

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
September 4, 2011
Romans 12:9-21

“...we believe in the goodness of earth’s life”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

It was August 19, 2011. We gathered in downtown Boston. Eight people of faith together—four of us in clerical collars, four in street clothes. We met at Copley Square and walked together to the building. We were nervous going up in the elevator—not terribly anxious, just hoping the meeting would go well. There was nervous laughter in the elevator and then the doors opened. We stepped out and the office in front of us had a big Canadian flag next to the sign on the door that said, “Canadian Consulate.”

Moments after settling into the lobby area, a staffperson appeared and said, “Mr. Annable will see you now.” We were ushered into a large, fancy board room, told to be seated, and then, Consul Aaron Annable, head of Political and Economic Relations, entered the room, introduced himself, and shook hands with each one of us.

The group had chosen me to be the first speaker, to set the tone and make clear why we were there, and so I began. I explained that we were part of a group called Religious Witness for the Earth—a national, independent, interfaith network dedicated to creating a society in which human beings live in loving, just and sustainable relationship with one another and with all Creation.

Then I went on to say that we had come to meet with Mr. Annable because we are concerned that Canada is promoting a form of energy that is extremely detrimental to the health of the planet. The production of tar sands (what many in Canada call “oil sands”) is pouring excessive carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, accelerating global warming, poisoning Alberta’s water supplies, and risking the health of its citizens, including Canada’s Native Peoples. I said that we fully understood this was a matter for Canadians to address, but that Canada wants to build a pipeline, the Keystone XL Pipeline, from Alberta through the American Midwest to the Texas coast where the tar sands will be refined into liquid petroleum.

And I indicated that we strongly oppose the construction of that pipeline.

I spoke about how the tar sands are a mixture of sludge, sand, and bitumen (a hardened form of petroleum) and that sending this thick, sludgy soup through an enormous pipeline from Alberta to Texas for refining would disrupt ecosystems, threaten communities, and destroy natural habitats all along the 3,500 mile route.

I also indicated that the tar sands would consume almost more energy to extract, transport and refine than they would yield in energy output, and that tar sands production was Canada's leading source of greenhouse gas emissions. I said that the tar sands were not an answer to America's energy needs and the whole process created more problems than the energy eventually extracted would ever solve.

After I spoke, each member of our delegation took two minutes to say something to Consul Annable.

Rev. Fred Small said:

Every religious tradition forbids theft. Global warming is theft from future generations and the most vulnerable of the earth's populations.

Every religious tradition teaches us to safeguard Creation. Global warming despoils it.

Every religious tradition commands us to temper our desire for material things. Global warming is the consequence of our addiction to consumption.

Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas took out pictures of her grandchildren and pushed them across the table to Consul Annable. "I want to pass on a habitable planet to all those who come after us," she said.

Rev. Christine Elliott spoke about one of the US and Canada's shared natural resources, the Whooping Crane, that hatch near the tar sands in Northern Alberta and migrate right along the proposed pipeline route.

Rev. Reebee Girach said that she hoped when decisions were being made in board rooms such as this one as to whether Canada and the US should go forward and construct the tar sands pipeline, someone at the table would speak for the planet.

Each member of our delegation spoke with care, attention, respect, and honor. That is the word I feel compelled to use, honor. There was a sense of restraint, almost nobility, in the room.

I sat there listening and thinking: we are doing this in such a careful, loving and honorable fashion. We are confronting an enormous problem, a project we completely oppose, with dignity, love, respect and discipline.

Friends, you know that I am not a pastor who steps into this pulpit and speaks week after week about sin. In fact, as you have probably noticed over the years, I use that word sparingly and with great care. But I went to the Canadian Consulate with my clergy colleagues to address what I believe is a sin: building the proposed Keystone KL Pipeline.

I do not talk about sin much... I am cautious about using that word. But I went to confront what I believe is a sin, a crime against nature. And, although I rarely use this language as well, I felt when we entered the board room that God was on our side. I believe that God is on the side of goodness, love, and life, and that we were doing God's work that day.

When I read our Scripture lesson for today from the Book of Romans, I feel that the eight of us, with our witness at the Canadian Consulate, did what Paul was speaking about when he wrote these beautiful words to the early church in Rome two millennia ago...

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Paul is saying that we do not combat evil with evil, we “overcome evil with good.” We are, Paul believes, to behave toward each other as God behaves toward us. This (I think Paul would agree) is active Christianity— in which followers of Jesus transform the world and turn the world's injustice on its head.

