"Center of Things"
A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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On Friday night, we had an exceptional evening of community here at First Parish. Dozens of people from age 7 to over 70 showed up to be together for nearly 3 hours of dancing. Learning who were the best, most energetic dancers might surprise you—let's just say they were not only from the under 20 crowd. The night was an extraordinary expression of community and the joy of being together.

After the music stopped and the lights went up, I was chatting with a group of youth who had attended. One of our high school youth, Emma, laughed saying, "no one would believe it. It was like a weird dream: I was at church, but it was dark. It was *Friday*. There were all these people dancing. And there was old music *and* Uptown Funk. ...And my kindergarten teacher was there!..."

Indeed, I also found the evening to be an almost *unbelievable* event, because there are few places where we can interact with so many people of different ages and generations. Significantly, while there was some ebb and flow of different ages according to which song was playing, throughout the evening there was *always* a mix of ages on that dance floor. While some of us may have families with regular multigenerational gatherings, others of us either live too far away from family to have such gatherings or do not have families that gather in this way. In the rest of our lives, we often live in age-segregated ways.

Different ages and stages of life *do* have unique needs that should be met. But, I for one believe it would be a loss to not also have ways of interacting across the generations. To me, this multigenerational way of seeing the world reflects a deep theological commitment to recognize that we live within an interconnected web of life—a web that spans generations as well as races and nations, species and life forms.

Within the Unitarian Universalist community, our 7th principle calls us to a "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." The kid's version of the 7 principles translates this to "we care for the earth." Indeed, UUs have long been engaged in issues of caring for the earth and environmental justice—including the Unitarian Universalist Rachel Carlson, author of the 1962 book *Silent Spring* whose powerful warning against pesticides helped to foster the modern environmentalist movement. As a religious tradition that embraces the use of reason and the value of education, our ranks have been filled with professional scientists as well as many who others who embrace the importance of science in helping us to understand our world.

And what the scientific community has been telling us for some time now is that human activity has changed the planet we share, the world that we depend upon for life. I remember when this idea was first presented to me. It was January 1998 and I had just enrolled in a class at a local seminary entitled, "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation."

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The professor, Steven Bouma-Prediger, assigned a small book by a then unfamiliar author to me, Bill McKibben. Written in 1994, the book, entitled *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation,* uses the story of Job as a metaphor for our own crisis as a global community.

As a story of cataclysmic loss of all of his family and possessions, the story of Job is often framed as an effort to make sense of unjust suffering. Somewhat understandably, Job bemoans his fate and longs for death. God responds to Job as a voice out of the whirlwind. In one of the most powerful passages in the Hebrew scriptures, God responds with a serious of questions such as:

> "Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain
> and a way for the thunderbolt
> to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
> on the desert, which is empty of human life,
> to make the ground put forth grass?
> (Job 38; #427 in *Singing the Living Tradition*)

Saturated with such images of the natural world, McKibben describes God's speech as "describing a world without people—a world that existed long before people, and that seems to have its own independent meaning."(p36) In this way, God is telling Job to remember that he is not at the center of things. Rather, as McKibben writes, "God's speech to Job is that we are part of the whole order of creation—simply a part." (p37)

Simply a part. Not the center. A *part* of the interdependent web of all existence. Like the Copernican turn that decentered the earth in the cosmos, McKibben suggests that the realization that planetary life is not anthropocentric is "mind-boggling." (p37) Many religions as well as a consumption oriented society and *economy* function with the assumption that human activity is *the* center by which value and usefulness is measured. According the McKibben, God's speech to Job refutes this perspective and relocates Job *within* a shared world of rivers and mountains, deserts and grasses, animals and fish. Actually, Job and all of humanity don't even appear in God's speech. In this description of the wonders of the world, humans don't even rank.

Nearly 20 years later Bill McKibben returned to the theme of Job in a 2010 radio interview with Krista Tippet, entitled "The Moral Math of Climate Change." Yet, this time, McKibben has a slightly different take on the story. This time humanity has a response when God asks challenging questions about the capacity of Job and by extension, all of humanity, to impact the world. McKibben says,

> "So now we spit back at God.
> 'Can you tell the proud waves where to break?
> 'Hell yes! We think we are going to raise the level of the ocean
> a couple of meters in the course of this century.'
> 'Do you know where the storms are kept?'
> 'Yeah, were pushing cyclones one after another

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across the Pacific.'"

Human impact *is* changing the world. In effect, human activity is re-creating the planet. The idea of a so-called *natural* world wild and untouched by human activity is—or indeed already has—changed the air that we breath, the patterns of weather that we experience, and the water we do (or do not) have to use. As McKibben writes in his book *The End of Nature*, "We have built a greenhouse, *a human creation*, where once there bloomed a wild, sweet garden." (p76)

So the world in which we live has changed. However, simply naming that the presence of change is only a part of the relevant equation. Today we are talking about Climate Justice because the impact of climate change has been disproportionate. In his interview with Tippet, McKibben does what he calls "the moral math." Talking about the megacity Dakha, Bangaladesh, which is gravely threatened by cyclones, he says,

> "There's an inverse, almost linear relationship between how much of the problem you caused and how quickly you're feeling the effects. I can remember going to the hospital in Dhaka and looking at this huge ward full of beds, a couple of hundreds beds, and people in every one of them just shivering away. And I remember thinking, "God, is this unfair. These people have done literally nothing to cause this. When the UN tries to measure how much carbon each nation emits, you can't even really get a number for the 140 million people in Bangladesh. It's just like a rounding error in the whole calculation.
>
> You know, the 4 percent of us in this country produce 25 percent of the world's CO2. It's not perfect epidemiology, but the moral math works for me. If there's a hundred beds in that hospital, 25 of them are on us."

