

“An Environment of Grace”
Luke 18:9-17
Andrew Foster Connors
20th Sunday after Pentecost
October 27, 2019

If you're not offended by what Jesus is saying here, you should be. I know we've come to think of Pharisees as hypocrites and tax collectors as maligned and even oppressed. But tax collectors were the worst kind of people – they were sort like individual tax collection agencies enfolded in a person. Tax collectors purchased from their Roman occupying power the right to collect money on their own people with some pretty nefarious tactics. They took a hefty personal cut from those taxes and so became rich off the backs of their own people living under an oppressive imperial regime. Jesus is saying, the people who are clearly good by our most objective standards are more susceptible to an arrogant self-righteousness than the worst kinds of people who throw themselves at the mercy of God. And God celebrates more the turning of those terrible, but repentant people to our own do-gooding.

Retelling this story on this last Sunday in our environmental stewardship series, in light of our climate crisis, I'd suggest we hear it this way. Two people went to pray to God, one an exceptional environmental steward and the other a Republican Senator with a League of Conservation voting record of 1%.¹ The environmental steward, standing by herself, was praying, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: litterers, oil industry polluters, 1%ers, libertarians, or even like this Republican Senator. I eat vegan; I give monthly to NPR, Amnesty International, and Greenpeace.' But the Republican Senator with the 1% environmental voting record, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, Jesus said, this person went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

If that's not offensive, I don't know what is. It's offensive because the young people whose futures are most impacted by the failure of the adults to lead are not talking about grace. They are demanding action. "You are failing us," Greta Thunberg told the UN. "But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you."

It's offensive because the Republican Party is now culpable for the ongoing warming of our planet. As Nathaniel Rich, author of *Losing Earth: A Recent History* notes, the Republican Party is the only major political party in the world that has a position that is to the right of the oil industry itself. Exxon doesn't even dispute climate change at this point. Yet the Republican Party does.²

¹ There are currently two Senators, both Republicans with a lifetime rating of 1%.

² Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: A Recent History*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019). See also the podcast interview on *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, April 8,

And it's offensive because there is no question at this point about the reality of global climate change and the reality of the impacts it is having and will have on the environment. This is not a yes or no question. It is one of degree and speed.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently released a report warning of the critical need to lower global climate emissions and outlining predictions as to what is likely to happen in the static model in which no changes are made. Under this "business as usual" scenario, some climate scientists estimate that temperatures would rise by over 4 degrees Celsius or more by the end of the century.³

Sea level would rise from 22 to as much as 35 feet meaning much less land that is habitable for humans. The eventual melting of both polar ice caps, which scientists predict is inevitable at the current rate of warming, would result in a sea level rise of more than 120 feet. The 145 million people living at altitudes within 3 feet of sea level could be displaced by the end of the century, more than 1 million Florida homes are at risk of flooding by 2100, and many major coastal cities could be at least partially under water. A 3-foot sea level rise would flood 20% of the landmass of Bangladesh, displacing about 30 million people. There would be widespread drought as there could be a 40% gap between global water demand and reliable water supply by 2030. Diseases such as malaria and dengue fever will spike, mass migrations and other issues could result in widespread instability in regional governments as well as severe armed conflicts. One of every six species on earth could be extinct.⁴

And the people who are taking us down this oppressive road, Jesus suggests, could be exalted over those who are trying to save us from ourselves? Offensive!

But the way I've always heard this story is a kind of admonition toward humility. Humility in service of some kind of post-life, heavenly healing. All those people who are destroying our planet have to do, this old interpretation goes, is say "sorry" to God and they won't have to be held accountable. They'll get their ticket to heaven. But I wonder if this story from Jesus doesn't have more than just truth about our own sense of self-righteousness. And I wonder if the offensive nature of God's grace might be about more than just what happens to us after we die. I wonder if it actually contains clues for the healing of the planet as well.

Because the worse our planet becomes the more desperate we all are in need of a *political solution* to address our problem. Individual efforts are good but not enough. And we'll never get a political solution without a *foundational belief in the possibility that the persons we most love to hate are loved just as deeply by God and*

2019,

<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=710992579>.

³ Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate,
<https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/home/>.

⁴ "Climate crisis disasters that could get worse if we don't do anything,"

USA Today, October 10, 2019,

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/10/10/climate-crisis-disasters-that-could-get-worse/40285151/>.

are as capable as anyone else of change. In fact, the more we seek to flaunt our own credentials of goodness, like bumper stickers on the backsides of our Priuses, the less possibility we have of connecting to the people in our families, our communities, our churches, and our nation who think differently than we do yet nonetheless, I have to believe, do not want to see our lands destroyed.

