

“Caring for Creation” (29July18)

Jeremiah 4:23-28; Romans 8:18-23; Psalm 96;
ELCA Social Statement*

This Social Statement is a sixth as long as the one on education, but death penalty and racism are shorter. Still, this gets bonus points in my book because it's got to address—by definition—Everything.

This isn't a confineable topic, even compared to the not-so-narrow topics of how society relates to the half the population of one gender, or what to do about wars that take up billions of dollars of our federal budget. Not that those are piddly things and this is frying bigger fish. It's that they're all in the same barrel. By definition, creation means everything that's not the Creator. So it includes fish and barrels and humans of whatever gender doing whatever we do to each other on this little planet amid the inconceivably vast universe and maybe multiverses. All of that in 12 pages of Social Statement.

Remarkable economy, if you ask me. I appreciate lots crammed into little space, though I can't quite manage in this sermon the proportion of this Social Statement to the long ones, because it would be shorter than the mini mini sermons for midweek worship and I'd already be done. So I'd better get going.

I explicitly connect this to other Social Statements so we don't wind up with a sense that this is something separate, that when we talk about creation we mean gardens and forests and giraffes and climate change, but don't as clearly mean farmers and young girls who have to walk farther to haul water and national security and genetics and how we treat people in prisons. But this is all connected. I really appreciate this Social Statement for understanding that. When Pope Francis' environmental encyclical came out in 2015, it made a splash for tying together ecological concerns and human rights. Well, the ELCA has known intersectional ecojustice for a quarter century at least, not only caring for

animals or separating out human needs as if they're extraterrestrial, somehow disconnected to life on this planet.

Though the MCC regularly recognizes such relatedness of God, neighbor, and creation, still I expect the Jeremiah reading felt uncomfortable and kind of bleak. But don't think of it as God's wrath to start. Instead observe consequences to misbehavior and living apart from God's intentions: God wouldn't be very loving if there were no repercussions for how we lived, no possible mournful result, and having license to mistreat others wouldn't do well to fulfill God's intentions, either. When we ignore God, farm fields do indeed dry up and wither. When we attend to God's ways, life flourishes.

At the Capital Biergarten Bible discussion on Wednesday, Kathy Henning said Jeremiah reminded her of the start of *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's groundbreaking 1962 book. Here is an excerpt so you can hear what Kathy meant:

There was a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings, in the midst of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. Even in winter countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow.

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. The doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients.

There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example where had they gone? It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.

No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.

Do you hear the resonance with Jeremiah? Rachel Carson wasn't writing a spiritual fiction about punishment from God. She was describing the

* <http://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Caring-for-Creation>

detrimental effects of our use of pesticides like DDT. Certainly we people of faith would say that God continues the creative work of songs and colors and life and so strongly disfavors the causes of mysterious maladies and sick children or dying chickens, the barrenness and blight that Jeremiah also pictured. The effects of our actions were harming God's good creation. The Social Statement describes this as rebellion against God, which leads to experiencing "disrupted nature [as] a judgment on our unfaithfulness as stewards."

But it doesn't end bleak. Like the Social Statement, Rachel Carson moved from a description of destruction and lack of faith toward life restored, freed from the bondage to decay. Paralleling the glimmer of prophetic hope, where Jeremiah sees all has not been completely destroyed, the vision of *Silent Spring* fostered the turning of culture away from DDT, re-filling spring days in the countryside with song.

The book provoked a revolutionary environmental movement, eventually calling us into things like Earth Day, the Endangered Species Act, the Environmental Protection Agency, and Clean Air and Water Acts. We should remember, much of that was signed under a not-very-eager President Nixon under pressure.

Since then, other cries and other crises have arisen. When the Social Statement was written in 1993, the hole in the ozone was seen as a catastrophic problem. Yet a global agreement meant that what was eating away at our atmosphere to allow in harmful radiation would be banned and the air could begin to heal. God's intention could be restored. Destruction was not the end.

Again, in 1993, global warming was seen on the same level as the ozone hole. We managed to address one problem with a global agreement, and needed another revolution on the scale of prohibiting chemical corporations to profit from DDT, but in climate change have chipped away at the edges. We read the—not bleak but urgent—words in our Confession that "action to counter degradation, *especially within this decade*, is essential," but two and a half times that span has

passed and we are still needing to compel ourselves and others to the essential action.

A revolution producing global agreement to preserve the life of vulnerable humans and prevent the extinction of thousands of species is certainly not easy. As with the other Social Statements, that's recognized here. But our faith is never about simple solutions to small potatoes problems. This is always big stuff, life-and-death, enormous tragic wrongs countered with even more powerful love, destructive evils versus creative life, and all founded in our God who is "deeply, mysteriously, and unceasingly involved."

Though facing similarly weighty and fretful ethical dilemmas as other Social Statements, this one may even more recognize despair, the sense that we can't make a difference, that the crisis is too big, that the resolution is too far off.

Yet we are people of hope. The creation waits for us, groaning with eager longing. It is not only we who have faith, but the stones crying out, and dogs going into the kingdom of heaven, and valleys waiting to bloom and rejoice, and the trees to clap their hands, and everything in the seas with their coral reefs acidifying. They wait in hope, a glorious hope that may be unseen but will not disappoint.

And so we act. We act, Romans reminds us, even through suffering.

Now, I don't know if Peter Bakken would say it was suffering to help write this social statement, but it certainly has helped bring important actions to birth. Rachel Carson faced loads of ostracism and even threats for her work. President Nixon probably had some of his own disgruntled suffering. For me, I can't say that my biking to reduce fossil fuel use has been too much suffering this past week, with such pleasant summer days. It was no great struggle to be out with Kids in the Garden this week, and only slightly more to take an afternoon for a Wisconsin Interfaith Power & Light meeting. My decision not to eat much meat doesn't feel fitting for a metaphor of labor pains. Neither is my suffering of choosing to act analogous with those who suffer from inaction, whose homes are inundated by hurricanes or

wildfires, whose song goes silent as they are overrun by a greedy economy, whose bodies are poisoned to the confusion of doctors or veterinarians or biologists.

But I do trust my kinship with all of these, knowing their need from sound science, trusting our relationship through Christ our sibling, with compassion breathed into us anew by the life-giving Spirit that compels our concern and energizes our action, the creative possibilities that stretch in front of us, founded by and resulting in God's goodness, our true and vital source and goal, our sure home. That is the end.

We heard in the Social Statement's conclusion: "The prospect of doing too little too late leads many people to despair. But as people of faith, captives of hope, and vehicles of God's promise, we face the crisis. We claim the promise." Vehicles of promise. That sounds like the most environmentally-sensitive vehicle there could be. And I rejoice in being aboard with you.