



Eco-Justice Ministries

Eco-justice: "the well-being of all humankind on a thriving Earth"

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Our Children's Trust

A sermon delivered at the Wheat Ridge Congregation, UCC, Wheat Ridge, CO, 10/15/17
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1 Timothy 6:17-21

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. Grace be with you.

This morning, I want to explore a question that I hear fairly often in church circles. It is a question with all sorts of moral and ethical implications.

This question comes up most often from middle-aged and older people in congregations, and it tends to be voiced when they have new grandchildren.

The question they raise with me is one that suddenly has cropped up in their lives in a much more immediate and personal way. They ask, "What kind of world do I want to leave to my grandchildren?"

With that new little girl or boy as a member of their family, there's a fresh sense of their own lineage stretching into the future. They hold that child, and they can imagine this person living 70 or 80 or 90 years. The year 2100 doesn't seem quite so abstract anymore. If all goes well, that's when their grandchild might be living into retirement.

What kind of a world do I want my precious descendant to be living in at that stage in her or his life? It is a powerful question, and a very important one.

They often name that question when they're talking with me – a relative stranger – because I'm the guy who came and talked to their church about climate change. I'm the guy who, during a sermon or a class, told them that the world in 70 or 80 or 90 years is not going to be pretty, or comfortable, or safe. Climate change (global warming) is already kicking in in a serious way, and it is going to get a lot worse.

"What kind of world do I want to leave" is a much more difficult and painful question for us, than it was for our grandparents because of the rapid changes happening around us.

This morning, I'm not really going to answer the big question – not directly, at least. I'm going to work around the edges of it a bit, and look at some of the factors that need to be considered in order to answer the question well. At the end of that somewhat wandering path, I'm going to point to something that should be big news in a few months, and that I find to be a very hopeful development. (But you're going to have to wait!)

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We're in an appropriate season to deal with today's question, because Stewardship Sunday for this congregation is coming up in just a few weeks. It is the time of year when churches raise that sometimes awkward topic of money, and ask us to think about what kind of church we want to have next year, and 10 years from now.

How do we want to use our financial resources – whether they are sparse or abundant? How does the church fit into our commitments, our hopes and dreams? What sort of number are you going to write on that pledge card?

A number of years ago, at my home church in Denver, we did an unusual thing one Sunday morning during the stewardship season. It was October, and our fall campaign was at the same time as the public radio stations were doing their incessant fall fund drives. So, we played with the idea: what would it look like if churches did fundraising the way public radio stations do?

As I recall, we interrupted the service six times in one hour – including in the middle of the sermon. We harangued folk about making their pledge of support right now. We invited them to donate a car or a boat. We told them about how essential their donations were. We suggested different giving levels, and options for giving on-line. It was really annoying, and it was years after that before anybody dared to suggest that the church talks about money too much.

In the church, we talk about stewardship. That's a good "churchy" word. But most of what we do in these fall seasons is quite similar to what the radio stations, and every other charity is doing. We're not asking people to be stewards – we're asking them to be charitable or philanthropic.

If we're going to be accurate, a steward is one who serves in the role of managing assets that belong to someone else. The person who manages your retirement fund is a steward of your savings and investments.

A philanthropist is a person who is generous in giving away their own money, or their own resources. Bill and Melinda Gates are some of the wealthiest people in the world, and they have done some very worthwhile things by directing billions of those bucks to good causes.

Thanks be to God for all those who take part in that kind of philanthropic giving. They reflect well what we heard in the first part of today's scripture reading:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

But consider the financial steward, the investment manager, the person who watches over retirement funds. What if that person had a sudden desire to be a philanthropist, and to give away lots of money to good causes? What if that person gave away *your* retirement money for disaster relief or cancer research? That's a very different situation. We would not celebrate their charitable spirit. We would try them for the crime of embezzlement, and seek to recover the money of those who had been cheated.

There is a big difference between a steward and a philanthropist. The steward has to be responsible in managing and caring for property that belongs to somebody else. It is the owner's needs and intentions that have to be considered. The steward doesn't own it.

Which brings us to a line from the second part of today's scripture lesson: "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you."

In the church, we talk a lot about stewardship. Sometimes, we touch on a theological message that the Earth is the Lord's, and that all that we have comes from God, and that our giving is a reflection of our responsibility to serve God in the world. Sometimes we say that. But usually, we sound just like the folk on public radio, trying to make a good case for why you should give away some of your money, some of your hard-earned bucks. We're asking you to be generous with your resources.

And, for the sake of the Wheat Ridge Congregation of the United Church of Christ, I do hope you appreciate how this church acts on your behalf in the community and the world, how it serves your values. Do remember how important this community is to you, week after week, nurturing your faith, and holding you in the love of this wonderful fellowship. Put a big number on that pledge card in a few weeks. Give generously. (I see your moderator nodding in the front row!)

But I was saying that there is a big and important difference between stewards and philanthropists, between trustees and donors. The difference has to do with whose resources are being handled.

I've made that point at some length because the distinction is at the heart of the question that I started with today. Over and over again, I've talked with people about the question, "What kind of world do I want to leave to my children and grandchildren?"

The way that question is usually presented, it is a question of generosity or philanthropy. How much of *my* comfort, *my* privilege, of *my* expectations am I willing to give up to benefit my descendants? What of my property and my rights will I direct to provide benefit to my children and grandchildren 70 or 80 years from now?

That is a good and important question, but it isn't the right question. Let's turn it around a little bit. What if we ask, "What kind of world do my children and grandchildren have a right to expect from me?" Does that feel different to you?

