

The Title of my talk today is “Have you Heard the Good News About Climate Change?”

This is the fourth sermon I’ve given, but it’s the first I’ve been asked to do in several years.

I guess folks wanted to give you time to forget my last one ... The title of that was, Does Evil Exist? I concluded it did.

Now, I’d like to share a story with you. The night before that service, I got a call from someone in the Fellowship– someone I consider a friend -- and she wanted to tell me she wouldn’t be attending because she knew it was going to be depressing ... and negative ... and well ... she just didn’t want to face it.

Apparently, I’d developed a bit of a reputation.

When I was asked to talk about climate change, I figured I might be talking to an empty amphitheatre.

So when I say it’s good to see you here, I really mean it.

Because, be honest now, when you hear the words global warming or climate change, don’t they kind of land like lead ... don’t they make you feel a little guilty; a little hopeless; like maybe you want to turn away and ignore it. Kick the can down the road?

It seems so hopeless ... so insolvable.

And yet we can’t kick the can down the road – it has fallen to us – right here and right now -- to meet this challenge.

In this moment in history -- we face epochal choices. Choices that will shape the future in ways more profoundly and more irrevocably than at any time in human history.

For the first time in history, humans are fundamentally changing the atmosphere on a **planetary** scale, pumping in enough greenhouse gasses to heat the planet beyond anything our species has ever seen; beyond what the ecosystems we evolved in can endure.

For the first time in history humans are changing the chemistry of the oceans **on a planetary scale**. We risk turning the life-giving seas into sterile, acidic, and nearly lifeless crypts.

And these will not be temporary changes. In fact, in the case of sea level rise, we've already locked in more than 1,000 years of steadily rising seas.

We are – right now -- reshuffling the carefully wrought balances of nature in ways our progeny will have to live with – and struggle against -- for eons.

We all know the litany of global warming's effects -- killer heat waves, encroaching diseases, mass extinctions, explosive forest fires, dying forests, famine ... as many as a billion climate refugees and 100 million deaths by the end of the Century ...

What we do – or don't do – in the next few years will quite literally influence the kind of planet our children's children's children live on – indeed it will shape the world for hundreds of generations to come.

These are moral choices. These are ethical choices. In fact, they are the most profound moral choices our species has ever faced.

As I look out there, I can see that a lot of you are wondering what happened to the good news.

Well, I do think there is some good news embedded in this all too grim topic.

Because – while it is true that Climate Change is the greatest challenge our species has ever faced I’ve come to understand that it could also be our greatest opportunity, our finest hour, our most magnificent legacy.

And I’ve come to believe that addressing climate change will not only save lives and preserve a livable world for our children’s children’s children, it will salvage our souls and restore our sanity.

Too often, we’re told that the effects of climate change are some far off future concern, but they’re happening now.

Right here in California, we’re in the fourth year of the worst drought ever recorded.

Our reservoirs have only 1 year of water left in them, and the Sierra snowpack – which has been nature’s reservoir for as long as humans have been here – are only at 13% of normal.

Happy World Water Day, by the way.

Right here in California, baby sea lions – starving and all but abandoned -- are washing up on our shores, as their mothers have been forced to swim vast distances to get food, because the seas have become too warm near the rookery and their prey migrated north.

Right here in San Diego – less than a year ago – 7 forest fires – unprecedented in the month of May -- ravaged the area, destroying the homes, including that of one of our own members.

Events like these are playing out across the globe, contributing not only to displaced species, but to mass migrations of people, too, creating unrest and even terrorism ... So climate change is here, now. And it's making us unhappy.

The real cause of global warming – the real source of unsustainable behavior – is the illusion that material wealth brings us happiness ... the idea that consumption brings us happiness ... more stuff; ever bigger houses; jazzier cars, flashier clothes ...

When these are the *sin qua non* of our existence – the compass which we use to navigate our way to a life of meaning, happiness, and fulfillment ... ***we get none of the above*** ...

The life they steer us into is neither satisfying, nor sustainable.

I believe this focus on consumption is at the core of much of what ails us in the 21st Century. And I believe we know it.

There is within each of us that still small voice that tells us we've lost our way – that this isn't working. That in our quest for stuff, we haven't become happier.

We should listen to that voice. There's wisdom in it.

