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; ... For we must consider that **we shall be as a city upon a hill**. The eyes of all people are upon us....

14. see <http://transitionus.org/transition-town-movement>

15. Note: I suspect many evangelicals would support this. See the recent post by Dr. Russell Moore, Dean of the School of Theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<http://fore.research.yale.edu/news/item/an-evangelical-crusade-to-go-green-with-god/>

16. Thomas Berry. *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*. Orbis, Maryknoll, NY; 2009. p. 67.

17. See Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers *What’s Mine Is Yours: How Collaborative Consumption is Changing the Way We Live*. The book documents the increasing popularity of the collaborative consumption model and the ways its growth will fundamentally change the workings of our economy. See also this 16 minute lecture on collaborative consumption: http://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption.html