

What the Pope Said

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

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So you may remember that I put on a short but vigorous campaign to become the pope a couple of years back. I shared my platform with you in a sermon and I hope you found it as interesting as I did. Nobody voted for me though, and now...I'm really glad! Because this pope is turning out to be quite a guy, and anyway, it's always better if the Pope is Catholic.

In June, Pope Francis released a Papal Encyclical, a letter to all Catholics, or in this case, as he makes clear, a letter to all the world. There are not many people on our planet who could pull off a letter to the entire world, but he is one. And the subject of the letter, the environment of our planet, certainly affects us all.

He is not the first pope to address a missive to the whole world; In 1963, John XXIII, addressed us all in his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, on the subject of nuclear proliferation and the extreme and immediate danger to the world of the doctrine of mutually assured destruction...a danger which took another two decades to ease and which is now, for all our worries about rogue states, no longer a danger to life on the planet.

These days, as Pope Francis rightly says, the danger is to, if not all, at least a good deal of the life on the planet and especially to that large part of the human race which is poor...a special concern of this pope, who has actually been a priest to the poor, living and working among them. In the part of the Catholic world this pope comes from, South America, God is thought to have a preferential concern for the poor. So it is thoroughly in character for this Pope to insist that, "We must hear the cry of the poor."

He is not the first Pope to speak out against the degradation of the earth, but he is the first to speak out so forcefully, and using the powerful tool of the papal encyclical, which sets Catholic doctrine and practice. The earth needs all the powerful friends it can get right now, so the encyclical is a contribution to the debate which is welcomed by almost all people who have similar worries.

This is mostly, however, not a document of science...although it is well grounded in science, and he insists to skeptics that the science which calls global climate change human made is good science. Nor is it a document of global politics. Although Francis' interpretation of the likely effects of climate change focuses most heavily on the effects of climate change on the poorest people and on community and culture. That's unusual. Most climate change analysis focuses on economics. However, Pope Francis moves briskly away from this topic. His interest is

theology, and this encyclical is mostly a theological document, and a revolutionary one which should be welcomed and understood by all who care about the earth, even those who are not Catholic or even believers in God.

Pope Francis, rightly, in my opinion, sees the degradation of the earth as a problem caused by an incorrect theology, or, if you will, a bad world view. That incorrect world view comes directly from the Christian mind-set and ways of interpreting the Bible and is so deeply a part of our culture that we are all effected even if we don't know how. The word for the world view is "anthropocentrism": the idea that human beings are the only really important thing on the planet, or even in the universe. It is a particularly western viewpoint: Indigenous people and the people of the East have not, historically, had this idea. How did we westerners get to be such egomaniacs?

Well, it might have started with the book of Genesis, which, as commonly translated in the West, has God tell Adam and Eve that they are to "have dominion over the earth and subdue it." It is easy to imagine how those words would justify the theology that says that the earth is here for human use and has no other purpose, that we should tame its wilderness, plunder its riches and generally do what we like with it. The idea that it is proper to, say, mine a mountain full of pumice down to a nubbin so that we can purchase comfy, pre-worn-out jeans comes directly out of the mindset. It is different from, say, the mindset of most indigenous peoples which says that mountains, like people, have an integrity of their own and should be left in their most natural state, that the world of nature is not simply a world of natural resources for human use.

Pope Francis lays waste to this interpretation of the Hebrew words of Genesis. He says that they should have been translated that Adam and Eve are to "till the earth, and keep it," not "have dominion over the earth and subdue it." Francis' translation of the old Hebrew words would suggest that humans are meant by God to have a harmonious, mutually beneficial relationship with the earth. We are not meant to exploit and take and manipulate but to care for the earth which is seen as having its own intrinsic worth and dignity, just as people do.

He also upholds other Biblical texts which are profoundly countercultural these days; texts which establish that God is the ultimate owner of the land, not people, texts which require Sabbaths, and not only the day a week sort, but the one year in every seven, and even the jubilee year every 50th, in which all land is returned to the families to whom it was first (equally given) and all debt is forgiven and all debtors who have been slaves are freed. Francis goes deeply into texts which remind us that we are required to treat our fellow human beings with respect and accord them the dignity of being, with us, God's beloved children. Those who have more are responsible to help those who have less. Not only that, but there are texts in the Bible which remind us that we must treat the world's creatures well, also. For instance, the Sabbath exists, not only so that people can rest from labor, but that the animals that help us may rest as well.

Our ecological problems are rooted in bad theology or bad world view, a world view or a theology which says that humans can and should exploit the rest of the world and its creatures and...probably also the weaker of our own species, for our unlimited benefit. We have enshrined this bad theology and world view into an economic system which the Pope also takes aim at. He calls it the “technocratic Paradigm” ...the idea that all technology and knowledge is a good thing, worthy of uncritical acceptance and put on the market so that some people can make money off of it. He is very critical of this world view and asks us to be more skeptical of the idea that more and newer stuff is the key to a rich life.