In fact, the apogee of happiness in the US according to the National Opinion Research Center, was in 1957, when the average American family had one car; one TV; a house less than half as big as today's homes with one bathroom, no air conditioning, no clothes dryer, no stereo - we had less than half the stuff we have now. Since then, as psychologist David G. Myers points out, we've gotten less happy, but astronomically richer.

At the end of the day, here is the problem with a consumer-based economy: It is amoral. Not immoral, but amoral – it operates outside of any moral framework.

What gets more is good; what allows us to have bigger, better, faster, fatter, flashier, fluffier stuff is good.

When consumption is our pole star, we become liquidators instead of investors; we become debtors rather than donors; we become exploiters rather than stewards.

But we don't become happier ...

So here is the core of the good news – at last.

If we are to meet this challenge, it is not simply a matter of what we do – although we will be called to do many things – rather, it is a matter of *who* we are, who we can *become*, and what we value.

In the next few years we need a technological revolution that requires an effort comparable to what we did in World War II.

But to do that, we will have to ignite a Renaissance of the soul. We will have to stop trading in our children's future for the convenience of a super-sized happy meal, a neighborhood box store and ... stuff – ever more stuff.

The good news is, tackling climate change can help us lead richer, fuller, lives. Lives that are grounded in community, not consumption.

Lives in which we derive meaning from how we relate to each other, not how we exploit one another.

Lives which are grounded with a deep reverence, respect and gratitude for the world we've inherited. Lives in which we function as stewards, not liquidators.

In the end, tackling climate change is about Right Relations in 4 key areas, as much as it is about cutting greenhouse gasses.

Let's examine each.

First, it will require us to establish right relations with all peoples. A civil society requires us to understand the deep interconnectedness of all peoples.

Right now, the world is defined by the exploiters and the exploited; by the rich and the poor; the true believers vs the infidels; the black vs. the white –

The concept of we – of who constitutes us – is being splintered into ever-smaller groups, like light through a prism.

Fed by corporations and political parties we are singled out and separated, classified and sorted into semi-sentient consumers ... the context of “us” diminishes, while a multitude of “thems” explodes.

The more divided we are, the more we can be manipulated by fear, jingoism, and greed.

-- Consumption feeds this divisiveness. It is narcissistic. It's about me, not us. If more stuff is the answer, then what is good is defined by what *I get and what I take*, rather than what *we make* and what *we give*. A civil society becomes secondary to the getting.

Consumption makes us exploit people. If we can get folks in China or Vietnam or Mexico to do our bidding for less, we can get more. So why not? If we can buy cheap stuff from Wal-Mart, does it matter if their employees need food stamps to survive?

But if our goal is to preserve the magnificent legacy we have inherited, then “the we” must be expanded – we must care about the dispossessed, the disadvantaged, the affected and the afflicted.

We must turn that prism around so that we stop shattering ourselves into ever smaller splinter groups and move from a thousand “thems” to the one greater we.

Martin Luther King said, “We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

“The giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism” -- these are the consequences of an amoral economic system ... a system in which “more” becomes an end in itself.

And ask yourself ... has this brought happiness?

Second, Tackling climate change will require right relationships with the natural world.

We were born makers – for 50,000 years homo-sapiens sapiens -- Man the Double wise – was defined by what he or she produced. We are – in the depths of our DNA—makers. And we find joy in producing and building ...

But for the last 100 years – a scant blink of the eye in geologic time – we have defined ourselves as consumers – as takers, not makers.

And when getting and taking replace giving and making, we lose something of the divine within us.

If we have to liquidate a rainforest – or destroy a climate – or acidify the seas, or eliminate species and eco-systems to get more for less then we will, for the getting is what it is all about.

Makers must be stewards of the raw materials they use to produce – consumers simply want more. A true family farmer nurtured the soil – a factory farm consumes it. On average, the Earth is covered with about 3 feet of topsoil. In the US, soil is eroding ten times faster than it takes to build it up. We're not farming soils, we're liquidating them.

Takers don't just exploit people, we exploit species and ecosystems -- Giant feedlots in which cattle can't move; pigs that never see daylight; chickens with their beaks cut of living on antibiotics and factory-farmed Frankenfood; turkeys bred to be too fat to stand, consumed by people who almost can't.

All for the getting – the cheaper the better, the more the better.

Agricultural practices that are in harmony with the earth sequester carbon – they actually have the capacity to take carbon out of the atmosphere. Diets that are low on the food chain generate less carbon and they make us healthier ... Here again, doing the right thing for climate also enriches our ecosystem, improves our health, and enriches our soul.

