

The Church's Calling to the Coming Crises

This is sermon I offered at our Eighth Day Faith Community on Sep 6, 2009. It seems to me that the coming ecological, economic, political and social crises that so threaten humanity call the church to respond deeply.

Bible Texts: Isaiah 35:4-7, Psalm 146

Over the past several years, we've talked a lot in Eighth Day about the intertwined series of profound crises that our world faces over the next several decades from:

- the environment,
- resource depletion,
- the economy,
- inequality and poverty,
- nuclear weapons,
- consumerism,
- corporations, and
- governance

Their combined impact threatens human civilization on an unprecedented scale. I'm not going to review all the threats here. We've done that enough!

Rather, this morning I'd like to place those threats in a different context and examine a theological response that offers me hope.

What I would like to emphasize, however, are the complex interrelationships among them. Each threat not only intensifies but also prevents significant change in others. The effects of global warming fall heaviest on the poor as their lands are inundated, food becomes unaffordable and extreme weather increases. Conversely, global poverty exacerbates global warming and other environmental dilemmas as the impoverished struggle to survive using whatever resources they can.

Similarly, as long as the economic system is committed to maximization of profit and sanctification of private poverty, the devastation of the environment cannot be reversed nor global inequality reduced; it's simply not possible. The structure of corporations shields the stockholders from responsibility for corporate malfeasance while the law insists managers act to increase profits despite any environmental harm. Governments could change the economic system and structures of the corporations ... except for the overwhelming influence of money in American politics—to say nothing of the persuasive power of advertising. We might reduce the impact of money in politics with campaign finance reform but then, again, the power of the wealthy makes that unlikely. (The Supreme Court this week indicated that it might declare unconstitutional even the weak restrictions on corporate money in the current McCain-Feingold campaign finance law.

I won't go on. What's important to recognize is that success in working with any of these problems in isolation is unlikely since each inhibits adequate change in any of the others. A leading environmentalist James Gustave Speth has recently written that the environmentalist approach—which he'd championed most of his career—of tackling issues one at a time, of trying to change government policy piecemeal, and of working cooperatively with corporations has largely failed. Speth and many others are insisting that if we hope to avoid widespread devastation, we can't attack these problems piecemeal as we have previously but must do something new: a simultaneous, broad scale attack on the issues as a whole.

Yet if we can't solve simple political problems like health care financing or social security reform, what chance is there of tackling the big ones all at once? The only practical answer, say a surprising number of our deepest thinkers, is the development of a deeper spiritual consciousness within the society.

The coming crises implicate the entire culture. When an entire culture reaches an impasse such as ours, the only possible way forward is through widespread spiritual transformation.

- Speth—speaking as a scientist not a spiritual guru—writes: “[T]oday’s challenges require a rapid evolution to a new consciousness. That’s a profound conclusion,” he says. “It suggests that today’s problems can’t be solved with today’s mind.” [\[1\]](#)

- Eric Fromm writes of the need for a transformation of the human heart: “The need for profound human change,” he writes, “emerges not only as an ethical or religious demand, not only as a psychological demand ... but also as a condition for the sheer survival of the human race.” [\[2\]](#)

- Daniel Patrick Moynihan writes: “The central conservative truth is that culture, not

politics, determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself. ... [But] [h]ow ... can politics save a culture from itself? There's only one way ... through the development of a new consciousness." [\[3\]](#)

At their root, the coming crises are theological: Who is God? What's God's will for creation, for the earth, for human beings? What does it mean for us to be "cast in God's image"? What are the consequences of our sin? Is God a "player" in world history?

Let me read the Isaiah passage from our lectionary again:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance

with terrible [retribution],
He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool.
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Isaiah 35:4-7

First, God comes with a vengeance, with terrible retribution. *Then* the eyes of the blind are opened, the waters and streams break forth, and so on. God's judgment clears the way for hope and ultimately renewal.

If ever we needed these words of judgment *and* comfort, it's now.

The psalm for this week makes it even clearer who's acting here: The LORD executes justice; the LORD gives food; the LORD sets free; the LORD lifts up; and so on.

Well, in our case, the LORD had better be involved, 'cause we sure can't do it by ourselves.

So how might the LORD do this, and what's going to be our role.

Let me list my understanding of some of what the LORD requires of us:

1. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Mt 22:36). So ... we are to honor God's creation as inherently valuable; despoiling it is not permissible.

