

The World Council of Churches and multiple Christian denominations around the globe have started celebrating the "Season of Creation," a celebration that is designated to take place between September 1st and October 4th. The "Season of Creation" celebration comes in response to a call to action, a call to defend and care for our environment with a particular focus on issues of climate change. Actually, Pope Francis is leading this call which began with the environmental encyclical he published in which he discusses the scientific basis of global warming. This document calls on people of faith to work for and seek urgent action from policy makers. As ELCA Lutherans, we are participating in this effort. In fact, many congregations are focusing on care of the environment and climate change as part of their celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation which takes place next year. Our Faith Lutheran community is responding to this call with the formation of our Green Team as we work to develop an intentional focus on becoming good stewards of creation.

Pope Francis has said, "Believers and unbelievers agree that the Earth is our common heritage, the fruits of which should benefit everyone. However, we must look at what is happening in the world that we live in.... The relationship between poverty and the fragility of the planet requires

another way of managing the economy and measuring progress. It requires conceiving a new way of living because we need a change that unites us all.”

Well, I promised our Green Team that I would set aside one Sunday between September 1st and October 4th to highlight this “Season of Creation” effort. When I looked at the schedule of events on our church calendar, today seemed like the one Sunday that would be an option. Then, I looked at this gospel reading! Ugh! In today’s reading we receive one of the harshest stories Jesus tells. I have to say, my initial response was, “How do I possibly connect Jesus’ words to this season of creation effort?” Then, after further study of this passage, I realized there really **is** a connection because today’s reading is all about a call to live a certain way in the **here and now** of everyday life.

Today, Jesus continues his conversation with the Pharisees about the love of money and one’s search for riches. He continues by telling the Pharisees yet another story, a parable that is rather difficult to hear. Borrowing from what scholars believe was an Egyptian tale, Jesus tells the story of two worlds: the world of the haves and that of the have-nots, the world of the rich and that of the poor, the world of the comforted and that of the afflicted. And, the boundaries between the two are very clearly defined.

The writer of Luke's gospel was extremely concerned about the proper use of wealth, something that is threaded through the entirety of his telling of the Jesus story. As we dig into this story we have to understand that, in this parable, Luke is **not** trying to settle issues about the afterlife or eternal punishment. Luke **is** addressing the way we live our lives, **here and now**. As Jesus tells this story, he uses a good deal of hyperbole to address those who love their money more than people, their possessions more than the poor, their clothes more than compassion, and their extravagant feasts more than sharing food with the hungry. And, it is very clear that Jesus has no pity for those who should know better. The rich man in this story has **no** way of pretending that he did not know the plight of Lazarus in this life, since the poor man was brought directly to his door, presumably by friends, or fellow beggars. And, the tale of the afterlife tableau is one of merciless pain suffered by the rich man, pain which cannot be alleviated. Even when the rich man asks for his family to be warned and spared, he is told that all they need to know is already available, and even if Jesus was raised from the dead, they would not mend their ways.

The themes presented in Jesus' story stand as powerful indictments of our world today. The ever-widening chasm between the rich and the

poor is one of the most important issues of our day. The great divide between Lazarus and the rich man didn't spring up upon their deaths or after the last judgment; it was created **by** the rich man while **both** of them were **living**. There is no escaping this indictment in Jesus' story. This is a parable urging "the haves" to **do justice now**, for there will be no opportunity later.

Yes, there is a growing chasm between the poor and the rich, as depicted in today's reading. As we look at our world and the creation we have been given, the rich control resources like land and money, and the rich control systems of taxation that perpetuate the "great divide." As we look at climate change and its increasing effects upon people, the poor of this world are going to be the ones who face the greatest risk. They will be the ones who suffer the most. Warnings and messages are coming in every form, but too often these warnings remain unheeded.

The Rev. Sally Bingham, eco-minister, founder and President of Interfaith Power & Light, says that abuse of natural resources and pollution of your neighbor's air is a sin against creation. If we love our neighbors, we don't pollute our neighbor's air. She fervently says, "The environmental crisis is a theological problem, a problem that stems from our view of God and how we relate to God and each other. Our view of God can be one

that encourages and/or permits destructive, unjust behavior **or** one that encourages right relationship and harmony with **all** of the created order.”

Bingham considers scientists some of our modern day prophets. Scientists told us thirty years ago that carbon dioxide was a heat trapping gas and too much of it would trap heat close to the earth, causing our planet and our oceans to get increasingly warm. We didn't listen and became overly dependent on fossil fuels for energy. We are now paying the price of not listening. But, it isn't too late. We will see more of the same as we move along in the 21st century, but we CAN turn the trend around. There is hope all around with new technology. Renewable energy is coming on-line and now growing rapidly. Jobs are being created, more and more people are driving smaller cars and using energy more efficiently – that is crucial and it **is** happening.

However, as theologians and scientists discuss environmental issues, they continually remind us that this is a **moral** issue, one that requires a change in people's hearts and minds. Sally Bingham writes:

What institution changes hearts and minds? Churches and that is why the religious voice is so important in this dialogue as we look for solutions to climate change. As religious people we **must** do our part – and we have a big role in this. If we don't protect creation, how can we possibly expect others to? Moral leadership sits right here with us...Our job then is to become informed, do our part and work so that people understand we will **not** be the healthy children that God intended and we will **not** live on a healthy planet **unless** we can get

beyond partisanship and do what is right for the entire communion of life. The creation that God called good, the creation where God put us and instructed us to till and keep this garden, is the creation that sustains us and will sustain us **if** we do our part... We have a responsibility to each other, to the future and to God. [And, if we do our part,] we **will** be the people that God placed in the garden to till it and to keep it. We **will** be obeying the first and great commandment to love God and each other and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Christians cannot look at the current state of the world, including related issues of climate challenge and claim ignorance. These are hard days, to be sure. But, as Bingham suggests, we have a responsibility to each other, to the future and to God. In today's reading, Jesus lays before us the importance of relational social issues as we live our lives **right here and right now**. We are called to live into God's dream of **justice** for this **entire** world. God created us to live in relationship with **all** others and with the creation we have been given. The abundant, eternal life Jesus calls us into **comes** through the community of creation, and that life starts **now**. God calls us to enter into that life and seek abundant life for our neighbors and the whole **world**, the life made manifest and available to **all** in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord.