

## Through the Lens of Scripture

### Reflections on Green Faith: Environmental Justice

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*The Rev. Canon Dr. Marilyn Cornwell, Rector*

*Church of the Ascension, Seattle, WA*

**Let justice roll down like a mighty river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.** —Amos 5:24

The theological foundation for human compassionate action for environmental justice is God's righteousness. As Christian theologian Jaroslav Pelican noted, the English words "justice" and "righteousness" derive from a single word in Latin —*justitia*—and there is one word for both in Greek and Hebrew. There is an abiding connection between justice and righteousness: the moral law of God—required *righteousness*—and the just operation of the law of man—*justice*. Both are *justitia*.

From the Christian point of view, environmental *justitia* is integrally related to Jesus' operating commandment of neighbor-love. Environmental justice asserts that the impacts of environmental degradation (such as pollution) should not fall unfairly on any human group, whether in our own backyard or a distant country. Environmental justice links social/economic justice—meeting the basic needs for the well-being of all God's people, especially the most vulnerable—with care for the environment on which socio-economic justice depends. Environmental justice includes challenging the abuse of power which results in the suffering of the vulnerable due to the effects of environmental damage caused by the thoughtlessness and/or greed of others.

Intentional and unintentional indifference of humankind to the demands of the right relationships of *justitia* with our neighbors and our environment (God's creation) is, in effect, denial of the ever-flowing river of God's *justitia*, God's grace and God's love for all.

A few weeks ago my husband and I went to Seattle First Baptist Church to see the documentary "A Place at the Table." This haunting film about widespread hunger in the United States documents the reality of how food insecurity ravages the working poor along with the unemployed and destitute. Our own state of Washington is the 14<sup>th</sup> hungriest state in the nation. Hungry children are not prepared to learn, read or succeed in school. They have more health problems, frequent absences from school and long-term developmental challenges. Hungry adults are unable to concentrate and more vulnerable to work absences or on-the-job accidents. In King County, more than 20% of children, and more than 13% of all residents are food "insecure." They don't know when they will get their next good meal. Food banks are struggling to keep us with growing demand.

When the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched its online Food Desert Locator last summer, 17 geographic areas of concern in Puget Sound were documented. The USDA defines a food desert as any census tract where at least 20 percent of people earn below the poverty line and 33 percent live more than a mile from a supermarket (10 miles in rural areas). There are 17 such tracts in King County, mostly in South Seattle, but extending down through Tukwila to Auburn and Federal Way. In all, more than 125,000 people, in neighborhoods live in places where fresh, healthy food is difficult to find. The presence of food deserts and the consequences of food insecurity in what we think of as the land of opportunity for all are hallmarks of the interrelated nature of social and environmental injustice.

### **The Consequences of Environmental Injustice**

Disproportionately high and adverse human health, socio-economic and environmental effects are often experienced by people of color and residents of low-income neighborhoods. Race continues to play a statistically significant role in the location of toxic-waste sites and other hazardous facilities near low-income

communities. For example, the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City has borne, and continues to bear, a heavy environmental burden for the rest of the city. Every weekday, 15,000 trucks pass through the neighborhood – and produce toxic air pollution – on their way to and from the Hunts Point Market, one of the world’s largest food distribution centers. Facilities in the South Bronx also handle 100% of the waste produced in the Bronx and 23% of all of the city’s commercial waste. Emissions from four power plants additionally contribute to the local air pollution. The South Bronx is populated primarily by people of color and the urban poor.

In our own emerald city of Seattle, the lower Duwamish River—historical and current site of tribal lands of the Duwamish people, was first damaged by altering the flow of the river to promote ease of shipping, and then indiscriminately polluted with toxic runoff from businesses along its banks. Designated a superfund cleanup site by the US government, there are a host of major concerns for the mostly low-income residents along the Duwamish River: risks from direct contact with the river; the dependence for dietary protein on eating fish and shellfish from the river; synergistic health effects of multiple pollution sources; underrepresentation of community members in the decision-making process regarding the river’s cleanup; and, continued siting and permitting of questionable facilities in areas of existing industrial high density and placements that are in close proximity to vulnerable populations.

There are dire consequences for people around the globe due to the ravages of environmental injustice. A new phenomenon in the global arena is termed “Climate Refugees.” A climate refugee is a person displaced by climatically induced environmental disasters. Such disasters result from incremental and rapid ecological change, resulting in increased droughts, desertification, sea level rise, and the more frequent occurrence of extreme weather events such as hurricanes, cyclones, fires, mass flooding and tornadoes. All this is causing mass global migration and border conflicts. A recent report in the New York Times documented the forced migration of United States citizens from their homes in Alaska due to climate change. For the first time, the Pentagon now considers climate change a national security risk and the term “climate wars” is being talked about in war-room like environments in Washington D.C.

### **How then shall we live?**

*Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Amos 8:4-7*

*[Jesus said,] "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Luke 16:10-13*

Our Creation Season lessons from the book of the prophet Amos and the Gospel of Luke keep the cross-hairs of God’s judgment centered on those who benefit from the socio-economic structures that perpetuate environmental injustices. The Biblical witness is clear: God expects humankind to be righteous and act with compassionate justice in our stewardship of the abundance of earthly blessings we have been given. God’s wrath awaits those who destroy the earth (Revelation 11:18).