Listen to more of Paul's words—they are radical and hard to adhere to and yet central to our practice as Christians:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty... do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

We are called, Paul is telling us, not to turn away from evil, not to ignore evil, not to pretend evil does not exist in the world. Evil exists in the world, evil is real—Paul acknowledges that and I agree. But we must not be overcome by evil, we must overcome evil with good.

We met with Consul Annable for one hour. He listened deeply, and did not agree with anything we said. He countered our points one by one, he defended the Canadians right to extract the tar sands and build the pipeline. But we remained calm and centered, some of us spoke in hushed tones, it was like we were in a sanctuary not a board room. We listened deeply to him and yet we held our ground. We talked about our love of life, and nature, and wilderness, and our need to break our addiction to oil so that we do not destroy the natural world to acquire every last contaminated drop. We listened with the ears of our hearts, we responded from a wellspring of love and graciousness inside us. God was so present in the room. We followed Paul's advice...we held our ground but we outdid one another in showing honor. We were ardent in spirit. We spoke about living in harmony with one another and with God's creation. We were not haughty, and we did not claim to be wiser than we are. We were not overcome by evil, but tried to overcome evil with good. Paul would have been proud.

On the drive home from Boston, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas and I talked about the meeting. God was so there, I said. God was so there, she said. We had not rehearsed our little two minute presentations but they just flowed like we had planned out every word....she said. Amazing what the Spirit can do....I said.

I believe that as people of faith we are called to confront sin and evil. How we would like to turn away, how we would like NOT to be implicated, how we would like to be innocent. But, as the bumpersticker says, "silence is complicity." We are called to confront evil—that is what our brother Jesus did in his time. He confronted the Empire, he befriended the lowly, he blessed the outcasts, he spoke out for justice. And we are called to confront what is evil and unjust in our time.

When reflecting and writing about this passage from the Book of Romans, theologian and seminary professor the Rev. Douglas Webster asks: "Does 'turning the other cheek' mean standing my ground without confronting my brother? Or is it cowardly to evade confrontation? Turning the other cheek," Rev. Webster says, "is not the same as turning a blind eye."

The 8 people of faith who went to the Canadian Consulate did not accuse, we did not condemn the individual we met with, we did not point fingers or become shrill.

We made the board room into a prayer room and we spoke about our abiding love for God's Creation. We talked about being faithful stewards of this good, green earth, and we called on the Canadian government and our own government to do what is right: not what is profitable, not what is tempting, not what is popular, not what is lucrative, but what preserves life, what honors Creation, what saves the environment, what protects the Whooping Cranes as they migrate.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, Paul said, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

How often when we confront injustice do we want to lash out, to get revenge, to strike out, to become strident and self-righteous....how often I have taken that low road in my life, I say with some shame. But as people of faith we are called to take the high road, to model what it means to be a follower of one who confronted injustice with love, who overcame evil with goodness, who tried in all settings to create the kingdom of God on earth.

Eight American men and women, armed only with our convictions and our faith, went to confront the possibility of an enormous evil being done to our planet—to name a planned pipeline project as a crime against nature, a crime against Creation.

Winston Churchill once said, “You can always count on Americans to do the right thing,” then he added, “after having exhausted all other possibilities.”

But as Christians we are called upon to do the right thing from the start, not when all other possibilities are exhausted. Christians are called upon to respond to evil and even to prevent evil from occurring when we see it coming. As we told Consul Annable, it will be far better for the planet if we DO NOT build the pipeline at all, rather than try to dismantle it in the future.

I went to the Canadian Consulate with my clerical collar and my prepared comments written out on index cards. And I went with a sense that God had called me to take this action. What I experienced once there was that we were a small group of believers trying to live the simple instruction found in the Bible: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

What I experienced there was a small group of believers manifesting the very words we all said today in our unison reading at the beginning of our service: “We have faith in One God, one Source of all life. One Ground of the whole earth, with all its creatures. And thus we believe in the goodness of earth's life, in the innate worth of all its dependents, in human partnership in the life of nature.”

When the hour came to a close, the meeting was over and we stood to leave Consul Annable, Rev. Fred Small shook his hand and said, “We know that you, as a public official, cannot tell us how troubled or untroubled you may be by this project. But we hope we have troubled you. We pray for your health and happiness, and loss of sleep.”

Amen.

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