Now most of these theological points have been noted by others, and these radical ways of reading scripture used by liberal Christians, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, but this is new to, let's call it mainstream Catholicism, and this pope goes even further in his interpretation. He proposes a new theology of relationship which emphasizes the fact that everything is related. He calls this Integral Ecology

Traditional Christian theology has said that human life is made possible and enriched by two kinds of relationships: our relationship with God, and our relationship with other people who are made in the image of God and whose brothers and sisters we are. These two kinds of relationships are related: it is only possible to have a relationship with God if you have the experience of a relationship with people. And it is hard to fully appreciate people ...who can, as we all know, be difficult... if you don't begin with appreciating what we UU's call their worth and dignity, which theists believe exists because of being made in God's image and non-theists simply take as granted...a humanist decision of faith.

Pope Francis, in this revolutionary encyclical says that there are not two fundamental relationships, there are three. They are a person's relationship with God, a person's relationship with other people, and a person's relationship with the earth. They are all of equal importance, he says. That's radical. Some Liberal Christians have said this in the past, but they get slapped down for being “pagan”. Traditional Christianity has never valued the earth, has had a fair amount of trouble valuing even human bodies because of how earthy we are. Pope Francis will have none of this.

Unitarian Universalists don't all believe in God...about a third of us have no use for that idea at all, but we believe in honoring the wisdom of others, and there is wisdom here for theists and non-theists. We, too, could benefit from thinking of our lives as having three vital foci which interact: our relationship with others, our relationship with the earth, its beauty and with its life, and a relationship with what is most meaningful to us; knowledge, beauty, love...whatever brings a catch of awe to our breath and goosebumps to our skin. The UU purposes and principles name these things, the worth and dignity of individuals, mystery and wonder, and the earth as critical to us and our spirituality. Now...we can welcome the Pope in, too!

So...What the Pope said! Which is: We've got a big problem. We have soiled and mis-sued our environment, and that is causing and will cause increasing suffering, especially to the poor. That problem has its roots in a theology or world view of domination rather than stewardship, and pridefulness rather than relationship, and it has been enshrined in our economics.

He offers two ways out: a radical new theology....and it has to be said that radically new theologies are not an everyday thing in the Catholic church, and a renewed focus on living together honoring and respecting our fellow human beings. He talks in glowing terms about the joys of community, family, and finding meaning in life's simple pleasures. He is wise enough to see how complex all of this is and suggests that individuals and communities will find different answers. He offers no easy solutions. He is not all about solar power or a vegetarian diet or riding bikes. He is about individuals, communities, and peoples finding respectful ways to live in the interdependent web of existence. No, he doesn't use those words. Those are our words. But really...this guy is our pope!

Anyway, that's what the Pope said. In saying it, he made a lot of people, especially Americans, mad. He made politically conservative Catholics mad. Political conservatism has bought heavily into theologies of domination and made a shrine of what they call free-market capitalism and what the pope called Technocratic Anthropocentrism.

The pope made a lot of conservative Protestants mad, too, by re-interpreting some of their favorite biblical stories. He implicitly criticized American conservative leaders, secular and religious, on their "just deny it" strategy, saying outright that Global warming is caused by people and that is proven by science.

And... he made liberals mad, because he dealt with the problem of overconsumption but not the problem of overpopulation. And, he made people mad by vilifying technology. We do all love our technology, can't really imagine living without it, and it is true that a good case can be made for the hope that a re-directed technology will go a long way towards staving off or avoiding environmental crisis...things like batteries and solar power, and which will allow us, if we choose, to mitigate the effects of global warming on the world's people.

Most papal encyclicals, it must be said, make barely a blip on the Catholic horizon, must less the world horizon. Nobody gets mad, there are no op ed pieces in the newspaper, and no UU minister devotes a sermon to them. The fact that so many people got mad at this encyclical gives me hope.

Now, if you had elected ME pope, I would have written that encyclical a little differently. Not a lot differently...but a little. First of all, I would have left Catholic hierarchy's abhorrence of abortion out of this particular encyclical as quite tangential, and I would have offered two paths to right relationship to the earth, not just one. The first and most important path, especially to the world's powerful people and the world's rich people, and that includes every single one of you, no matter how stressed out you are by money.... Is, as the pope points out, the path of ending our obscene overconsumption of the world's resources. There is no doubt about it, this is ruining the life on our planet, and going to cause infinite suffering, especially of the poor and maybe of almost all of us. But speaking of the suffering of the poor, if I were the pope, I would offer a second path of saving the earth by giving women and men the ability to both enjoy their god-given sexuality AND reliably limit their family size. This would not have a great impact on global climate change; global climate change is caused by the profligate rich, and we

can never forget that for a moment. But it would have a big effect on families and ecosystems in the third world, and that is important, too.

The second thing I would have done differently if I were the pope, is to offer a little more nuanced critique of technology, because it is not going to go away, it will be a part of any solution we manage to come up with to climate change, and I, for one, would like a few more tools to distinguish the good from the bad, the dangerous from the worthy. I, the Unitarian Universalist skeptic, not Christian, am, ironically, totally with the pope when it comes to the theological parts of what he said. I love his re-interpretation of scripture and expanded definition of human as bound into three kinds of relationship: with spiritual reality, with others, and with the earth. Love it! And I live in a technological world. I need guidance on my relationship with that, too. Maybe that will be MY next encyclical,,,,uh....sermon. If so, you'll be the first to know!