

## NOW IS THE TIME FOR OUR WITNESS

Sermon by the Reverend Kathleen Hepler

First Parish in Framingham Unitarian Universalist

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### READING

The night of the Buddha's Awakening he was sitting sheltered by the tree now called the Bodhi, *Ficus Religiosa*, or awakening tree, (the great-great-great-great-great-grand daughter of which is still alive in Bodh Gaya India, and is thought to be the oldest historical tree). While he sat, with the resolve to remain there until he had understood the truth, all sorts of temptations and distractions assailed him. First, there was the lure of greed for pleasure, next the trap of anger, and then the snare of self-criticism and undermining thoughts. Finally the Buddha, asking for help, placed his right hand calmly on the earth. In this gesture, he called the earth to witness his right to be there, at this place, sitting under this tree of awakening. In this mythic evocation, the earth immediately responded to his call and, in the form of a woman, came forward and touched Buddha's hand, meeting him and serving as the key witness to his claim to take his rightful place.<sup>1</sup>

### SERMON

## NOW IS THE TIME FOR OUR WITNESS

You may have come thinking I was going to speak on health care reform. My change in topic comes from a shift that occurred in me this past week, and my commitment to not let form of the usual block the urgings of the Spirit brought this surprise to you. The shift came as a result of the 350 initiative in regard to global warming, which I will tell you about in a moment. Twelve or so of us gathered last Saturday and again yesterday to ring the bells of this Meeting House 350 times for the earth. We handed out information about global warming and compact florescent light bulbs to passers-by. In our Saturday gathering were members of the youth group, members of the Green Sanctuary Committee here, one young woman who has only come to First Parish in the past three weeks, Michelle La Grave (who was the one who encouraged us to do this!) and me.

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<sup>1</sup> *Love God Heal Earth*, Linda Ruth Cutts, p. 115

Then, on Thursday night I attended an interfaith clergy dinner hosted by the Massachusetts Council of Churches on the 350 initiative. What is 350.org? This is a grass roots initiative started by young people and the environmental activist Bill McKibben. 350 is the red line number for human beings and the eco systems that sustain the life as we know it on the earth. The most recent science tells us that unless we can reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million very soon, we can cause huge and irreversible damage to the earth. We are above that number now at 390. There is still time to pull it back. And, we know how to do it. On October 24<sup>th</sup> people in large and small groups from all over the world gathered to publicize this information in their communities... and to commit to working toward 350. It is especially important that we be a voice for the delegates going to the United Nations Summit in Copenhagen in December. This is a near and important chance to unify and create a structure that will make significant, critical and lasting changes in the earth's atmosphere. As UU minister Fred Small writes: "Changing a light bulb is good. Changing a member of Congress is better. Changing the tide against global warming will require the largest, most diverse, most creative and most courageous mass movement in human history."<sup>2</sup>

While listening to the keynote speaker, Episcopal Priest The Reverend Canon Sally Bingham, who started the Interfaith Power and Light which works tirelessly to coax religions to become engaged in this issue..... a sea change of sorts came as a wave through me. All I knew about global warming came together with a clarity that was not distracted by any other concerns. A slight turn of the head and I realized without equivocation that seeking to turn back global warming is the most important moral issue of our time. And, I knew that I would be shaping my personal life to answer this call of the earth much more diligently from that moment on. And, I knew that I could speak of nothing else this morning. I knew that this could not wait to be announced in the newsletter. I knew that involvement in this issue could not wait for the completion of our long range plan. The time is now; there is no doubt about that. I wanted to say to you that we are being called to bring our love and energy to the changes necessary to stop the total destabilization of our planet.

It is not easy to hear the full truth of global warming. And it can feel dire and it can bring fear to our hearts. But I know you are people who admire the truth and I know that you want to be free to live in the light of truth...and the truth is not always a "feel good" kind of thing.

It's like this: imagine that you have a sick child, a child who is gravely ill. The doctor tells you that everything needed to cure your child exists...all of the technology, every medicine. It is no secret what needs to be done to cure your child. Then, the doctor tells you that the plan to treat your child will not actually be fully implemented until ten or twelve or twenty years from now...which unfortunately will be too late, most likely waiting will cause the death of your child. Well, this is absurd at the least, immoral at its core, and wholly unacceptable.

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<sup>2</sup> *Love God Heal Earth*, p. 17.

Think of the earth as our child. We know what we need to do. And, in order to create saving wellness, we cannot wait. This is a moment in the history of life on earth that is pivotal to the survival of human beings and many other species: the ecological system that supports this life of ours. “We are in a period of extinction that is much, much harsher than that which wiped out the mighty dinosaurs off the face of the Earth. At that time 90 percent of the existing species had disappeared.”<sup>3</sup> Well, the earth survived and new life emerged. And, if we don’t prevail, most likely the earth will survive and life will evolve from those remnants.

Last night, Halloween, a glorious night. I sat on my porch in the balmy warm night with my bowl of goodies and watched the parade of souls appear out of the dark hopeful and masked and eager with delight: ninjas and nurses, hippies and fortune tellers, spider man and super woman...one chef with a hamburger hat and one wizened Yoda. The clouds covered the moon and moved again to reveal it through the branches and the little feet “scuddled” through the leaves. The weather was just scary enough to bring us to the edge of the mystery... and just gentle enough to take the edge off the fear. My heart ached with love for this parade of little souls and the parents who waited on the sidewalk and coached them to say “trick or treat” and “thank you” and “take just one” ... as people have been doing for so long. My heart sang with the beauty of the earth and its creatures and all history to this point.

And I knew that I would take my stand ... that climate change is not the will of some vengeful god, or a precursor to Armageddon...or a leftist political, hippie ploy. The facts are clear. The planet is out of balance and the rate of climate change is rapid.

