

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 22, 2008, dedicated to the Sacred Earth Committee and their witness for our church and our world, and to the glory of God!

“A Crash Course for Spaceship Earth”

Romans, 6:1b-11; Matthew, 10:24-39

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Thomas Berry has written: “The human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single sacred community or we will both perish in the desert.” Berry’s words have been weighing on my heart and mind this week.

We need only to do a meteorological analysis of today’s weather on this first full day of summer, or check out the increase in tornados and floods in the last four weeks to realize something is out of balance on “Spaceship Earth.” We need only to do a spiritual inventory of each of our relationships to the Earth to see that something is out of balance with our “sacred” relationship with the Earth.

Berry continues: "We are called to live in right relationship with all Creation, recognizing that the entire world is interconnected and is a manifestation of God." In 2008, living in "right relationship" with all creation is both noble and imperative. Perhaps, living in right relationship is the simplest, clearest and most honest way to approach all our conversations about the Earth.

Living in right relationship is nothing new. Our Judeo-Christian heritage calls people to live righteously, or in right relationship with one another and with God. Romans 6 speaks of living in such a way that newness of life and a likeness to Christ's glorious resurrection are reflected in our lives. We are called by Paul to be "dead to sin." Can we describe our relationship to Earth as "sinless" or "dead to sin?" I don't think so.

Likewise, Matthew 10 speaks of making sacrifices in our lives for Christ. Again, are we making sacrifices for the creation, so that she will live a long and glorious life? Perhaps, but more is required in order to call this a right relationship.

Eighteenth century Quaker John Woolman called his generation to live in right relationship as he witnessed against the evils of slavery, oppression and materialism, which he warned were causing serious injury to generations yet unborn. We discern a similar dynamic of greed and thoughtlessness in today's global environmental crisis.

Whether we call it “right relationship” or "sustainable living," you and I must acknowledge that many of our world's social and ecological problems stem from practices that are manifestly unsustainable – misuse of nonrenewable resources, treatment of soil, air, and water as commodities to be sold to the highest bidder, the general disregard for the needs and rights of future generations. We are all complicit and therefore accountable for damage being done in our name.

Living in right relationship goes a step further. So many of the humans today seem unwilling and unable to change their ways, even when they are aware of the size and effects of their ecological footprints, in terms of housing, transportation, diet and family size.

The Quaker Earthcare Witness Web site tells the story of a man who makes a comfortable living commenting to a co-worker that he and his wife have decided to have a third, and then a fourth child, not only because they enjoyed raising children but because they could afford them. The question raised in the co-worker’s mind was, *"Yes, but can the planet afford them?"* That same logic can be raised about our personal decisions to buy grander houses, larger cars or costly foods at whatever level income can sustain.

We proceed with the assumption that we have a right to as much of a common resource as we can use. This assumption is what ecologist and author Wendell Berry

calls "a kind of moral simplicity," based on our ability to ignore the claims of others and of posterity.

The Quaker Earthcare Witness Web site writes:

True sustainability means transcending a narrow calculation of self-interest and weighing the effect of our actions on a larger scale, seeking "right relationship" to the wider community – and ultimately the Earth community. In "right relationship" there is less conflict between individual and community because we are more aware of our common values and common destiny. While there will always be differences in lifestyles and levels of consumption (for example the material needs of a family with young children vs. those of a single retired person), we (Friends) can commit ourselves as a community to find ways for everyone in the wider community to be fed, clothed and housed, and to be generally fulfilled, and for all the children to be loved (including those of the future and of other species), without debasing and crippling God's glorious creation in the process.

In this day and age, we have no good excuses for ignoring environmentally-sound lifestyles and policies. There are so many resources available to us, and they all have the same basic message: "Live in right relationship with the Earth."

The United Church of Christ Web site has great ideas and connections for each of us to consider as we seek to

sustain life on this planet. In the years to come, we cannot look back and say “we did not know the problems” or “we did not know how to address these problems.” Only our lack of will and lack of initiative stands in the way of ecological progress for each one of us in each one of our homes – and this church!

For example, at earthcare.ucc.org, you go to churchesgogreen.org and a tree appears with 14 apples. As you click on each apple, practical ideas pop-up on how to green your church and your home. One is “*Up on the roof.*” When the time comes to replace your roof, consider using a cool or light colored roof. Then, it gives you links to get in touch with your radiance ratings and ways to offer habitats to birds and bees and reduce water runoff.

Other links tell you how to “*Turn it down and step it up*” – ways to have more effective heating and cooling systems. “*Salvation in the bathroom*” tells you how to water in your home and church. For example a low-flow showerhead saves about \$20 a year. “*Tune in to turning off*” explains that turning off computers when not in use and unplugging chargers and appliances are big energy savers. A typical PC consumes about 300 watts and it uses that energy whether you are using it or not. When not in use, over a period of a year, a plugged in computer is using at least \$219 of extra energy. If you plug it into a power strip and turn that off, you save 1,000 pounds of CO2 in a year and more than \$200 on your utility bill.

“*Trash is NOT treasure*” tells you how to reuse, recycle

and renew – saving between 1,200-2,400 pounds of trash each year by recycling virtually everything – cans, bottles, papers, batteries, some electronics. You also can use minimally-packaged goods and stop using bottled water, which is one of the greatest new strains on the environment (and I would add, our family budgets).

We have a paper recycling container in the back of church which could be filled each Sunday if we all brought our paper products into the church. As becomes a Green Church, cutting our environmental footprint by 20% by the year 2012, our new refrain should become (to paraphrase the chiseled words over our Broad St. entrance): **“Enter to Worship, Depart to Recycle!”**

Do you see how easy it is to begin to walk in right relationship with the Earth? ***God’s evolving creation is extravagantly interrelated. Significant environmental issues are before us. At First Congregational Church and in the United Church of Christ, we celebrate that everything we do to tend and appreciate the diversity of Earth community matters.***

On April 8, the Collegium of Officers of the United Church of Christ released a significant theological statement, *And Indeed It Is Very Good – A Pastoral Letter on Faith and Environment: Living in Community with God’s Creation*. The letter offers a new prophetic word about the need to celebrate the beauty of the Earth and engage in faith action on behalf of the interrelated components of creation. We want to make clear the UCC's extravagant hospitality with evangelical courage extends to the environmental and the social, the

local and the global.

The letter says: "Worshiping God in prayer and communion, energizing community transformation, our efforts become a breathing with the world. We dare to move forward with practices of care and devotions of nurturing 'creation communities.' "

In response to the letter, Nick Carter, president of Andover Newton Theological School said: "If the Good News isn't Green News we are all a bunch of frauds. *How can we love God and not be passionate lovers and caretakers of God's marvelous creation? . . . Every church in America ought to commit to reducing its energy consumption by 20% within 4 years. Let's say: 20 by 12!*"

Ecologist and theologian Ban-Ki Moon writes, "*Climate change affects us all, but it does not affect us all equally.*" It is imperative that we, as a church committed to social justice, work diligently in our personal lives, in our homes and in this magnificent house of God to do everything, EVERYTHING, in our power to reduce energy consumption and increase our care for the Earth.

As Quaker activist John Woolman reminded us 200 years ago when battling the evils of slavery: "To fail to address this issue now we will be causing serious injuries to future generations." I would contend that our failure to act may cause fatal injuries to the Earth we love and live on. Amen.

