

Climate in the Pulpit Sermon
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Chesapeake
October 22, 2018
Robin Lewis

Good morning everyone! It is a blessed and beautiful day that our Lord has made!
Today's text comes from the first book of the Bible....
Genesis 50:15-21, it reads this way.

15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' 16So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17"Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.'19But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?20Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. 21So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Today, I will focus on two things: first, our responsibility as people of faith to be environmentally "Woke" and secondly, to consider justice for not just yourself but also for those who are marginalized.

My topic – Environmental Justice? –Your Decisions – Your Brother and Sister's Consequences.

Let us pray. God, I asked that you used me to speak your word and share the knowledge that you have blessed me with on this very important topic, environmental justice. I have been shown us repeatedly that we are responsible for not only caring for your earth but to treat everyone justly, especially those who are oppressed and

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marginalized. Therefore, as people of faith, trying to do what is right by each other, we seek strength to stand up for justice no matter what. Amen.

I am not a minister, in the formal sense of the word. However, I believe that I was called me to the ministry of environmental justice, otherwise – I don't think I would have picked this profession as it takes so much out of you!

Well, just a little background. I am a single mom, with a 26-year-old son who has finished college and left me – I am officially an empty nester.

I started as a professional in telecom and low and behold, I got laid off. Wondering what I was going to do next, I went back to graduate school for my second Master's degree. This time at GW in sustainable urban planning with a focus on climate change. I don't know what struck me about the environment (maybe the Holy Spirit) but I knew that I should study climate change and its impact on the marginalized.

Well, I first started studying the impact of urban revitalization and walkable development on low income and minorities. I found that urban centers that were dilapidated and distressed, were targets for conversion to these walkable, sustainable, and healthy vibrant areas with many amenities. Those who were displaced were people of color and poor folks. This is called gentrification, simply put. So, we were exchanging one problem for another. The people that were pushed out of these urban areas, had to move further away from their employment and amenities, which made them even poorer. Also, the further you live from the urban center, the less public transportation is available. As a result, we are forcing poor people to move out of the city, using older gas guzzling cars (i.e. creating more pollution) to get to work or they couldn't get to work at all. This is called the suburbanization of poverty. This phenomenon has occurred in many cities. Because of this trend, I felt a need to get involved with identifying ways to

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reduce displacement, provide affordable housing, and create a more diverse and sustainable environment.

As I learned more, I decided to get involved with non-profit environmental groups. I noticed that I was the only Black person at the table, even when we were talking about environmental issues such as trash incineration, waste facilities, air pollution, lead poisoning, water pollution, food deserts, lack of transit, lack of green space, etc. – all of which are in minority and poor communities. Living in Prince George’s County and working in Baltimore, both with over 65% African Americans, I saw the similar health issues such as high asthma rates, high cancer rates, and odd immune disorders even though PG is almost twice as wealthy as Baltimore City. I was hired to fight against incinerators, gas infrastructure, fracking, water inaffordability and other environmental injustices with various non-profit. God led me to combine my faith with my passion for the environment when I started consulting with Interfaith Power and Light. I have been working to educate faith communities on environmental justice issues and help them to determine practical and legislative solutions.

So, let’s look at the biblical story and see how it relates to environmental justice.

Just a little background info about this Joseph story. We know from the story that Joseph was his father’s favorite and was pretty much a brat. He told his brothers that he had a dream wherein they would bow down before him (that’s the short version of the story) As a result, his brothers decided to get rid of Joseph by selling him to passing merchants into the slave trade. Joseph suffered for years after his brothers sold him. His brothers, on the other hand, weren’t affected...at first. None of them, except Rueben according to the story, even felt all that guilty. They lived good until the famine struck. Oh, then things changed! With No more food, no water, and no options, who did they end up turning to... Joseph, the brother they wronged. This is what stood out to me – what was intended to harm Joseph by his brothers, God or the Universe turned it into

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good to save many lives. Ok – so let's look at how we could consider environmental justice in this story....

What is environmental justice you say?

Majora Carter, an activist and EJ advocate in NYC says: “Environmental justice [means that] no community should be saddled with more environmental burdens and less environmental benefits than any other. “

That's straight forward. For today It means that people of color and low-income people, who are the marginalized, should not be dumped on with environmental hazards just because they are Black or Brown or just plain poor and are, therefore, the path of least resistance. That's just plain just, right? Stop poisoning people period.

A study was commissioned in 1987 by Charles Lee of UCC called “Toxic Waste and Race” authored by Benjamin Chavis and again in 2007. It indicated that “RACE is the most significant predictor of people living near hazardous waste.” Also, statistics show that minority communities are 79% more likely to live near hazardous sites than other groups. Thus, the term environmental racism was coined.

So, in 1991, The First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit and the 17 principles of Environmental Justice were adopted. These are principles if applied would ensure that residents in areas most impacted by environmental injustices could exercise self-determination to self-direct their communities to find sustainable solutions. This inclusive decision-making process is what is done in communities with less socio-economic issues.

Unfortunately, residents of marginalized communities are not included in the decision process as it relates to environmental policies. Much of the siting for fracking, drilling,

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pipelines, etc. are in or near black, brown, and poor communities. These communities have very little, if any, resources to stop these industry practices.

