



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Climate Change and Love of Neighbor by Jeanne Finley



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A recent report released by an international panel of scientists addresses the consequences of climate change in the next two decades. What consequences does the report highlight, and how will they affect people throughout the world? How does Jesus' call to love our neighbor guide the ways we respond to climate change?

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Touching a Spider Web

In his Pulitzer prize-winning novel *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren uses a striking image to highlight the interconnected nature of our lives: "The world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter."

We're impacted by decisions other people have made, and conversely, our actions can change others' lives for good or ill. If you touch a spider web in one place, other parts of it move. This image also applies to the critical problem of global climate change.

A recent report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) describes the dire and immediate consequences of additional global warming beyond that which has happened since the beginning of the 20th century. The spider web image helps us to see how human actions in one part of the world can have negative consequences far beyond that region. Such insight encourages our reflection on how the Christian responsibility to love neighbor applies to addressing climate change.

REFLECT:

- What are some other images or illustrations that help you understand the way in which all of humanity is connected?
- If you've heard about this report on climate change, what do you know about it?

The IPCC Report: What Consequences Does It Highlight?

According to an October 2018 *New York Times* article, the earth has warmed 1 degree Celsius (1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) since 1900. The IPCC report describes the effects of warming another .5 to 1 degree Celsius. In short, the effects could threaten the lives of tens of millions of people globally through water shortages, extreme heat waves, and coastal flooding. In addition, these increases could destroy the earth's coral reefs and all Arctic summer sea ice, thus resulting in greater habitat losses for polar bears, sea birds, seals, and whales. Hundreds of millions of people worldwide would be exposed to extreme drought, especially in the Mediterranean region. An increase of 2 degrees Celsius would expose 32 to 80 million people worldwide to sea level rise, an especially significant impact for small island nations. Projected temperature increases will especially affect crop yields in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central and South America.

The IPCC calls these consequences real and present dangers. Because the world's nations haven't acted in a timely manner, a 1.5-degree increase is expected to happen between 2030 and 2052. This is likely the best we can hope for. It would take a rapid, massive, and, to be honest, unlikely global effort to stop all fossil fuel emission and to remove enough carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to avoid this outcome. The more likely outcome is that the earth's temperature will rise by at least 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) before the end of the century.

The IPCC report makes it clear that even small increases in warming can have calamitous effects on both human beings and natural ecosystems. Many coral reefs are likely to die off at the 1.5-degree threshold and could vanish entirely with a 2-degree increase. Even at 1.5 degrees, the vast ice sheets on top of Greenland and West Antarctica could destabilize enough to cause significant sea level rise. The report also warns that

small island nations and many African countries could experience heat waves, crop failures, and a dramatic increase in malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

The effects of this rise in temperature aren't uniform around the earth, and neither is the responsibility. The Arctic and other regions will heat up much faster. The Mediterranean and the Middle East could have a significant drop in water availability. These changes could make for huge problems in regions that already have water scarcity issues along with political instability. The rise in temperature also won't have uniform effects on extreme weather events such as powerful storms and severe heat waves.

According to a May 2018 *Washington Post* article, the northern hemisphere, which is the location of 13 of the 15 largest countries in the world measured by GDP (gross domestic product), is responsible for a much larger portion of greenhouse gas emissions than the southern hemisphere; but the whole world will heat up, not just the northern hemisphere. Tropical countries, which are often poorer, will suffer the most from global warming. This disproportionality is a major reason why wealthy countries need to understand how their actions affect other nations around the globe and act accordingly.

REFLECT:

- Even though the IPCC report clearly indicates that the nations of the world need to take immediate action to prevent dire consequences, many people, even policy makers, don't take this report seriously. Why do you think that is so?
- How does the metaphor of the spider web help us grasp the disproportionality of the situation?

Climate Change and Neighbor Love

Genny Rowley is a hospital chaplain, board member of Utah Interfaith Power & Light, and a Green-Faith Fellow. Discussing the interconnected nature of the environment in a *Christian Feminism Today* article, she says, "If an interconnected ecological

network sustains our lives in this world, we are inevitably in relationship with all parts of that living web. We are ecological and planetary neighbors, in spite of species difference.”

