

Sins of the Parents and Global Warming

Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
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If you believe, as many believers do, in a politically engaged spirituality, and you're trying to save the environment...and if you're an American trying to temper patriotic fervor with a healthy dose of national humility, you're bound at times to feel like quitting. But Jesus never allowed his soul to be conquered by despair, and if it was to those furthest from the seats of power that he said "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world." Who then are we to quit "fighting the good fight of faith?"

—William Sloane Coffin

Ancient Witness: Exodus 34:1-8

In the New Testament there's a story about the disciples bringing a blind man to Jesus. (John 9) And they asked Jesus, "Who sinned that this man became blind?" They asked Jesus this question because he was a Rabbi, a teacher and interpreter of the Jewish Holy Law. And in the Hebrew scriptures, there was something scholars call the deuteronomic principle. This was the principle that if you obeyed God, you will experience blessings and if you deviated from the way of God, the way of compassion and justice, this would bring curses upon you.

So it was a natural thing to ask. They saw blindness as a curse from God. "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" they wanted to know. And Jesus said, Look, a bad thing happening doesn't always mean that it is the result of negative, destructive behavior. It isn't always the result of deviating from the path of God. In the case of the blind man, he experience the curse of the loss of his sight through no fault of his or his parents.

Jesus' comment was a counter argument to always blaming the victim for bad things that happened to them. And it was also an argument against the prosperity gospel, that faithfulness to God always lead to good things and blessings to shower down upon you.

Nevertheless. Sometimes it was true that selfish, greedy, faithless behavior did have consequences. Sometimes sinfulness, patterned of self-destructive behavior, did have results that can last generations. Sometimes the sins of the mothers and fathers are visited upon their children and grandchildren.

For me, the essence of sin is not some willful disobedience of an arbitrary list of rules. Rather, the biblical understanding of sin, to borrow an idea from theologian Marjorie Suchocki, is "unnecessary violence." The life and teaching of Jesus demonstrates that the essence of sin is the unnecessary violation of others. And the violence our progeny will experience is not necessary and avoidable.

Last month, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued it's Sixth Assessment Report that caused quite a stir because of it's bluntness. It reiterated the points of

previous reports with stronger, direct language that global warming is undeniably the result of human activity. By 2050 130 million will face starvation, 350 million will suffer prolonged drought, and 420 million will be exposed to deadly heatwaves. In addition, there will be unprecedented increases in hurricanes and severe weather, flooding and wildfires. Millions upon millions of people will die, the destruction will be immense.

The reports makes it clear that even if humans can somehow tame planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions, primarily carbon dioxide, the worst is yet to come, affecting our children's and grandchildren's lives due to melting glaciers, the warming of the oceans and thawing permafrost set to release tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

The report indicates that we already face irreversible changes; we have already passed tipping points. And likely we will pass more tipping points, which may link together, like toppling dominoes. The future is bleak and horrific for humankind. And it should cause us all to weep and mourn at the immense suffering and loss that is in store for our children and their children. The ancient wisdom of the saints and sages speaks to us now.

And what is needed from our generation is recognition, an end to the denial and deceit. And what is needed from our generation is repentance. This word, repentance, is not about self-flagellation. It is not about seeing oneself as worthless or evil. This word is from the Greek word, *metanoia*, which means "to change course." It is a clear-eyed recognition that as a civilization, we need to change our direction.

Because of our consumption of fossil fuels for generations, we now know that future generations will pay. Because of our inaction, our inability to change our course, our unwillingness to repent, future generations will experience unimaginable suffering. Because we continue along the path of misplaced priorities, spending trillions and trillions of dollars on weapons and war, our children will be cursed.

You know, so often when I touch upon the subject of sin, I can see eyes glaze over. And I think that people check out because sin is often portrayed as rebelliousnesses or a conscious choosing against God that deserves punishment, and sometimes it is. But sin is also outside of ourselves. *Sin is a force that is inflicted upon us, which we tragically inflict upon others, transmitting it from generation to generation, except by the grace of God.* Sin is often something we do not deserve, and guilt is entirely the wrong response.

Johathan Kozol, a wonderful writer and education advocate, wrote some great books, like *Savage Inequalities*, in which is shows how inequality and deprivation affects so many children in this nation, burdening them with wounds that they did not deserve. In his book, *Amazing Grace*, Kozol pointed out that nearly three quarters of the inmates in New York State prisons come from the same seven neighborhoods in New York City. He wrote,

So long as the most vulnerable people in our population are consigned to places that the rest of us will always shun and flee and view with fear, I am afraid that educational denial, medical and economic devastation, and aesthetic degradation will be virtually inevitable...

The sin and iniquity of our society is visited upon innocent children. The punishment of poverty is inflicted upon them. Our text this morning reminds us that the sin of society is passed along to the next generations. You will notice that this story immediately follows the story of the Golden Calf when the people turned away from the ways of God. It says that God “by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children.” In other words, *sin has real implications; it has destructive powers. And God will not shield us from the consequences of iniquity.* God will not even shield our children and grandchildren from the effects.

Let me interject something here. To say that God will not shield us from certain consequences is not to say that God will punish us. The image of God in Jesus counteracts the image of a punishing God who controls everything. Jesus countered the common Jewish belief that suffering was attributed to sin and that sickness was a penalty of disobedience. Sometime sickness comes on its own, he said. The God we experience in Jesus does not dole out rewards and punishments. But the God in Christ simply loves.

Even within the Exodus story of disobedience, there is a disclosure to Moses that God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” And so what we have is an affirmation by God—at a time when God is most deeply offended—that God is deeply committed to the human race. And so while the effects of iniquity may last a few generations, God keeps “steadfast love for thousands of generations, forgiving (or removing) iniquity and transgression.”

And so the episode concludes with Moses interceding to God on behalf of Israel saying, “Although we are a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity, and take us for your inheritance.” And God responds, “I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels... *for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.*”

In other words, despite the fact that sin is a power that overwhelms us and imprisons us, despite the fact that sin is a force that is inflicted upon us and that we tragically inflict upon others, God’s mercy can give us a new beginning. God’s presence gives us a way out of a destructive past. God’s grace can help us do awesome things in spite of the adversity they we did not deserve.