2. Jesus lived in material simplicity and warned of material surfeit. Consumerism is idolatry. So ... we are to live simply

3. Human beings are prone to sin; we're all complicit. Few of us can resist the cultural pressures to join in the devastation of the earth. So ... society must create laws in order to require each one of us to do what we all know all of us should do.

4. We are prone to hubris, thinking that we can manage Creation. But the wisdom of God and God's creation are far beyond our own. So ... we must rid ourselves of fantasies that we can control the coming crises through technology.

5. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The earliest Christians were anchored in community. So ... we are to practice economic sharing.

6. Jesus insisted upon a radical inclusivity. So ... we must participate in providing not only for America's poor but also for the needs of the global poor for food, adequate education, and basic health care.

7. Jesus and also Paul offered profound conceptual and practical understandings of the Powers—that is, in our day, government, corporations, and so on—and the need to confront them. So ... We must explore our Christian understanding of the Powers and begin redeeming them.

8. And finally we're offered what Fred Taylor calls apocalyptic hope, that God can make a way. So ... despair is not permissible.

While we as Christians come to these values through our own understanding of God, most of these values are, not surprisingly, inherent in almost all spiritualities. What's required is not limited to Christianity. But what's crucial to recognize is that what the church has historically tended to see as the behavior possible only for saints is no longer optional for any of us. It's become a practical necessity for humanity's survival. Judgment Day has arrived ... literally. There will be, in Isaiah's words, retribution.

So let me step back and ask you to imagine with me a future in which our country's spiritual consciousness has risen so that:

- People perceive the Creation as holy—a reflection of Love's glory—and understand human stewardship of it;
- People affirm that human well-being comes not from material goods but from love for others, human relationships, and community;
- People are humbled by their knowledge of human sinfulness and idolatry, both individual and corporate;
- People find in themselves a desire for justice and the inclusion of all people in Earth's bounty;
- People understand and find energy in spiritual traditions of confronting and redeeming the Powers;
- People find themselves anchored in local community and eager to share with one another; and
- People are radicalized by hope that God acts in history (or, for those of us who can't hope that much, be radicalized by a hope like Martin Luther King's that—beyond our knowing—"the arc of history is long but it bends toward justice.")

Secure in such spiritual maturity, we could in our democracy join with each other, co-creating with God to change governance, tame corporations, restructure the economy, banish nuclear weapons, eliminate global destitution, and live on this earth sustainably.

When I first noticed this correspondence between what's required to prevent ecological tragedy and what our scriptures require of us, I was stunned.

Our Great Work is to move toward—and shepherd others toward—the values of the Reign of God. In other words, if we wish to survive, we're called to radical discipleship: incarnating the relationship of Kingdom values to today's crisis and teaching others. In still other words, the primary call of the church today is to take the lead in transforming society.

Right!!

But ... isn't this what the Church has been trying unsuccessfully to do for 2000 years? What makes you think it's even possible, much less likely? Well, our faith is that there's another force that uses our radical discipleship to make possible the otherwise impossible. The general rise in spirituality required is no more unlikely than abolishing slavery was; no more unlikely than the Civil Rights revolution was; no more unlikely than—on a smaller scale—closing Junior Village was; or a tiny church creating a web of dozens of missions to transform the city was. Each of those was similarly impossible in their time, yet our forbearers answered God's call and did their part.

Values are deeply entrenched. What chance is there of actually changing the values of our society? Well, if that were the issue, probably very little. But it's less the values that must change than the application of those values. These are common values. Most people are aware that—beyond a basic income—increasing material wealth doesn't make them happier. Most recognize the injustice of poverty and want it overcome, even—polls show—if it raises their taxes. We're beginning to realize that we're all one global people and that love for others is now a practical necessity. Large majorities recognize that we're soiling the nest that has sustained us. True, we don't always act according to those values, but our values nevertheless shape our thinking and our actions. So, the issue is not so much changing people's values—which might be very difficult—as reminding people of them and demonstrating to them that we could organize the entire society around them ... and that that's the only possible response to our desperate situation.

Furthermore, these values are already expressed in thousands of ways around the country: nonprofits, volunteerism, co-ops, worker-owned factories, community supported agriculture, Medicaid, Social Security, Medicare, political activism, and much more. These are all practical expressions of care for others, community, inclusion that are independent of the limited values of our economic system.

