

Season of Creation  
15th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)

**WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER!**  
Lou Poulain, Licensed Lay Preacher

Look at the cover of today's bulletin. Three years ago yesterday, September 9, 2020, was "the day the sky was orange."

If you were here in the area that day, I suspect you remember it well. I certainly do. I woke up that morning with an uneasy feeling that something was wrong, off. When I got to the kitchen to start the coffee the light through our skylight was weird. I pulled back the curtains and froze in shock. The entire sky looked as if I was peering through a piece of amber.

How did you feel when you first saw the sky that morning? I was frightened. I quickly opened my phone and logged into the news app, to find articles popping up about smoke from wildfires very high in the atmosphere. My mind raced.... Are we safe? Is this dangerous? How long will it last? .... When will things return to normal? ... What is "normal"? Are we living into a new "normal"? And what does that mean?

Last week, Pastor Salying talked about loving the creation, and the pain that often accompanies that love, which that is borne out of compassion for the creation.

Today I want to talk about how we must respond to the climate crisis that threatens God's creation, and all the creatures therein, including ourselves. I will try to use today's Gospel reading as a template for that discussion.

The gospel reading today is very interesting. This is the only text in all the four gospels where we hear Jesus address issues specifically about life in "the church." This is interesting for a number of reasons, beginning with the fact that Jesus refers to the "*ekklesia*" (the Greek word translated "church" that means literally "the assembly gathered.") that assembly - that church — did not yet exist. But clearly, Jesus sights were set on the health and strength of the assemblies of believers that would eventually come to be.

Much of the Gospel according to Matthew articulates a well developed ethic for living faithfully. This ethic comes to life in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: How we are to pray; How we are to live into the spirit of the Law, and not merely the letter of the Law; How we are to go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, and how we are to love and pray for those who oppose us.

Today's Gospel text speaks directly to how we live within the church, and by living this way maintain the integrity of the assembly. I don't mean for that to be obscure and esoteric! So let me reframe a bit: The church, the assembly, is a social reality. We are,

and have always been a society, and actually a society of societies. Simply put, as a gathering of people, we are subject to differences, disagreements, conflicts. Jesus is speaking to a process to help the church thrive, and not disintegrate.

Jesus outlines a healthy process for dealing with conflict. He speaks concretely of situations where one member feels another has “sinned” against them. The notion of a “healthy process” begs the question of what are “unhealthy” processes. Here is a non-comprehensive list of a few of those unhealthy processes:

- The aggrieved party cuts the opponent out and severs all contact.
- The aggrieved party gossips and denigrates the opponent..
- The aggrieved party withholds forgiveness and bears a grudge against the opponent.
- The aggrieved party builds a coalition to share the grievance.
- The aggrieved party attacks the opponent’s character.
- The aggrieved party builds and elaborates a biased and inaccurate narrative about the grievance.
- The aggrieved party scapegoats the opponent as “the root of all evil and source of all problems.”

I’m not making this up. This is how people often deal with conflict. I suggest It explains much of what we now think of as “the culture wars.”

Jesus’ approach is radically different. He says here that if one has a conflict, they are to go to the other in private and talk out the issues. As Jesus says, “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.”

If the issues aren’t resolved, the next step is to bring witnesses, and again, talk it out. If the other party can’t or won’t listen, the next step Jesus says, is to “tell it to the church.”

Finally, if the other party can’t, or won’t listen even to the church, “they are to be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This sounds harsh like excommunication or shunning, but I believe that our model for everything is always Jesus. How did Jesus deal with the Gentiles and tax collectors? He healed them, and associated with them. This is a call to renew our efforts to proclaim the life-giving and healing gospel message to that party anew, and always be ready to reconcile.

That is a spiritually and socially healthy process. It lovingly and honestly holds the other party to account for what has transpired. The assembly stands ready to forgive, reconcile and reincorporate the other party, and when reconciliation efforts fail, the assembly grieves the loss.

For a second, hold Jesus’ model of healthy conflict resolution up in contrast to unhealthy processes. This healthy model, when applied to the legal system is referred to as *restorative justice*.

Can we adopt this healthy model of conflict resolution to the climate crisis that threatens God's creation?

I want to start that discussion by revisiting the wisdom of Pope Francis, as we heard this morning:

“...The world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships. This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfillment. The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures.”

That is the unifying principle, for our relationship to creation, and for the social order. We exist in, a part of, and integral to, the whole of creation. This is the religious concept of the environment. We are a part of creation, The next question is what is our religious responsibility to God's creation?

Bottom line: This is an issue of justice, which must include reciprocity and accountability and it is a social issue.

One thing we should have certainly learned in this pandemic era is to not take our physical health for granted, and to **not** ignore symptoms. But denial is a powerful psychological force. We are tempted to think, “If I ignore it, it will go away.” ... maybe. Denial can kill.

What is happening to creation is **not** akin to a case of the common cold, which will, probably, just go away. The month prior to the orange sky day was horrible. Fires blazed, and merged, and blazed some more. Several fires in the Santa Cruz Mountains merged into what became known as the “CZU Complex Fire” which raged through the canyons and across the ridges of our local mountains for weeks, finally racing through, and burning out 95% of Big Basin State Park. The devastation was so extensive, it was 18 months before Route 238 through Big Basin was reopened. Last year, Margo and I took a drive to see how bad it was. It was heartbreaking for us, who had hiked, camped and picnicked in Big Basin too many times to count.

Toward Thanksgiving 2020, while fire danger alerts were still being raised due to dry winds in the North Bay, the head of CalFire stated during an interview on TV that “There used to be what we called fire seasons. Now we simply designate fire years.”

These are clear warning signs. And those warning signs are everywhere. Things are changing rapidly, and the creation is in trouble:

Our political and social inertia is grounded in denial. There are some, I am sure, who in ignorance believe that nothing has really changed. Others perceive themselves to be “losers” in the political struggle, feeling burdened with the cost of fixing problems they do not believe they share responsibility for. Many many more deny, but their denial is cynical and dishonest. Lack of governmental action, justified by way of denial, lies and distortions, and the maddening “culture wars” approach presents a seemingly insurmountable barrier to applying a principled healthy approach to problem solving.

But we must, or we will be, contrary to our best intentions, more a part of the problem than part of the solution.

We will always need the prophetic voices, such as Greta Thunberg. We do need to confront the inertia, the mis-information and, worse, the disinformation. We need to hold one another to account. But we need to do so in a way that recognizes our shared humanity. All of us are, indeed, fellow creatures. We are all in this together. So, as painful as it may be, we must be willing to listen respectfully, and share our own perspectives with the same respect, even if we are speaking truth to closed ears and minds.

Holding others to account should begin with us holding ourselves to account. What choices am I making to live responsibly and minimize my impact on God creation?

Creation is in trouble. Time is short. We must, all of us, accept a share of responsibility, learn, avoid denial, pray, and take action. We cannot afford to give up.

Amen