She suggests an expansion of our concepts of neighbor both in “*how* we understand neighbor love, and *who* we understand our neighbors to be.” She continues, “If our relational metaphor [is] that of an interconnected web, . . . our relationship with the natural world [will] then need to be characterized by respectful engagement instead of taken-for-granted control.”

Scientific findings about the nature of the universe testify to the interconnectedness of God’s creation and also speak to the reality of human dependence on air, land, and water for health, well-being, and survival. Theologians and religious leaders concerned about the future of the planet recognize that we’re all part of the web of life.

Katharine Jefferts Schori, formerly the presiding bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church in the United States, is quoted in a recent *Anglican Theological Review* article as saying, “We are part of the whole; we’re not in charge of the whole, and whatever our socioeconomic status, we cannot avoid the destruction that results from misusing the whole. The choice is ours—we can continue the self-centered death spiral, or we can encourage the death of self-centeredness within us and our communities, and learn to live far more abundantly for the health and wholeness of the entire creation.”

REFLECT:

- How can we expand our understanding of neighborly love?
- How can we expand our notion of who our country’s neighbors are?
- How can we practically show our neighbors that we care about their long-term ability to survive and thrive?

The Second Great Commandment

Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and writer, offers a surprising interpretation of the second Great Commandment in an article published on the Center for Action and Contemplation website. In her view, this commandment focuses on our connectedness with other people and God through love. She begins with a reflection on **John 15** where Jesus says, “I am the vine; you [plural] are the branches” (**verse 5**). Moments later, Jesus says, “As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love” (**verse 9**). Pointing out that Jesus sees himself as one with the Father (**John 10:30**), Bourgeault reads the parable of the vine and the branches as a mutual life of love. She says, “We flow into God—and God into us—because it is the nature of love to flow. And as we give ourselves into one another in this fashion, the vine gives life and coherence to the branch while the branch makes visible what the vine is.”

With this understanding of how we’re connected, Bourgeault reads the second Great Commandment, “*You will love your neighbor as yourself*” (**Mark 12:31**), and says, “We almost always hear that wrong,” hearing *as much as* instead of *as*. There’s no *as much as* in it. The neighbor is “a continuation of your very own being. It’s a complete seeing that your neighbor is you. There are not two individuals out there, one seeking to better herself [or himself] at the price of the other, or to extend charity to the other; there are simply two cells of the one great Life.”

REFLECT:

- What does the parable of the vine and the branches say to you about loving our neighbors?
- What does Cynthia Bourgeault mean when she says the neighbor is “a continuation of your very own being”?

Small Island Nations

“Small island nations are increasingly imperiled by larger nations that are emitting most of the greenhouse gases, forcing changes in the global climate, and causing catastrophic ecological and social problems,” writes Jame Schaefer in a January 2018 article for *Anglican Theological Review*. Schaefer teaches at Marquette University in Milwaukee, where she connects the natural sciences with theology. She continues, “Among the most adversely affected people are islanders who are suffering immense health, economic, and cultural injustices that should be addressed at all levels of governance.” These island nations, with a combined population of about 65 million people, are predominately in the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Caribbean Sea. Together, they emit only one percent of greenhouse gases, yet they suffer disproportionately from the gases that the 99 percent of other nations are emitting.

Climate change has major effects on these nations. These effects include (1) rising sea levels from melting snowpack, glaciers, and sea ice; (2) warming of the ocean water, which puts coastal communities at risks; (3) contamination of fresh water by acidic ocean water; (4) loss of biological diversity and potable water; (5) increased health risks and susceptibility to diseases; (6) economic devastation; and (7) increases in climate refugees.

Schaefer points out that the injustices done to these island nations are compounded by the disproportionality of greenhouse gas emissions, the oppression of a tiny minority by a huge majority, and the fact that the islanders are poor and, as a result, the least able to adapt.

REFLECT:

- How does our Christian faith inform the way faith leaders advocate on behalf of these nations?
- How does our responsibility to love our neighbor inform our response to this situation?

Tangier Island

Scientists from the US Army Corps of Engineers predict that before 2045, climate change will force residents to leave the small island community of Tangier, Virginia. This historic location has strong United Methodist roots and is located in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. Most of its 450 inhabitants make their living from commercial fishing, especially for blue crab, as their ancestors have for generations. About 87 percent of the town’s population voted for Donald Trump, and many also share his doubts about climate change. After CNN ran a story about how rising seas are threatening the island, Trump reportedly assured the mayor that Tangier will be around for “hundreds more” years.