This is hard news because I like a good self-righteous romp as much as anyone. A good finger pointing. And yet, Jesus, argues, that doesn't lead to any kind of healing for anyone. It helps for both Democrats and Republicans among us to remember that the Republican Party hasn't always been so anti-environment. Republican Theodore Roosevelt established the U.S. Forest Service and many national parks, Republican Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency and enacted the Clean Air Act, and Republican George H.W. Bush implemented measures to combat urban smog and acid rain by improving the Clean Air Act.

A shift happened in the late '80s and early '90s when a few scientists who published essays calling climate change into question were paid about \$2000 per essay, funded by the oil industry. Those essays were then fed to the parts of our media that are so eager for "pro and con" stories that they created a "two sides of the issue" false dichotomy which is exactly what the powerful monied interests wanted. And the HW Bush administration that had been climate-conscious caved to those interests. Fed by a steady dose of talk radio many voters in our country bought into this narrative at our own peril.⁵

But the truth remains – prior to 1989, climate protection policies were not particularly partisan in our country – which means they don't have to be partisan now or tomorrow. At the same time, our political environment is likely to get more divided, not less. As more and more young people move to the cities on the two coasts, urban areas are going to get more populous and more liberal. Rural areas are going to lose population and get more conservative. There is no way to bridge these divides without people committed to bridging these divides. And there is no way to bridge a divide if you start with the assumption that people of a different party than you are intrinsically bad people who don't care about our earth, or our lands, or the wellbeing of their grandchildren or the children of others.

Note that Jesus does not say that the past actions of the tax collector are good or righteous. He does not say that fasting and giving and sharing undertaken by the Pharisee are bad. No, he says, rather, that God is always open to a change of heart. God is always ready to love and to forgive. God is always ready to work with people who know that they need God's love and forgiveness and power in our lives in order to be made whole.

Which makes me wonder if more attention ought to be paid to those within the Republican Party who are right now advocating for a different way. People like Rep. Frances Rooney, whose Florida district is already being affected by changes in the climate, who wrote recently "if we want to show America that we're the party of the future, then it's time for all Republicans to return to their roots as champions of

⁵ See Nathaniel Rich on *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=710992579>.

our environment.”⁶ Or more attention paid to some of the 77% of Republicans under age of 39 who say that climate change is a serious threat that must be addressed by both parties. Or to people like Katharine Hayhoe, a director of the Climate Science Center at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, who is also a conservative evangelical Christian. Like an Old Testament prophet, or an evangelical circuit rider, she goes around convincing fellow evangelicals of the need to understand the consequences of all of our actions in relationship to climate change, building a following on social media where her TED talk on climate has racked up 1.7 million views.⁷ It’s hard work bridging these divides, but we don’t have a lot of alternatives.

This past week I was a part of a national community organizing training hosted by NEXT Church and the Metro Industrial Areas Foundation here in Baltimore. By Tuesday, the entire training had erupted in hurt, anger, and recriminations. Accusations of the most painful kind around involving arrogance, not listening, making assumptions, and disrespect. And all of this intertwined in complex ways around race, gender, age, and sexual orientation. At one point, Rachel Brooks, BUILD’s senior organizer and the organizer for our church stood up in the chapel and said, “This is hard. It’s hard to build relationships that cross all the lines that we all embody here. I’m not sure I know how to do it. I’m not sure if we can do it. But here’s what I do know. Unless we figure it out, we lose. Unless we figure out how to relate to each other, we lose.” She’s right. I would only add that unless we figure it out, all of creation loses, too.

I think Jesus is offering us a way. It’s a difficult way. An offensive way that calls us, in the face of oppression that is real, to stay open to the possibility that our enemies could become our friends. Not to soften our demands for justice. But to imagine that there might be more to our enemies than we thought was possible. To nurture an environment of grace. And the only way to do that is to accept your own reality – my own reality – that none of us can ever become righteous without the intervention of God. That in the grace of God there might be more to us than we ever thought was possible. That our greatest identity, is not our party labels, our neighborhood affiliations, our racial designations created to elevate some of us at the expense of others, or our disability status, but our status of children of God. Loved by God in all of our faults, all of our failings and all of our possibility. A designation that we receive not by our strivings but as a gift from God. Like the land

⁶ Rep. Frances Rooney, “I’m a Conservative Republican. Climate Change is Real,” *Politico*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/agenda/story/2019/09/11/climate-change-conservative-republicans-000955>.

⁷ “One of America’s top climate scientists is an evangelical Christian. She’s on a mission to persuade skeptics,” *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/one-of-americas-top-climate-scientists-is-an-evangelical-christian-shes-on-a-mission-to-convert-skeptics/2019/07/12/9018094c-8d2a-11e9-adf3-f70f78c156e8_story.html.

itself, God wants to give us that kind of environment of grace. Not just the land restored, but our ability to see a reflection of the divine in each other. It is up to us to steward it.