

Climate Change: an Ecological Crisis of Unprecedented Proportions

By Dick Gillett

Sunday Forum talk on August 16, 2015, at St Andrews Church, Seattle.

Good morning, and many thanks for coming...

I've titled this talk "Climate Change: an Ecological Crisis of Unprecedented Proportions". But the title doesn't do adequate justice to the subject. Pope Francis—a prophet, and even more extraordinary, a CHURCH prophet— calls climate change “ a global problem with grave environmental, social, economic and political [implications]...”

A few weeks ago, the Pope called to the Vatican a conference of selected mayors from around the world. He was quoted there as saying something even more extraordinary, in my view, about this crisis: Speaking about his recent Papal Encyclical, he said, “It's not a green encyclical, it's a social encyclical.” But isn't this primarily an environmental encyclical?

But why did he call a lower level conference of mostly urban mayors---why not the world's top political leaders? I think it's because he understands that the world's mega-cities are where the world's truly poor are to be found—where the pain is worst. That means that this crisis we face is not just an environmental crisis but a global social crisis, one of unprecedented proportions.

On the newsprint is the title of the conference I attended in Claremont, California from June 4-7:

[read newsprint:—SEIZING AN ALTERNATIVE: TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION. Post conference website for followup: pandopopulus.com

At the conference, 2000 of us, from all over the world including over 100 people from the People's Republic of China, were exhorted to return home and “**challenge basic assumptions of the modern industrial world, and propose ecological alternatives.**”

So here's what I want to cover in my talk today, hopefully leaving 10-15 min. for questions at the end.

[On Newsprint.]

But first I want to give you the flavor of the opening minutes of the conference, with keynoter Bill McKibben. As most of you know, McKibben is very dynamic. He's the most prominent environmentalist and spokesperson on global warming in the country, and maybe the world. His global group, 350.org, was the organizer of that unprecedented global warming protest in New York City last September, which drew upwards of 400,000 people. He is also distinguished scholar of environmental studies at Middlebury College in Vermont and has authored many books on the subject.

"We live in the midst of perhaps the greatest crisis the world has ever known", he began, "and it came on us very fast."

If you look at the Arctic Ocean from space in summertime, the world looks entirely different from 30-40 years ago, he said. The ice has drastically retreated. The oceans are 30 per cent more acidic. In California, the drought is terrible...terrible, he said. But the drought in the Middle East is bigger. (I heard last week that in recent days Baghdad is having daily highs of 124 degrees F.) Look at the civil war in Syria, he said---that region is undergoing the worst drought in the history of the Fertile Crescent; people are leaving their farms there and fleeing. His message was that climate change and civil war, civil strife, are related. India and Pakistan are having terrible heat waves this summer. In 2013, torrential rains washed away the lives of 20,000 people, according to Vandana Shiva. (and then there is our ongoing record heat and drought in the Northwest).

But why, McKibben asked rhetorically, have we been able to do so little in the last 25 years about climate change? It's the power of the fossil fuel industry. He quoted the International Monetary Fund as calculating that each year the world gives \$5.3

trillion in subsidies to the industry!---that is how enslaved we are to fossil fuels—how bound we are to their benefactors.

Are these guys beatable? McKibben asked. Yes, but only with a global grassroots movement. But there is hope—witness the demos in dozens of countries across the globe the same day of the big New York city protest—5200 demonstrations.

And these are not white environmentalists, he said, as he showed film clips of them. He further cited the divestment movement, including notable religious groups like the Church of England, and this past summer the Episcopal Church’s General Convention approved a resolution urging us to divest of fossil fuel stocks...An the Rockefeller Fund in the U.S. announced it was dropping its portfolios of fossil fuel investments. But McKibben also says we are going to have to do civil disobedience (as he has), ie be willing to be arrested.

In a few moments I’ll review what other prominent speakers told us at the conference. But now I want to move to the Industrial Revolution, whose shadow we still live in.

I The Industrial Revolution whose shadow we still live in:

It began around the middle of the 18th century in England.

Moving rapidly from a rural agricultural society to a factory system of mass production, and aided by new technology, the revolution became enamored with mass productivity. The worker became a commodity, a cog in the machine.

As our capacity to apply new technologies improved over time, the volume and variety of goods produced soared, as did the networks of commerce and distribution . A “money economy” developed. “The economy” morphed into a kind of autonomous entity, understood by a smaller circle of people. Above all, economic growth was deemed a necessary virtue.

So this is still basically the mindset we live in: **growth, consumption, production, technology, financial resources.**

It's true that even in a new ecological era, these categories will still have some application. I want to be clear about that.