Third, Responding to climate change will help restore communities. Right now, we watch giant box stores and malls go up – temples to the getting -- but we fail to see that we're cashing in the life and vitality of our local communities for a 10% off sale on the latest gizmo made in China.

We move to chase jobs to make more money so that we can afford more stuff, and the family and community that defined human culture for eons is weakened.

In 1950 70% of us lived in relatively small communities. In 2008, for the first time, less than half of us did. And by 2050, 70% of us will live in massive urban settings that are little more than colonies of strangers.

Nature, for many of us, is becoming an alien place. We know the aisles of Abercrombie better than the canyons of San Dieguito. And you can't love what you don't know, and you won't protect what you don't love.

We get the McMansion, but the rooms are empty, our neighbors are strangers, and our connection with the world that sustains us all but severed.

Finally, if we are to tackle climate change, we will have to establish right relations with future generations. We live in a world that is a miracle – it is the only world we have – and we hold it in trust.

For eons untold, each generation has passed the magnificent legacy that is our Earth to the generation that followed. But we – for the first time -- are squandering that trust and betraying the future in a tidal wave of consumption, materialism and greed.

We are in effect conducting an open pit mining of our children's future, leaving behind the scarred remains of a once beautiful planet and a huge unpaid bill.

Carl Sagan said, **“The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else -- at least in the near future -- to which our species could migrate.**

Visit? Yes.

Settle? Not yet.

Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.”

But because we believe having more stuff will make us happy – we act as if our world is disposable and our children don’t matter.

Corporations spend more than half a trillion dollars each year telling us stuff will make us happy; they work to create new wants and then try to convert those wants into needs. Sell, consume, throw away, buy. Sell, consume, throw away, buy.

But what they’re really doing is creating a void that can never be filled.

As Eric Hoffer noted, **You can never get enough of what you don't need to make you happy.**

Frank Lloyd Wright made the same point in another way when he said: **“Many wealthy people are little more than the janitors of their possessions.”**

In our core, we know they’re right.

When we re-establish right relations with each other, the natural world, and the generations that follow; when we reconnect with nature – we will have simpler, more satisfying lives.

Lives in which prosperity is measured by the richness of our relationships, the depth of our connections to community, the harmony of living in communion with nature –

-not simply by the size of our car; our house or our portfolio.

These, in the end, are the things that bring joy, the compass by which we measure true prosperity. As the country song put it so aptly –I’ve never seen a Hearse with a trailer hitch.

Ah, but how do we get there? After all, words without deeds are mere dreams.

What power do we have to make these kinds of changes? How can we – mere individuals – stand up to this tsunami of want that is – literally – hardwired into our DNA?

Well, we have the power of choice – each purchase we make is a vote. We can eat sustainable foods, drive efficient cars, choose clean energy, use water wisely. We can walk out talk.

Here at UUFSD, we are taking this approach as we replace and repair our aging buildings – we will use rammed earth as a building material; use waterless toilets; construct ultra efficient buildings; install rainwater collection and solar energy. We aspire to make our campus a living laboratory that will help show others how to become sustainable.

But at the end of the day, this challenge cannot be met by individual actions. It requires a movement.

And it will require a struggle. Speaking of another change, Frederick Douglass said:

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing the ground;

they want rain without thunder and lightning;

they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters.

The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both.

But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and it never will.

Yes, when you look at the challenge before us, it seems hopeless. But here is the good news about climate change. Sometimes, David does defeat Goliath. Indeed, the collective power of millions, united by passion, animated by principle, and in pursuit of justice, is one of the strongest forces on earth.

That is precisely what we hope to ignite in the Commit2Respond initiative. We hope you will join us over the next 30 days and beyond as we work to light the spark that will build the movement we need.

Finally, if we are to have such a movement it will require a passionate commitment to stand on the side of love – love for those who will be affected in the future; love for those who are being affected now; love for the species we share this world with – and finally, reverence for the miracle that is our Earth.

May it be so.

Our closing words come from Paul Hawkins, who said,

When asked if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse. What I see everywhere in the world are ordinary people willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in order to restore some semblance of grace, justice, and beauty to this world."

Have a good week, and consider joining these people in their effort to build a world filled with grace, beauty, and justice.

John Atcheson, UU Fellowship of San Dieguito, Solana Beach, CA
March 22, 2015 – to kick off the Commit2Respond campaign