"We Belong to the Earth"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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This is a sermon about people, places, and climate. It is a sermon about love and about justice. Most of all it is a sermon about justice for people who love particular places.

In her recent UU World article, Jane Rzepka writes,

> I'll bet there's a place that beckons to you. It can be anywhere, really, ordinary or extraordinary: The corn fields in Indiana. Times Square. The local mountaintop. Antarctica. The pond in Maine from your childhood. The Amazonian jungle. The roof in your apartment building. Anywhere along the ocean. The African savanna. Cafés in San Francisco. A cabin in the Idaho woods. The streets of Provincetown. The backyard in springtime. ("Where There Can be no Words," *UU World,* 2/18/2019)

What place beckons you?

I could pick many different places: the Lake Michigan beach with its fine, soft sand and gentle, freshwater waves; the rolling, rocky alpine meadow of Cloudy Pass in the Cascade Mountains; or the magical twists and turns of the Alum Cave Trail in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

For Rzepka, the places that beckon her are fierce landscapes. She writes, "My dreams are to find the places that are at such a high level of beauty and absurdity that I literally cannot process it. The sublime. The realm of experience beyond the measurable."

For me, I go in search of the grand vista. I look for an expansive view that steals a moment of my breath, silencing me with the vastness before me. Such places humble me—both a reminder of my smallness and an affirmation of the enormity of the ocean, the sky, a mountain range. Such places are, as Rzepka describes, "beyond the measurable."

And yet, sometimes the places that beckon are not wild and vast, but ordinary and familiar. Places like home.

As you may know, home was the subject of my dissertation and my current research. Over the years, I have come to believe a few key things about the idea of home.

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Firstly, I believe we can have many homes. When I head back to Michigan to see family, I still say I am headed home. Home is also where I get my mail and sleep most nights in nearby Lincoln. And, when I'm asked where I live, home can also mean the greater Boston area and even the state of Massachusetts. Home is not singular, but multiple.

Secondly, I think that home is generally understood to be a grounding place, a kind of anchor as well as launching pad. This is the meaning we see in words like homepage and home base. Home is the center of our map from which we orient ourselves to the world.

And so, when we move to a new place, that internal map of home and world must be reconfigured. In time, through the repetition of travel to work and back, to the grocery store and back, and, of course, to First Parish and back, the new location begins to feel like home. In our repetitions of patterns that bring us back again and again, we recreate home.

Still, some places feel more like home than others, don't they? There are some roads that our muscles know by memory as they guide the car around the curves. There are familiar walking paths with hills that we anticipate, adjusting our gait as we move uphill, knowing the view that waits. Or, there is a chair in the corner worn to your shape, your hand, your particular tilt as you relax.

Sometimes our connection to a place can be so deeply held within us that it's hard to imagine separating person and place. For example, my dad's parents, Zane and Virginia lived in the same place on Musson Road in Michigan for nearly seventy years. It is the only home I ever knew for them. Whatever else changed for me or my parents, my grandparents stayed in that same spot—where the only change was in the surrounding farms as crops grew, died, and grew again year after year after year.

Do you have a place with deep connection in your own life? I know that some families have places extending back generations. I envy that kind of rootedness. Since leaving for college, I have lived in six states and moved nearly 30 times. I wonder what it would be like to be rooted for decades in a place as I know some of you are. How does it feel to move along streets that hold so many stories? Or through rooms that hold many layers of memories?

Imagine then what it might mean for a First Nations People to move from places where their people have lived for centuries, even millennia. Having lived in the same place, the culture and very identity of many First Nations Peoples are tightly interwoven with particular places. Moving away is not simply relocation, it is the fracturing of a culture.

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Throughout human history, people have migrated to new places. While sometimes such moves are entirely voluntary, people have also been forced to leave a place when there is no food, clean water, or other means to sustain basic human needs. With the onset of climate change, First Nations and Indigenous Peoples face the possibility of forced displacement as the patterns they have relied upon for many centuries have been disrupted. For example, more intense storms and/or warmer weather have eroded or flooded portions of land inhabited by Indigenous Peoples from the Island of the Pacific to the coasts of Alaska, Washington, and Louisiana.

