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Environmental Justice

- I. What is it?**
- II. Why should Christians care about it?**
- III. What can a Christian do about it?**

I am going to speak today on the subject of environmental justice. Specifically, what is environmental justice, why should Christians care about environmental justice, and what can Christians do about it?

Before I talk about environmental justice, I would like to read a prayer. This was in our church bulletin some years ago. It was written by Wanda Lawrence of the Chippewa Native American Indian People:

We pray that someday an arrow will be broken, not in something or someone, by each of humankind, to indicate peace, not violence.

Someday, oneness with creation, rather than domination of creation, will be the goal to be respected.

Someday fearlessness to love and to make a difference will be experienced by all people.

Then the eagle will carry our prayer for peace and love, and the people of the red, white, yellow, brown and black communities can sit in the same circle together to communicate in love and experience the presence of the Great Mystery in their midst.

Someday can be today for you and me. Amen.

What is environmental justice?

After I agreed to Rev. Knight's request that I speak today, and after I selected environmental justice as a topic, I then fully realized the difficulty of my task. One of the difficulties is that environmental justice is not really separable from justice generally. Another difficulty is that environmental issues are not easily discussed apart from many of the other issues of the day. For example, environmental impacts are related to resource use, to the manufacturing of products, and to the consumption of those products. And it seems that everything is related in some way to the economy.

When I set out to find a definition, I uncovered several, and it appears that some commentators use the terms "environmental justice", "environmental equity", and "environmental racism" almost interchangeably. I prefer the terms "environmental justice" and "environmental equity", because they are more inclusive terms.

The definition of environmental justice that I have selected is the one offered by the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1998. It is really a two-part definition:

Part one states that "Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulation, and policies.

Part two explains what is meant by 'fair treatment': it means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic or socioeconomic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the

execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies.

Fair treatment. It may be difficult to identify and it may be even more difficult to achieve, but that is the goal: fair treatment.

Environmental justice, as a recognized movement in this country, is commonly said to have begun in 1982 in Warren County, N.C., where citizens of this predominantly African-American community protested for 6 weeks the siting of a toxic waste landfill in their neighborhood. Black churchwomen lay down in the road to block dump trucks loaded with soil contaminated with toxic wastes.

The Warren County protests led the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice in 1987 to produce a report entitled "*Toxic Wastes and Race*", which has been deemed the first national study to correlate waste facility sites and demographics. Writing in the Spring 2008 edition of the journal *Environmental Law*, Robert Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Saha and Beverly Wright state that

...twenty years after [the release of the 1987 report], people of color and low-income communities are still the dumping grounds for all kind of toxins. Using 2000 Census data, an updated database, and newer methods, we found [that] significant racial and socioeconomic disparities persist in the distribution of the nation's hazardous wastes facilities. ...People of color are particularly concentrated in neighborhoods and communities with the greatest number of facilities, and racial disparities continue to be widespread throughout the country...Race continues to be the predominant explanatory factor in facility locations and clearly still matters.

The National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, in its ecumenical study guide, cites as examples of environmental inequity such things as (1) migrant workers' exposure to pesticide-laden fields, (2) residents of Harlem's exposure to increased air pollution because six out of the seven bus depots in Manhattan are located in Harlem, and (3) Navajo people's exposure to contaminated land and water from uranium mines near their home in Rio Puerco, New Mexico.

The United Church of Christ's 2007 update of its 1987 report sums it up this way:

For Hispanics, African Americans, and Asian/Pacific Islanders, statistically significant disparities exist in the majority or vast majority of EPA regions...the pattern of people of color being especially concentrated in areas where facilities are clustered is geographically widespread throughout the country.

But concerns about environmental justice and equity do not end there. The clean up of this beautiful lake that surrounds Mercer Island also raises historical issues of environmental inequity. The writer Matthew Kingle, in his recent book, "*Emerald City - An Environmental History of Seattle*", asserts the following:

Metro's cleanup of Lake Washington resulted in the shifting of raw sewage from the Lake to the Duwamish River. The Duwamish River, which flows through low-income neighborhoods and is home to fishing rights owned by American Indians, was sacrificed for the health of a lake that supplied leisure and scenery to many comfortable Seattleites and suburban neighbors...it had not occurred to those [leading the cleanup effort] to save both the lake and the river at first and thus serve larger principles of environmental and social equity...".

I should note here that Mr. Kingle's book, or at least some of his conclusions, are certainly not uncontroversial.