But it's the deification of these values that must be destroyed---like the deified Golden Calf the Israelites made down below, while Moses was up on Mt. Sinai getting the Ten Commandments.

In his just-released Encyclical "Laudato Si", Pope Francis brilliantly describes our current mindset: "A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us." He goes on to say that we have succumbed to a "technocratic paradigm", which leads us to believe that every increase in power means an increase of 'progress' itself...as if reality, goodness, and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such." [from The Pope and the Planet, essay by Bill McKibben, in the NY Review of Books, August 13, 2015.]

So with these "golden calf" values we are now running headlong into environmental limits. ---as Bill McKibben said at our conference. The ecosystem only has so much carrying capacity---and it has been breached.

II Larry Rasmussen and a new theological perspective

But do we church folks have any religious perspective to bring to this?

Recently I listened to the tape of an address given earlier this year by Larry Rasmussen, who held the Reinhold Niebuhr chair at Union Theological Seminary in New York before he retired. The address was titled "From Social Justice to Creation Justice". "This is a sacred universe", asserted Rasmussen, who was present at that astonishing turnout last September of 400,000 people in the streets of New York. He was deeply moved at the rally by words of the chair of the Indigenous People's Council. "Mother Earth is Sacred", the indigenous leader said. REPEAT.

The words of the native leader reminded Rasmussen that we of the human species, like other species (animals, plants, earth, sea, mountains) are a part of nature, not outside it.

And in our time, nature seems to be changing course, due most prominently to our actions as the human species.

So for us the question of “who is my neighbor?”—the big ethical question of the Judeo-Christian tradition—now extends, in this new ecological age, to future generations of time and space. Says Rasmussen: “the natural world is worthy of such reverence , that it might make moral claim on us, and itself might now be due justice.” Think of that! The natural world. Is itself due justice. Our rivers and oceans, the seabeds, the Great Plains where prairie grass grows, our forests, ancient and modern---from the rain forests of Brazil to Redwoods of California---**the natural world is itself due justice.**

So the notion of social justice as the movement of love towards action, must now be expanded to include creation justice. REPEAT! That is Rasmussen’s new insight. That is a huge conceptual leap for us to make.

And let me speak personally here—for me, the leap is uncomfortable. Because as a lifelong activist and advocate for worker justice, I don’t want to leave social justice behind in the rush to be an environmental zealot. I don’t, in other words, want to throw workers under the bus . Because we of planet earth are all in this together: Humanity and all of nature— in one ecosphere, present and future.

III Key Insights from other speakers

A day later, **Vandana Shiva**, Indian philosopher and advocate for organic farming, came out strongly against genetic engineering of foods and for the basic intelligence of the world’s small farmers. “They know about the relation of soil to food, and about self-maintaining and self-renewing systems”, she said. “Growing up, we had been told about the wonders of the Green Revolution. But we learned that it was just a name given to industrial agriculture and its extensive use of chemicals when introduced to the Third World,” she stated. Shiva’s work in India has focused on the cultivation and careful preservation of seeds in harmony with nature and earth’s soils.

Then Wes Jackson, an agronomist and president and founder of The Land Institute in Kansas, spoke to us. He spoke in terms which even a non-farmer like me could understand:

- Soil is more important than oil.
- We are losing global topsoil at the rate of 1% a year
- Land use—primarily urban land use—is the no. 2 source of greenhouse gases.
- If we don't get sustainability in agriculture first, the new ecological civilization is not going to happen.
- But the time is right to do away with the annual monoculture of grains. And there is good news here: Jackson is successfully developing a new perennial wheatgrass which shows great promise.

So for me at this conference, Jackson's and Vandana Shiva's focus on soils and agricultural sustainability was an eye-opener, putting it on a level with the elimination of fossil fuels.

Herman Daly was a third keynoter with a crucial message for the conference attendees. Attending the conference from Vermont via video, Daly, an ecological economist, answered an interviewer's question. The question was: "What's wrong with economic growth and the benefits of globalization?"

Daly's answer: Back when the world was relatively empty, nothing was wrong with it. But now we have a "full" world.

It used to be that the limiting factor in production was labor and capital—ie not enough of either. NOW the limiting factor is remaining natural resources. Ongoing economic growth may be increasing environmental and social costs faster than it's increasing production benefits. **In other words, our natural resource depletion (e.g. the world's forests...or our soils, or water) at the one end, and air and water pollution at the other end, need to be built into our calculations.**

It's simple cost-benefit analysis, now applied to the natural ecosphere.