Isn't this just a cover for a liberal agenda? How can we mobilize most of the church along these values? Actually, most of the values we're talking about are traditionally seen as conservative: challenging materialism and consumerism, love for others, respect for God's creation. Indeed, the environmental movement is becoming quite strong within many conservative churches, which understand the necessity of protecting God's creation. What remains to be done is educating Christians to understand how their to translate their values into action.

Why should this be possible now if it hasn't been before? The urgency of the environmental crisis is gradually becoming evident to all. What were once idealistic Christian behaviors for

saints are now practical necessities for human survival. Historically, profound societal changes become possible during crises, and this is a crisis to trump all others. We're now confronted with the very tangible results of our separation from God. Now is a new time!

But isn't it too late? Scientists say that we must make radical changes now, and it's clear that those changes aren't coming anytime soon.

Well, yes, the time when we could have prevented all damage from ecologic imbalance has already passed, but that doesn't mean we can't prevent much more damage by acting now, setting a new course for humanity.

My teaching this morning is really a beginning attempt to call the Church to its fundamental task in the 21st century. This is what God requires of us now. If we wish "to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God," this is the task in this time and place. I'm also calling us as a community to a new mission ... well, perhaps not to a new mission but to our current missions with a new consciousness.

Take as an example, Joseph's House. Like many of our missions, it's been founded and operates upon the values of love, sharing, inclusivity, the elimination of poverty, and so on. Strangers sometimes sense these values almost physically when they come in the door. People come from across the country to volunteer significant time because they value so highly what Joseph's House does and is. Does Joseph's House operate by the rules of the market economy? Hardly. Yet, because many different people act out of love, sharing, and cooperation, this economic enterprise just celebrated its nineteenth anniversary as a practical example of the new consciousness.

We don't need so much to take on new calls as to see Joseph's House and our other missions as also manifestations of this rising spiritual consciousness. We need to teach our interns, articulate to our supporters, and more generally advertise to everyone that society can and must operate on these values.

Many of us advocate for political change in one way or another, for instance, for health care financing reform. This is not only volunteer work—which is, by the way, another expression of this new consciousness—but also support for government action ... and government social programs are themselves expressions of this new consciousness in which all of us care for each other. At issue in the current health care financing debate is whether a significant percentage of American health care is going to be funded by private contributions through insurance companies (whose goal is to maximize profits) or whether universal health care will

be recognized as an important expression of our values and funded by progressive taxes on everyone. So we need to be aware of our work as an expression of the new consciousness ... and broadcast that.

So ... many, perhaps most, of us in this community don't need to do anything new except see our work differently and begin to talk about it that way, to educate others. Our missions are not opportunities for spiritual giants to do good deeds; they're a necessary map for our future.

What else might we do? Here's just a jumbled beginning list in no particular order.

As individuals, we could:

1. Learn how to use our individual savings and checking accounts and our investments to support institutions that work for the community or that support workers or the environment. (If that sounds right for you, attend Andy Loving's workshop on socially responsible and community investing at 10 AM, Saturday, Oct 17, at 2025.)
2. Proselytize among our wider families.
3. Participate in food coops or Community Supported Agriculture.
4. Simplify our lives and give the savings away. In our mission groups, small groups, and spiritual direction, give each other support for simplification.
5. Invite someone to live with you.

Collectively, as a faith community:

1. we could work together to articulate this as our common mission and call other C of S faith communities to it.
2. We could immerse ourselves in the biblical teachings on confronting & redeeming the Powers. Christians are called to confront the rulers and authorities of this world. Walter Wink's trilogy, especially the last volume *Engaging the Powers*, is especially helpful (if you haven't already read it).
3. Our educational mission groups—The Banyan Tree, Wellspring, and the Servant Leadership School—can educate us and others about the coming crises and their connections with Kingdom values. We can attend those events or organize them ourselves.
4. We could take on as missions ecojustice projects, which respond to the negative environmental impacts—such as waste dumps, polluted water, contaminated land, and so on—that are most often found in poor neighborhoods.

There are many more that we'll discover.

Our faith community can take on as its primary overarching mission (of which all other missions are part) the changing of our society to incarnate the deepest values we've been given. Our vision is people mobilized by the values of the Kingdom acting to save our civilization. Our long-held spiritual goals are now necessary for our survival.

[1] Speth, James Gustave, *The Bridge at the End of the World*, p 204.

[2] Ibid, pp 201-02

[3] Ibid, p 211