FAITHLINK writer Alex Joyner serves as the United Methodist district superintendent for the area that includes Tangier. When I asked him about the strong United Methodist heritage of the island, he replied, “The congregation at Swain Memorial UMC on Tangier is more than a historic outpost of Methodism. It is also a place where some of the practices of early Methodism, like class meetings, continue and provide a source of vitality and accountability that I would wish for every church. From camp meetings to revivals, when the Spirit has moved to produce great spiritual fervor in this marginal place, it sparks similar outbreaks elsewhere. I worry that the vulnerability of this community threatens one of our greatest spiritual incubators!”

REFLECT:

- Imagine yourself as a resident of Tangier. How would you feel about predictions of its demise?
- Imagine yourself in Alex Joyner’s role in relationship to Tangier. What concerns would you have about the island?

Helpful Links

- In the “Daily Meditations” from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Franciscan priest Richard Rohr offers a number of reflections on climate change and the interconnectedness of human beings with one another, the earth, and all living beings. In the center’s search engine at www.cac.org, enter terms such as “climate change” and “connection.”
- Learn more about the recent IPCC report on climate change: <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>
- Caretakers of God’s Creation is a grassroots community of United Methodists who believe that a relationship with God’s creation and a ministry of caring for and healing the earth are integral to what it means to be a Christian and a United Methodist: <https://www.umcccreationcare.org/>
- Environmental justice is a part of the work of the General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church: <https://www.umcjustice.org/what-we-care-about/environmental-justice>
- *New York Times* article “Why Half a Degree of Global Warming Is a Big Deal,” October 7, 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/07/climate/ipcc-report-half-degree.html>
- *Washington Post* article about the people who will be most hurt by climate swings, May 2, 2018: <http://tiny.cc/c8qa2y>
- Cynthia Bourgeault’s article “One with God, One with Each Other,” April 12, 2017: <https://cac.org/one-with-god-one-with-each-other-2017-04-12/>
- Genny Rowley’s article “Climate Change and Neighbor Love,” published in 2014: <https://ewc.com/climate-change-neighbor-love/>

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Next Week in FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Sex Recession

by Kira Austin-Young

The cover story in the December issue of *The Atlantic* indicates that young people are having less sex than previous generations. What are the reasons behind this trend? What does this mean for Christians and our views on sexual ethics?

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Opening Prayer

Loving Creator, as we consider the effects and consequences of climate change, help us to see the many ways our lives are connected to the lives and well-being of people, plants, and animals the world over. Help us to recognize how our decisions and actions, corporate and individual, impact the lives of our neighbors near and far; in Christ's name. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Open the session by considering the question that Jesus answered with the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:29: "Who is my neighbor?" Here are some questions to aid discussion:
 - » Are there geographic, cultural, economic, ethnic, or political boundaries that influence whom I regard as neighbor? If so, why are they in place?
 - » Does my neighbor have to be human? Should animals, plants, or the earth itself be regarded as my neighbor?
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

- **Offer a Book Study.** Consider leading your group in a study of *Love in a Time of Climate Change: Honoring Creation, Establishing Justice*, by Sharon Delgado (Fortress Press, 2017). Delgado is an ordained United Methodist minister, author, speaker, and activist. The book can be purchased at <https://www.cokesbury.com/product/9781506418858/love-in-a-time-of-climate-change/>.
- **Learn More About Tangier Island.** Share these videos about Tangier Island. On October 10, *PBS Newshour* presented this nine-minute clip in which journalist John Yang talks with Earl Swift, author of *Chesapeake Requiem: A Year with the Watermen of Vanishing Tangier Island*, at <https://www.pbs.org/video/losing-ground-1539039380/>. See another interview with Earl Swift from WAMC/Northeast Public Radio at <http://www.wamc.org/post/year-watermen-vanishing-tangier-island>.

Closing Prayer

O God of the universe, help us to regard the earth and the natural systems that sustain our lives as a shared gift to all your creatures, not a private possession. Give us the wisdom and courage to expand our understanding of who our neighbors are and how to love them through actions for the healing of your creation. Amen.