In terms of the topic of waste, we live in a disposable society. Convenience is king and we do not care where our waste goes. Just not in our backyard. So, again the marginalized get dumped on. However, it doesn't stop there as it spills over to our waterways, the land and the air that we breathe because we are all connected.

Look at the harm and undue burden we are placing on our marginalized neighbors who cannot afford to go to Whole Foods to buy organic or live in a walkable community where they can bike to work, drink water from reverse osmosis filters, use Zip Cars, or have dog parks. Are these marginalized people suffering or harms intended to be used for everybody's good?

Let's look at the unfortunate situation right now in the Southeast coast as well as Central American with Michael. Last year there were 10 hurricanes and 6 major hurricanes. This year we already had 4 major hurricanes and the season is not over. Everyone – and I mean everyone in the path of Michael was devastated by that storm. It did not care what you were. If you were in the way, you got hit. Of course, the richer you are the quicker you will recover. But right now, everyone is suffering due to this hurricane – and we know that weather patterns have intensified because of sea level rise and warmer water temperatures – yes climate change is REAL and here to stay. Scientists say rising global temperatures are likely to increase the intensity and impact of major storms. 2016 was the Earth's warmest year, with 2017 coming in as number 3, NOAA reported. Look at the all of the fires in California because of drought conditions. These weather events are due to the warming of the planet better know as global warming or climate change, plain and simple.

Ok how does this relate to the reading?

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Well – communities in the text that were directly impacted by the famine were living in an environmentally disadvantaged situation. They were forced to turn to other communities, more affluent communities, to try to find ways to meet their needs and deal with the impact of climate change on their homeland. They did not have the benefit of the wisdom that Joseph was blessed with to save grain over a seven-year period before the famine. So, when they ended up in a crisis the story told us the people turned to each other....

Similarly, in terms of the Hurricane survivors, people today are turning to each other. On the news Did you see the number of people who were pitching together to help their neighbor - no matter their color, ethnicity, gender identity, economic status. The relief efforts came from everywhere - volunteers, neighbors, organizations are pouring in from around the world. Everyone jumped right in to help those who were hit by the storms. In the story, Joseph helped all the people who came to him regardless of their ethnicity, their culture or even their personal history of wrong-doing to him personally.

Do you see how people are now mobilizing to speak out about climate change? In fact, cities and states are supporting and implementing climate mitigation strategies from the Paris Accord, even though our Federal government is not supporting it. People are out in the streets protesting, helping the poor, increasing private grant funding, calling out racial injustice, speaking out on social justice via marches on TV, in Sports, everywhere. Some are losing their status – like Colin Kaepernick. No matter what we think, he, just like you and me, has the right to peacefully protest – even if he is a Black football player! Also, look at all the young people that are running for public office. This election is going to be something else!

This is how positive change occurs. Unfortunately, to be “Woke” you must sometime get “Yoked” – ok, get shaken up by circumstances.

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In the story, Joseph was placed in position to both help his family and the world during a famine. I am not saying that God couldn't have chosen to do it without Joseph's suffering, that is not for me to say. But what I am saying is that because of free will and human nature, his brothers chose to harm him to benefit themselves, or so they told themselves. However, when facing their own suffering, because of the famine, they had to go to the one they harmed the most for help. Through our experiences with suffering, we learned compassion. And when it was the most important for his family and the world, we can be in the position to help others even though we weren't concerned until we suffer. Because we learn empathy for others through suffering ourselves, we are then able to forgive and help others out of their situation of hardship.

What does that have to do with environmental injustice? Does this mean that the fact that we are polluting and destroying our planet and allowing the marginalized to suffer for it will somehow be used for the good for everyone?

Wouldn't it be ironic, like in the movie "Day After Tomorrow," if we had to humble ourselves to Mexico which we don't care about environmentally today because we needed to survive tomorrow?

We are not isolated and cannot survive without each other. We are meant to lean on each other and treat each other justly, with dignity and honor. Also, we are called to forgive each other even when we were harmed by inconsiderate actions of others. Don't we expect to be forgiven by God and others many times even when we do things that are harmful to the earth and to others.

Whatever your belief is, you can be an instrument to be used to do good on the earth. What we have harmed, God and the universe can and will use us to make things good. As they say, use your lemons to make lemonade.

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We are given free will to choose to help the marginalized and support environmentally just policies. Some of us are in positions to really influence policies and legislation which could really help those who have been harmed.

It hurts us not to fight environmental injustice even though it appears to be somebody else's problem. As we pollute in one area, yes, those people will suffer first. But make no mistake, climate changes will impact everyone unless we do more now to mitigate it.

We can all support legislation that increases the use of renewables, namely solar and wind. We can recycle, compost, use reusables, and be thoughtful about how your actions impact the environment. Yes, we have harmed others by our energy demands, but we don't have to continue to do so. We can repent and turn things around.

All this is to say, fight the good fight for those who don't have the means to fight. If you have some privilege, use it to help the marginalized have a voice so that they can advocate for themselves.

Do Justice.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said "Injustice anywhere is a threat on Justice everywhere".

I want to thank you for allowing me to speak today. Please stay "Woke" and reach out to help someone who is less fortunate than you. And always consider the environmental justice impacts of policies and decisions in your life at work and at home. Our calling is to love justice, as God does. Joseph was just and we can be too.

Thanks again and May God Bless.