"What kind of world do my children and grandchildren have a right to expect from me?" It isn't a question of what I, as a generous person, want to pass along to them. It is a question of what I, as a steward, have an obligation to maintain for them.

Parents often want to leave a bequest for their children. They want to pass along some wealth or property to the next generation. But there is no obligation for them to do that. You can write a will, leave nothing to your kids, and give it all to public radio, or the Humane Society.

There's a line in the biblical book of Proverbs (13:22), "The good leave an inheritance to their children's children" – but the verse recognizes that the sinners don't. It is up to you.

A friend who likes to send along jokes recently let me know about a quip made by some celebrity golfer who didn't plan to leave any sort of an inheritance. He said, "I'm working as hard as I can to get my life and my cash to run out at the same time. If I can just die after lunch Tuesday, everything will be perfect."

On a far less humorous level, I've heard of people talking about their climate inheritance in distressingly similar ways. Lots of people have said, in essence, "I don't care if the world gets hot and unlivable. I'll be dead by the time it gets really bad."

If we look at the world given to future generations as a matter of our generosity, then we can decide to not leave them anything of value. Unfortunately, that is what we – in the big collective sense – are doing.

James Gustave Speth, in the opening pages of his book, "The Bridge at the Edge of the World", [www.thebridgeattheedgeoftheworld.com] has provided a vivid assessment of where we are headed.

How serious is the threat to the environment? Here is one measure of the problem: all we have to do to destroy the planet's climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today ... Just continue to release greenhouse gasses at current rates ... and the world in the latter part of this century won't be fit to live in. But, of course, human activities are not holding at current levels – they are accelerating, dramatically. ... We are thus facing the possibility of an enormous increase in environmental deterioration, just when we need to move strongly in the opposite direction.

What kind of world do our children and grandchildren have a right to expect from us? I don't know the details, but I am convinced that they have a right to a livable planet. I am convinced that this beautiful, fragile planet does not belong to us to use up and destroy for our own profit, convenience and pleasure. We are stewards of Earth, with an obligation to future generations, and to the entire web of life.

And that is where I'll make the shift from abstract theological and philosophical comments, and start talking about current headlines.

There is something very exciting and hopeful going on that shifts the talk about climate into the realm of stewardship. A group called "Our Children's Trust" [www.OurChildrensTrust.org] is involved in a number of lawsuits now working their way through courts in several states, at the federal level, and in some other countries.

The federal lawsuit is filed on behalf of 21 children and youth. Two of them are from around here: Xiuhtezcatl Martinez from Boulder, and Nick Venner from Lakewood. For the sake of full disclosure, I know and respect both of them. I also need to let you know that Eco-Justice Ministries is one of many religious organizations that has signed on to "friend of the court" filings in support of the youth. I'm not impartial about this!

As Our Children's Trust describes the case:

Youth filed their constitutional climate lawsuit, called Juliana v. U.S., against the U.S. government in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon in 2015. Their complaint asserts that, through the government's affirmative actions that cause climate change, it has violated the youngest generation's constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, as well as failed to protect essential public trust resources.

The lawsuit – which is currently scheduled to go to trial on February 5, 2018 – says that our children and grandchildren have a clear legal right to a much better world than they are going to get. If it is successful, the lawsuit will require profound changes in US policies about climate change.

This is not a frivolous lawsuit. The judge who will be hearing the case refused the government's attempt to have it dismissed. She wrote, "Exercising my 'reasoned judgment,' I have no doubt that the right to a climate system capable of sustaining human life is fundamental to a free and ordered society."

The legal principle being used in the lawsuit is called the public trust doctrine. It is an idea that goes all the way back into ancient Roman law, and has tracked through western civilization. It is a foundational principle of virtually all legal and religious systems. One of the most prominent legal scholars on the topic wrote, "The public trust doctrine speaks to one of the most essential purposes of government: protecting critical natural assets for the survival and welfare of citizens."

I heard that scholar, Prof. Mary Christina Wood, give a lecture in Boulder a few weeks ago. She let us know that there is nothing all that new or surprising about the public trust doctrine. What is new, surprising and frightening is that there is now a strong case to be made for invoking the doctrine because of the climate crisis.

Never before have we had such a clear situation where the well-being, even the survival, of future generations is at stake. Never before has the public trust been so dramatically violated.

Next February, a US District Court will hear the question that we've been talking about this morning. What kind of world do our children and grandchildren have a right to expect from us?

I am delighted that the case is going to trial, and I lift up fervent prayers of hope that the courts will address the injustice that is being inflicted on future generations.

The case brings us back to what should have been a central stance for all Christians. The Earth is the Lord's, and we are stewards of it. We are trustees of this marvelous world, with an obligation to pass it along intact to those who come after us. It is not ours to use up or to destroy for ourselves. We are stewards of our children's trust.

The Juliana case calls us back to our proper responsibility to God's creation, to our children and grandchildren. The simple presence of that lawsuit, even before it goes to trial, is helping us come to new understandings of our roles, responsibilities and relationships. The Juliana case is good news for us, and for the world.

I promise, that if the case is not all over the headlines when it makes it to trial, that I'll keep you informed.

Until then, I invite you to spend some time pondering the question that I've talked about this morning, and the question at the heart of the trial. What kind of world do our children and grandchildren have a right to expect from us?

This sermon is offered in the public domain as a template for pastors preaching about the Our Children's Trust lawsuits and climate justice. It may not be published without permission from the author, Rev. Peter Sawtell, of Eco-Justice Ministries.