



Eco-Justice Ministries

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

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Sermon by Rev. Peter Sawtell
at Lord of the Mountains ELCA, Dillon, CO
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Mark 8:27-38

Just a few weeks ago, I heard a remarkable story about today's Gospel text, and the line about "take up your cross."

There are people who take that instruction very literally. Some individuals will, on occasion, walk around their community, carrying a large wooden cross over their shoulder, as a witness to their faith. Well, there's one guy who really didn't get the point.

I heard of this from Rev. Steve Van Ostran, the Rocky Mountain regional minister for the American Baptist Churches. He saw one of these Christians carrying a cross that is about 10-feet tall, made out of fairly heavy timbers. But the thing that got to Steve was that, at the bottom end of the cross, there was a wheel. This guy wasn't really carrying the cross – he was wheeling it.

Steve wrote, "Jesus didn't have a wheel to help Him carry the load... and the image He uses in His discourse focuses on we as disciples picking up the burden of the cross... not on figuring out some way to ease that burden."

Being a good Baptist preacher, Steve broadens his message: "But then again... without being too cynical... maybe this is a picture of modern Christianity or even of the American Church. We're willing to make a show of picking up the cross, but we want to use modern convenience to make the burden a bit lighter, the task less difficult." He mentions, for example, using Facebook to "visit the sick" instead of actually going somewhere.

Steve finished his newsletter article with a clear affirmation: "Jesus tells us that if we are to follow Him, we must pick up our cross... give up our own desires... and follow Him. But He also says that when we do this, we will not only discover Him, but that we will find the fullness of Life that only He can give." [*Steve's article, including a picture of the scene, is at <http://www.abcrm.org/single-post/2018/08/01/%E2%80%9CTake-Up%E2%80%9D-not-Roll>*]

I think I was in high school when I first started to ponder the strange logic of Jesus in today's passage. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

It took me a while, but then it became clear. If you're following Jesus just so that you can get saved, just so that you can collect the blessings of that relationship, then you've missed the whole

point of what it is to be a follower. If you're only looking for what you can get out of it, you're mistaken about the kind of life and community that Jesus offers.

If you really are following Jesus – living in love and compassion, seeking justice, and always focusing on God's intention for the well-being of all creation – then you will have turned away from a self-centered life. You will lose that life, and you will find the rich abundance of service, community, and faith.

Fifty years ago, this text helped me realize that faithfulness requires us to be out in the world, doing important and dangerous work. These words from Jesus made it clear to me that being a Christian is not a safe or easy thing. In the late 1960s, I saw that confirmed in people living faithful, committed and self-sacrificial lives as they worked for racial justice and peace. They found abundant life as they committed themselves to holy work.

Well, as interesting as this may be, your pastor did not invite me to come up from Denver to reminisce about my theological ponderings from 50 years ago when I was in high school. She did seem to be most interested in what I've been doing for the last 18 years, through my work with Eco-Justice Ministries.

In the summer of 2000, I started this non-profit agency because I was very worried that churches were not well equipped to deal with the urgent ecological and social justice problems taking shape around us. Churches were too often silent about these issues, or didn't know what to do as a community of faith.

Through the years, there's a question that I have often raised with pastors and church leaders: What does it mean to "be the church" in this time of great environmental and social justice crises? How can we most fully be the church in a way that is relevant to today's great needs?

Eco-Justice Ministries doesn't spend a lot of time on what I call the environmental basics – changing light bulbs and recycling. We affirm bigger and harder steps like installing solar panels, and being engaged in political advocacy. But my real passion in working with churches is what I call transformational ministry.

I try to find ways to help churches call us into conversion – into changing our sense of who we are and how we are called to live in the world. And I'm especially interested in how those changes will guide us – individually and collectively – in living more gently and justly and sustainably as part of the whole web of life.

Now, I know that yesterday you helped organize an all-day program on "Its Easy Being Green." You provided helpful information and good encouragement to people in your community. But I'm convinced that energy-saving gadgets and easy-to-do behavior changes are not sufficient for these times. They are not enough to get us through the big changes that we need to slow global climate change, or to protect endangered species, or to stop the spread of plastics and toxic chemicals. We need to change our values, our sense of what constitutes the good life. We need to

shift our beliefs about how we live in community with all those around us, and into future generations.

We need those big changes because the path that scientists and economists call "business as usual" is suicidal.

James Gustave Speth, in the opening pages of his book, "The Bridge at the Edge of the World," made that case vividly. [www.thebridgeattheedgeoftheworld.com]

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.

Jesus said, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." That is a spiritual shift, and it is one that faithful people need to live out in practical forms of service and action.

And there is a sense in which losing your life to save it is true in a collective way. As a society, we must lose our current way of life, We must turn away from business as usual. It is only by doing so that we can hope for joyous and sustainable life for ourselves, our children, and all the beautiful richness of God's creation.

If we cling to the comfortable, familiar way of affluence and consumerism and our addiction to fossil fuels, if we try to save that way of life, we will lose it. But if we give up that comfort and privilege, we will have made a turn toward the sustainability that will bring life to the whole Earth community.

That's pretty abstract. So let me point at a dramatic example, coming up this fall, where we can see a choice between the deadly path of holding on to who we are, or the life-giving option of making changes.

Some of you may have heard of a lawsuit called Our Children's Trust [<https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/>], which is scheduled to come to trial at the end of October. Twenty-one youth have filed suit against the United States government, charging that US energy policies are denying them their constitutional right to a livable future, because of the damage coming from climate change.

I want to point out that the case was filed three years ago, and accused the Obama administration of that failure. And the case isn't arguing that the US hasn't done enough to slow climate damage. The case goes much farther. It charges that the government, for decades, with full

knowledge of the dangers of greenhouse emissions, affirmatively chose programs and policies that make climate change worse.

The kid's lawsuit says that, by clinging to and encouraging an economy dependent on fossil fuels – by trying to save what many have seen as our essential our way of life – the US government has abandoned the chance for future generations to live a full life. The children's lawsuit calls for a dramatic change in US policies, a turning from the suicidal life of climate destruction, and a turn toward rapid climate action.

The lawsuit has made me rethink one of the ways that I talk to church groups about environmental issues. Often, I would gather in a class or workshop and ask people, "what kind of world do you want to leave for your children and grandchildren?" That's a good question, and a good discussion starter. But I've come to see that it is the wrong question.

We should be wondering, instead, "what kind of world do our children and grandchildren have a right to expect from us?" The first question depends on our charity. Once we've satisfied our desires and needs, how much do we choose to leave for them? The second option turns from charity to justice. It makes us consider what they have a right to demand from us.

The lawsuit says that – constitutionally – future generations have a right to a livable future, a stable climate, and adequate resources. Their call for climate justice proves the truth of Jesus' words. If we try to save business as usual for ourselves, we lose our heritage. If we change for the sake of justice and love, we will find life for all creation, now and into the future.

Watch for news about the lawsuit starting on October 29.

For years, I have asked pastors and church leaders, what does it mean to "be the church" in this time of great environmental and social justice crises?

Among other things, the church needs to call us – individually and as a society – toward some kind of conversion. We have good news to proclaim, because we can turn aside from the life that leads toward destruction. We can embrace a new, sustainable, and justice-filled life.

The church for this time needs to believe the gospel we talk about. It is when we stop trying to protect things as they are that we can find the hope and the joy of new life. May we be courageous and bold in proclaiming that message to the world.

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