Calculating our use of carbon relative to the impact it has upon the planet is an equation of moral math. Such math raises the question of how our carbon footprint impacts planetary life for all number of beings—human, plant, and animal. Such moral math raises questions about justice for all beings in the interdependent web of life.

Last fall I heard Bill McKibben speak at the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature conference. He surprised me. As a public figure and founder of the environmental organization 350.org, I expected a charismatic figure calling us to proverbial arms. Instead, as I listened, I heard a man whom I felt was nearly broken with grief. In part, his invitation to speak was predicated on the 20th anniversary of the publication of his book *The Comforting Whirlwind.* Listening as he spoke of the facts and figures of climate change, I imagined Job recounting his cataclysmic losses. *"All is lost,"* McKibben seemed to be saying. Part of me wanted to run from that loss, that deep grief, and simply walk straight out the back of the massive hall as he spoke.

But, I stayed. And, I am glad I did. Because while he does seem to feel that it is too late to entirely *stop* climate change and its destructive effects, he also told the story of the start of 350.org—a story also available in the Tippet interview. In short, McKibben was at

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Middlebury College in Vermont and gathered a group of 6 interested students to work on issues of climate change. Since there were 7 of us, he explained, we each took a continent and whoever took Antarctica also had to take the Internet. Well, that was 2008. As Krista Tippet narrates, "on October 24, 2009, 350.org called a Planetary Day of Environmental Action and charted over 5,200 events in 181 countries." (*interview*) That's impressive, but they didn't stop there. They continue to organize massive *global* actions in support of policies and practices that will help create a healthier planet.

7 people in less than two years mobilized thousands of people across the planet—working from a college in Vermont. I find this deeply inspiring. There are more such stories. For example, McKibben describes "a story of moral imagination" in which 2 sisters organized more than 15,000 people to march in the streets of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. (interview) I like this phrase—moral imagination—because it recognizes that sometimes action takes not only a sense of moral conviction about what is right or wrong, but also the need for *imagination* to consider how to move beyond the status quo into a different world. Moral imagination reflects the conviction that *another world **is** possible.*

There is plenty wrong with the world today. Climate Justice calls us to attend to issues of planetary scale. The magnitude is intimidating and it's very tempting to slip out of the lecture hall and walk away. Yet, by walking away you may miss the chance to be inspired by the moral imagination of another—or to be surprised by the moral imagination ready to emerge from within yourself.

Rather than walk away, I believe that we are called to engage in the moral math of life on our shared planet. Our place within the interdependent web of life means that we cannot simply walk away. We are already a part; we are already having an impact on the lives of others. Yet, what kind of impact are we making? Undoubtedly, by virtue of our location in a relatively affluent community in the U.S. our impact on climate change is significant . . . even if we drive a Prius and relentlessly recycle. Yes, we can, and I believe we *should*, do what we can to reduce our individual impact for which we are personally responsible. But, I think we must also be attentive to the efforts of moral imagination that are seeking to transform our *shared* world.

Whether we join a Climate March, sign a petition for Divestment, or donate funds to the UUSC's Blue Bucket campaign, there are multiple ways that we *can* engage in works of moral imagination that are seeking to recalculate the unjust impact of climate change.

We are not at the center of things as humans. Rather we are a part of a web of life that in too many ways is suffering. It is also a *wondrous* web of life. It is a web of butterflies and sunsets, bird song and waterfalls. It is a web of plants, animals, and human animals. It is a web of multiple generations of people living together, learning from one another, and, as we saw Friday night, dancing together.

Because no one of us, nor the entire human species of us, is at the center of all, we must carefully consider where we do fit into the whole. Gratefully aware of the ways our own lives depend upon the web of life, I believe that we must ask how our own lives—

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individually and collectively—can best serve this web of life. Our covenant calls us to "unite for worship, community, and service."

Service can look very different for each of us and that's ok. For some of us, service may primarily mean taking good care of the interdependent web of life that is your immediate family—children, siblings, or parents who depend upon your care for the wellbeing of their life. For others, service may primarily mean helping to nurture and sustain this spiritual community by singing in the choir, teaching a RE class, or sitting on a committee. Still others may focus their service on the compassionate care of those in their community—such as a school project that needs a volunteer or an elderly or sick neighbor who needs a ride, visit, or meal. And, for some of us, service will take an activist or political role in an effort to change some of the policies, attitudes, and practices of the world.

While how we serve may vary, the commitment *to* serve unites us. Recognizing that we are a part of this shared world, may we all engage in a moral math that compels us to imaginative actions of many kinds.

So may it be. Amen.

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