So—to the extent possible!— I’ve tried to set the stage for our big challenge:

IV In our globalized economy, how to move towards an ecological civilization?

In our present political climate, it’s difficult to believe that even our most enlightened leaders will come to their senses any time soon, and put forth any comprehensive plan towards ecological civilization and away from an ethic of growth capitalism. The much more likely scenario is that one, probably several, future global ecological or climate events will tragically be of such magnitude as to “incentivize” (I hate that word!) us to move faster. And it’s pretty certain that the proponents of the present era, for example the fossil fuel and agribusiness industries, will be digging in their heels to the last.

At the “Seizing an Alternative” conference, I was privileged to be part of a small team of people who conducted several workshops on the topic of “Good Work: Core Challenge for an Ecological Civilization”. We were challenged with thinking years ahead, about what happens to work and workers if they begin to be laid off in massive numbers because they are no longer needed in an era that is moving away from dependence on fossil fuels.

For example, in jobs related to the fossil fuel industry, where do the riggers, the drillers, the truck drivers, the railroad workers, the technicians, and the managers go? Do we just depend on the free market to adjust and find them jobs, and good luck? This shift is already happening in Appalachia to devastating effect, as the coal mining industry there greatly contracts, and entire towns are devastated---families desperate.

Or do we as a democracy have a responsibility for retraining, and/or, say, a guaranteed annual income, for workers?

In “Good Work”, our very first workshop at the conference, by the way, heard directly from workers themselves and their present work. We heard from a WalMart worker, a port truck driver, and a food service worker about their present jobs and working conditions. Their stories sensitized us to remember that like us,

they are human beings with families: they too, are a part of this huge transition we must now contemplate.

So we are trying to imagine a transition away from a growth-oriented economy and toward what some economists are calling a “steady state” economy. A post-industrial economy, whose functioning we must stretch our imaginations to contemplate.

Because the inescapable fact is that economic growth is now pressing hard on the ecosystem, even as economic inequality increases. As the economist on our small team told us,

“At what point does inequality become intolerable? As I indicated before: “We neglect the uneconomic nature of growth by measuring only production benefits, and fail to measure environmental and social costs.” In our public policies we have not even gotten this far—to measure consistently the “externalities” as part of the cost.

So here’s the truly radical statement coming out of the conference: **Growth can no longer be the driving force of our social and economic policies.** An “economic ethic” which arose out of the Industrial Revolution two and half centuries ago, is now killing the planet.

I’ve put out at the end of the pews, copies of a very timely OpEd piece that appeared last Tuesday Aug. 18 in the Seattle Times. It was titled: **Washington State can lead on climate change and clean energy**, authored by three community leaders with diverse backgrounds: a businesswoman, a labor leader, and a community leader.

The community leader, by the way, is Rebecca Saldaña, executive director of Puget Sound Sage, a community organization incorporating faith leaders. I know her well, and I occasionally participate in community advocacy events with Sage.

The Labor leader is president of the Washington State Labor Council, and the business leader is chair of Washington Businesses for Climate Action. Here’s the paragraph that caught my eye.

“The solution to climate change—transitioning to clean energy, ensuring we have a resilient food system, making our current energy and building stock more efficient, expanding access to sustainable, affordable transportation options, and repairing our outdated infrastructure—are opportunities to lift people out of poverty, create stable jobs in a resilient economy, protect our communities from extreme weather, and invest in clean air for our families.”

So here’s a starting place for collaborative action, right here in our state. (Including the idea of a carbon tax initiative).

(I regret here that I don’t have time in this presentation to strongly encourage the collaborative agreement between our Episcopal Diocese and the Diocese of the Southern Philippines regarding their reforestation project and our carbon offset strategy—a project I mentioned in our conference workshop.)

So as Christians, do we actually have a strong enough ethic to undergird the goal of a new ecological civilization? I think we do. It is the sharing, caring, healing ethic of Jesus: love your neighbor—here and across the planet. More than once in our discussions at the conference, the word **sharing** surfaced. Does that simple human act —**sharing**— not undergird practically every book of Holy Scripture? It’s the ethic of The Common Good. And if we go by Larry Rasmussen’s new Creation Justice ethic, we include all of nature—with which we human beings are one.

And we need, I think, to publicly and privately speak about the Common Good everywhere!

Finally, here are rules for citizens!

V. Rules for citizens in the new ecological civilization:

1. Locally, do no harm.
2. Look right around you—you probably can do more than you thought!
3. Join regional alliances, coalitions and movements
4. Participate in political advocacy!

Thank you.