In any event, I can tell you, based on some of my work over the past 8 or 9 years that concerns about environmental justice continue to exist regarding the Duwamish River. King County, the City of Seattle, the Port of Seattle and The Boeing Company are under orders from EPA and the Washington Dept. of Ecology to find a way to clean up the Duwamish. One of the most difficult questions we face is whether any clean up will ever result in seafood safe enough for Native American Indians and others to eat. You see, those populations eat more fish from the Duwamish than the members of the general population. It may be that clean up will prove so costly and so technically difficult, that safety of seafood will just have to be one of those goals slated for achievement sometime in the far distant future. The

disproportionate burden of contaminated food source may be the unfortunate reality.

At least one other local environmental project deserves mention because its location cuts against the grain: the County's huge West Point sewage treatment plant is located in Seattle, in close proximity to the Magnolia area. When that plant was slated for upgrade and expansion in the late '80s and early '90s, serious consideration was given to relocating the plant to another area, including near the Duwamish River. To their credit, the political leadership stuck with the current location. Now, some have asserted that the people of Magnolia were able to secure excessive mitigation measures, but the plant is there, and the people of Magnolia experience the impacts of the treatment plant, what ever they may be.

Now, this brief description of environmental justice issues might be enough to cause a person to throw up her hands and conclude that this may simply be too wide-spread and too complex. After all, there are so many other problems out there, including some rather pressing ones. A concerned person could devote herself to any number of other causes and perhaps even make a difference.

Now that we have an idea of what "environmental justice" means and some sense of what "environmental injustice" looks like, the next question is this:

Why should we as Christians care about environmental justice?

First, there is a sound theological basis for Christian concern. For example, we need look no further than the words of Genesis 2:15, where God places humans in God's creation to till and keep it, and the beautiful words of Psalm 104, where praise is given to the sovereign Lord for His creation and providence.

In addition to the covenant God makes in Genesis, God sends Jesus as a way to teach, lead and save God's creation. In Luke 4:18, Jesus reads aloud the scroll of the prophet Isaiah "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor". And in Acts 17:24, Paul speaks of God "who made the world and everything in it".

If we as Christians truly believe those words, and we must believe them, then we cannot ignore environmental damage to the earth or environmental injustice to the people.

Christians, I believe, are clearly called to seek fair treatment of all people, to seek justice particularly for people who are overlooked or oppressed, or who, as EPA has said, may be burdened with a "disproportionate share of the negative consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local and tribal programs and policies".

The Social Principles of our own United Methodist Church provide the following instruction regarding the natural world:

All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life and space are valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect...let us recognize the responsibility of the church and its members to place a high priority on changes in economic, political, social and technological lifestyles to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world leading to a higher quality of life for all of God's creation.

So, then, what can we, as Christians, "do", regarding this problem of environmental injustice?

I would like to offer some suggestions. But before I do that, we might do well to consider how it is that we may be contributing to the inequitable environmental burdens placed on others. Consider the following:

The author Jared Diamond has written that "the average rates at which people consume resources like oil and metals, and produce wastes like plastics and greenhouse gases, are about 32 times higher in North America, Western Europe, Japan and Australia than they are in the developing world. The

population, especially of the developing world is growing, and some people remain fixated on this. They note that the populations of countries like Kenya are growing rapidly, and they say that is a big problem. Yes, it is a problem for Kenya's more than 30 million people, but it's not a problem for the world, because Kenyans consume so little. A real problem for the world is that each of us 300 million Americans consumes as much as 32 Kenyans. With 10 times the population, the United States consumes 320 times more resources than Kenya does.

I submit that we may find it impossible to effectively confront environmental injustice if we do not seriously commit ourselves to making fundamental changes in the way we live, including the way in which we consume the earth's resources.

I believe that there are many, many things that can be done to address the problems of environmental injustice. The United Church of Christ's 2007 update report that I mentioned earlier refers to legal and institutional changes, stating:

Many of the environmental injustice problems that disproportionately affect communities where low-income people and people of color live could be eliminated if current environmental, health, housing, land use and civil rights laws were vigorously enforced in a non-discriminatory way. Many of the environmental problems facing low-income persons and people of color are systemic and will require institutional change including new legislation... [However,] government alone cannot solve these problems, but need the support and assistance of concerned individuals, groups and organizations.

Then there are the technological changes - the innovative approaches and the new ways of doing things. These are obviously too numerous to recount. Thankfully, some very smart people are working on some exciting developments. I note though, that people recognized long ago that we needed to always pursue change. For example, before his death in the early 1940s, the African-American scientist George Washington Carver told us this:

I believe that the great Creator has put ores and oil on this earth to give us a breathing spell. As we exhaust them, we must be prepared to fall back on [the farm], which is God's true storehouse and can never be exhausted. We can learn to synthesize material for every human need from things that grow.