Last October, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (or UUSC) co-convened a gathering of First Peoples from many places to share stories, experiences, and responses to climate-forced displacement. In one presentation, participants from Kwigillingok People in Alaska recalled:

> "We have two old cemeteries that are no longer being used... Some of the grave sites are lakes and ponds. We used to be situated on a high bluff, and we no longer have that…the old village, it is now maybe two miles out in the ocean."

These are communities who already have experienced loss due to climate-change. For them, the climate is not simply changing, it is already in crises.

In the UUSC report about the First Peoples Convening on Climate-forced Displacement, they recount many such stories about the impact on First Peoples. Notably, such communities have done little to contribute *to* climate change, but they are the ones who are being hit first. From thin ice jeopardizing hunting, to floods that destroy houses and whole villages, to the inundation of salt water into drinking water sources, the changes in weather and the ocean have already dramatically altered how many First People nations live—and where they live. Despite the threats faced by First Peoples, most do not want to leave their land. This is land that has been their home, their culture, their sense of place and identity.

Furthermore, on their land, indigenous people have many international and state rights to self-determination. Relocation then becomes not only an issue of physical and cultural survival, but also political rights. And yet, according to the UUSC report, First Peoples struggle to gain access to funding and discussions about responding to climate change. Challenging this exclusion, participant Angela Johnson of Nelson Lagoon, Alaska, explains:

> We are the start of this. We are the first people that are experiencing all this. It will hit other people some day; they will have to ask us how we adapted. We are going to be the ones that know, because we are the ones who had to go through it first. (p15)

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Her words are difficult to hear—to realize the suffering that is already present and the suffering that is yet to come.

Climate change is never a 'fun' topic. And yet, here we are. The crisis we have heard predicted for decades has already arrived. We are asked to listen to the experiences of First Peoples as they already suffer loss and fundamental challenges to dwelling in the places of their cultural roots.

Significantly, the First Peoples Convening last October not only addressed the enormous challenges faced, but also shared resources and ideas for adapting. There are some problems whose enormity can paralyze people from even attempting a response. Denial can be tempting. But denial is only an option if you're not actively having to reconsider where to live, what to eat, or how to preserve your culture. For people at the front-lines of climate-change, they are already listening, learning, and collaborating on ways to respond and adapt.

What does this mean for us in Greater Boston? Climate change and the crises it will engender will not be something any one of us or even a small group of us will be able to 'solve.' As a global problem, it must be addressed through partnerships between global organizations and those working on the front-lines of crises. This is what the UUSC does. With partnerships stretching to many countries, the UUSC tries to address both critical emergencies and complex problems from climate-forced displacement to Central American refugees. As an organization that began by collaborating to get Jews out of Europe to safety in World War II, the UUSC is not afraid of wading into choppy waters of difficult situations. Furthermore, they have a deep tradition of being in solidarity with local peoples who are both impacted by problems and are working to solve them.

On every Justice Sunday, it is important to remember and support the work of the UUSC and the need for such organizations to address the big and the critical problems. On this particular Justice Sunday, we are asked to specifically reflect on what it means to be in solidarity with First Peoples who are struggling with climate-forced displacement.

For me, understanding this issue begins with a reflection on the love of place. To be a People deeply rooted in a place is to fight to stay in that place. Again and again, I find love to be the most powerful resource in the struggle for a better world. Love seizes hold of what is precious and resists the people, policies, and programs that would cause harm. Love calls for us to seek justice in relationships with others—seeking to be in solidarity with those facing harm, listening and learning from them as we follow their lead.

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As we face an unknown future littered with major problems such as climate change, national politics, racism, economic inequality, sexism, transphobia, and much more, we will be asked again and again to 'do something.' Whatever strategies and solutions, protests and resistance we engage in to work together for a better world, my hope is that we do not lose our connection to a sense of love. We need to fight for something we cherish—or the fight is meaningless.

On this Justice Sunday, as we reflect on the places we love, and the people who are fighting for the places they love, may we recommit to fight for this earth. We belong to the earth and we are the ancestors fighting for those who will or will not be able to live in these places in generations to come. May our love sustain us in the fight.

So, may it be.
Amen.

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