I believe that human beings are worth saving, and so too the polar bear and the honey bee and the manatee.

And, there is a window of time in which to do it this is limited. This truth is a hard truth.

But, be not afraid. Hope is all around us. Many, many in the world are putting their hand on the earth and awakening to the call.

Hope is everywhere.

For one, we know exactly what we have to do to turn things around. Sally Bingham described the scientists of our time as the prophets. They are the canaries in the coal mine and they also understand exactly what needs to be done. There are so many human problems that do not have such clear solution.

Hope is everywhere.

There are people all over the world going about the work of bringing the carbon per million back down to 350. If you go on the website of 350.org you will see pictures from Indonesia and Arica, America

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Woody Bartlett, *Love God Heal Earth*, p. 63.

and Iceland...young and old, white and yellow, poor and rich. You will be greatly encouraged and motivated by the goodness of our fellow human beings.

A third reason to rejoice. This issue is bringing religious people of all stripes together. At our clergy dinner on Thursday were Muslims and Catholics, Unitarian Universalists and Methodists, Hindus and Jews, Buddhists and Lutherans. Nationally, Evangelical Christians have risen to the call of the earth and are making the undoing of global warming their top priority. Arguing over abortion or gay rights is beginning to recede a bit... for the call of the earth is a strong one that resonates with all religions, and trumps every other issue in its immediacy. Most every religious tradition has a form of "love your neighbor as yourself" in its belief or ethical stance. And, everyone I know has, in its scripture or principles, a reverence for creation. When it comes to global warming our neighbors are the children of the near future. If we don't act strong and soon, they will be born into a world inhospitable to their survival, and they will bear great suffering. We are called to bequeath life to them by beginning now to live more gently on the earth.

In our hands now the kind of world that will live on after us. This is the moral issue of our time. It eclipses every other work that presupposes a future. And we cannot take a long view of this, for the toxins we have created, the over consumptive lifestyles that glut our spirits with excess and sickness are the cause of this emergency. And we have become conscious in the evolutionary flow and this calls us to responsibility.

I'm asking that we make a commitment as a religious community to making this work a priority. We are in the process of looking into our future with the Vision 20/20 process. And, we could wait to see if global warming surfaces as something that people are wanting to address.....but there is really no waiting on this issue. If we think that the children of the future deserve to be born into a world that will be hospitable to their survival...now is the time. This a critical moment in the history of life. I believe we here at First Parish want to take our stand. Two roads diverge and there is only one moral direction to walk. These core group of people here at First Parish who have been ringing the bells and working to green our space and offering movies for us to become aware of this issue have created a way for us to engage, together as Unitarian Universalists who all affirm that deeds in the world and not creeds of words are the path we choose together.

There are four areas of ministry, of stewardship, that we have defined:

- 1.) The ministry of greening our buildings and grounds at First Parish by lowering our Co2 emissions and using less energy. Folks on The Green Sanctuary Committee have already done much in this regard. We have had an energy audit and are seeking bids for some of the work that needs to be done. This will include insulation of our roofs, solar panels and green heating systems. There is a way that we can become so efficient as to actually give back energy to the common grid!
- 2.) The ministry of individual lifestyle change: each person, each family, and each household making as many changes as possible to contribute to this earth healing. We hope everyone will be willing to observe the hints that will be forth coming in the updates each week. Will you make a pledge to observe these changes if you can? Things like turning your thermostat down. Things like installing

CEF light bulbs. Things like eating one less meat dish per week, which I am told would have more impact than buying a Prius!

- 3.) The ministry of public education. Each Saturday from now until the conference in Copenhagen in December we will be at the Meeting House at 3:50 n to give out light bulbs and information and to ring our bells 350 times for the earth. Would you sign up for a Saturday or two?
- 4.) The ministry of political action and eco justice. We need to bring pressure to bear on our elected officials. We need to tell them that many, many of their constituents (we suspect a majority at this point) are tired of bargaining and selling our earth out to profit and power...for they are meaningless without the solid ground of our habitation. We want to influence those Americans going to Copenhagen to be courageous with no equivocating about the international policy that is required for the world to meet the 350 goal. We want them to know that we understand the urgency and we will support their boldness. We want to encourage America to stop lagging behind in the name of profit.

And, likewise, we know that global warming will affect poor, developing countries hardest and first; especially in the southern hemisphere. Each year for three years we at First Parish have collected money for stoves that help the poor in Guatemala heat their homes in a non-toxic way. On November 20<sup>th</sup> we will have a dinner here at First Parish to raise more money for this eco-justice project. We will eat Guatemalan food and celebrate life and thereby raise money for more stoves. There is a sign-up sheet for this in Scott Hall as well.

Now we are called to witness to our faith in life and the dignity of all in the web. We can think back to the Civil Rights movement of the 60s and wonder about that pivotal moment in history. Would we have stayed silent? Could we have called ourselves a religion of love and justice if we had? This is the next call for our witness.

And here is the best part of this crisis we face. This work toward 350 is not onerous or distasteful or sacrificial in any way. As we simplify our own lives...as we buy more local food and as we walk to our backyards to put the scraps in a compost bin....as we plant seeds in the earth that it creates....we will begin to remember our connection with the land and with all beings. And this is the way that humans are meant to be...close to the earth and full of love for all life. And this is the way that people of spirit (which is all people even as they honor varying masks of the divine) are called in our time...to love the earth and its beings so much that we will work to heal it for the sake of the seventh generations beyond.

Whatever happens, may we here at First Parish rise together for this time in history and know that we fully engaged in the most important moral issue of our time.