Those now involved in efforts to innovate would do well to heed Carver's words. Of course, as we move into the new world of innovation, we must be careful not to bring along the old world of environmental injustice. (I should mention here the example of workers in developing nations being exposed to toxins as they try to eke out living recycling computers and other electronic devices.)

The legislative actions and technological innovations are very important, and I believe we have no time to lose in making the changes needed to eliminate environmental injustice. And we must always keep environmental justice in mind as we forge ahead to address our energy and resource needs and the current economic crisis.

Perhaps more than anything else, though, we must, I believe, seek to heal our spirits. Author Richard Foster has written a gem of a book that some of you may have read. It's called *Freedom of Simplicity*. In it, Foster describes what he acknowledges is paradoxically a very complex subject: Christian simplicity. I wish that I could fully capture the subject in the remaining few minutes, but that would be impossible. Instead, I will provide just a few comments.

Foster speaks of responding to the demands of life from the divine Center. By divine Center he means God, but not, as he says, an abstract or theoretical God, but a God who is at the heart of life's experiences - whether we are gardening or working or engaged in other activities - each of these should all be viewed as an opportunity for communion with God. Foster fully acknowledges the demands of modern life in America - we feel strain, hurried, even breathless.

But it may be that our problem is that we are plagued by the passion to possess because we may uncritically accept the notion that the good life is found in accumulation-that "more is better". Christian simplicity allows us to see material things for what they are - goods to enhance life, not to oppress

life. People once again become more important than possessions. The witness to simplicity is profoundly rooted in the biblical tradition, and most perfectly exemplified, of course, in the life of Jesus Christ.

Foster hastens to add that he does not view wealth, in and of itself, as a bad thing, but that managing wealth in a manner consistent with Christian simplicity can be exceedingly difficult. He speaks in fact of the ministry of money and describes it as a dangerous undertaking, in part because it can give one a false sense of power. But this ministry of money, Foster adds, can be successful, noting “innumerable servants of Christ who quietly and unpretentiously have been the channel through which huge sums of money have flowed Released from any need to hold on to or control it, they have been able to freely receive and freely give”.

Foster talks about voluntary poverty, and speaks to those not called to give up all material possessions. I certainly place myself in that group. He suggests that we try the following tiny experiment, with genuine profit as God prompts us. We can go through our home, find one possession that we value, and consider "Am I growing too attached to this object? Is it becoming a treasure to me?" Having examined our hearts before the Lord, let us give it away. We must not rationalize by saying “But Lord, after searching my heart I know that it is clearly not a treasure to me, and so I don't need to give it away”. If it is truly not a treasure, we will not mind in the least giving it away; and if it has become our treasure, we will want to give it a way for our soul's sake.

I happened to mention this experiment to a colleague last week. This colleague was already considering giving away a car that had belonged to his deceased father. The recipient would be one of the clerks at the local grocery store who walked to work. I told this colleague that he had to decide whether he considered this car a treasure, but that assuming he did, he should give it away. Not only should he give the car away, he should also spend the \$500 needed to fix the breaks. This was, of course, a very easy decision for me to make.

As I come near to closing, recall that I stated earlier that the beginning of the environmental justice movement is deemed to be about 1982. However, there are those who feel that Martin Luther King, Jr. was on a mission of environmental justice when he went to Memphis in 1968 to stand with the men who collected garbage in that city. I am sure all of us have heard the

hear-wrenching testimony of some of those workers. Several years prior to that fateful Memphis trip, around 1956, Dr. King delivered a sermon in which he imagined the Apostle Paul writing a letter to the Americans, in much the same way that he had written to the Romans. Dr. King, speaking in Paul's voice, said in 1956 that

I understand that you have an economic system in America known as capitalism. Through this economic system you have been able to do wonders. You have become the richest nation in the world, and you have built up the greatest system of production that history has ever known. All of this is marvelous. But Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your capitalism. I will contend that money can be the root of all evil. It can cause one to live a life of gross materialism. I am afraid that many among you are more concerned about making a living than making a life. You are prone to judge the success of your profession by the index of your salary... rather than the quality of your service to humanity.

The misuse of capitalism can also lead to tragic exploitation. This has so often happened in your nation. They tell me that one tenth of one percent of the population controls more than forty percent of the wealth. Oh, America, how often have you taken necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes? If you are to be a truly Christian nation, you must solve this problem.... God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty. God intends for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life, and he has left in this universe "enough to spare" for that purpose.

Conclusion:

Let me conclude by reiterating that environmental justice is fundamentally about nothing more than fairness. It may fall to Christians to lead the way if we are to eliminate the unfair environmental burdens borne by people of

color and people of low income. Finally, if we embrace Christian Simplicity, we can begin to free ourselves from ways of living that result in placing unfair environmental burdens on others.