

First Congregational United Church of Christ

“Tuned In and Hanging On”
Colossians 1:15-20

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According to the Rev. Jim Wallis, when asked what was most wrong with the world. G. K. Chesterton is said to have responded, “I am.” Somewhat more recently and more corporately, some of you may remember the Pogo cartoon in which the author reflecting on contemporary experience proclaims, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

For many the world today is experienced as a chaotic and randomly violent place. Jill and Molly recently returned from Uganda and last week a suicide bomber claimed the lives of many in a blast in Kampala. Unemployment remains high with five or six people applying for every available job. A friend recently told me that a relative who has been working for about six months after being unemployed for about a year was just laid off again in yet another corporate downsizing. Unemployment benefits for many have run out or are nearing an end. Bankruptcies and foreclosures remain high. Uncertainty is everywhere. Healthcare remains illusive to millions of Americans in spite of current legislation. School systems keep paring program and personnel causing parents some concern regarding the quality of their children’s education. And, there is the environmental catastrophe in the form of the oil spill in the Gulf as yet unresolved and a long way from being mitigated. This event, in particular, seems an apt symbol for much of the rest. It represents life out of control, or at least, out of community; life out of tune. And, with this, comes a great deal of finger pointing, blaming and name calling, anger, anxiety and fear, and little accepting of responsibility, humility, compassion, and aggressive, cooperative problem solving.

Life in the human community does not have to be this way and we know it. Last week, after the sermon in which I shared stories of compassionate acts on the part of several people illustrating the mercy of the Samaritan who helped the beaten man left to die by the roadside, a number of you shared similar stories with me out of your own experience including some among us who lean toward the somewhat cynical.

That ray of hope noted, I want to lean into the bad news a little longer and stick with the oil spill as a symbol for life in the human community appearing out of control, out of community, out of tune. Much of what follows is borrowed from or based on two online essays by the Rev. Jim Wallis who structures the conversation for people of faith clearly given the fact that even though the leak is stopped for now, a good portion of the Gulf is off limits to fishing; many miles of coastline have been soiled; wetlands and marshlands have been contaminated and are dying; nearly all species in the path of the spill are threatened and countless individual creatures are dying or dead, their habitat irreparably altered; and, at the top of the food chain, thousands upon thousands of human lives and livelihoods have been compromised now and perhaps for generations.

Writes the Rev. Wallis, and rather pointedly:

Theologically, we are witnessing a massive despoiling of God’s creation. We were meant to be stewards of the Gulf of Mexico, the wetlands that protect and spawn life, the islands and beaches, and all of God’s creatures who inhabit the marine world. But instead, we are watching the destruction of all that. Why? Because of the greed for profit; because of deception and lies; because of both private and public irresponsibility. And at the root, because of an ethic of endless economic growth, fueled by carbon-based

fossil fuels, that is ultimately unsustainable and unsta-
ble.

... It is a lie that we can continue to live this way,
a lie that our style of life is stable and sustainable, a lie that
these huge oil companies are really committed to a safe and renewable
energy future. (*A Time for Moral Reckoning—*
SojoMail, 6/3/10)

After a recent visit to the Gulf Coast with a delegation of national faith leaders who were
visiting to listen to people's stories, and to pray and to worship, the Rev. Wallis wrote:

Language fails us. This is not a "spill," but a
spoiling of God's creation - - of wetlands and beaches; of
God's myriad creatures; of lives and livelihoods. And we heard many
testimonies of this devastation over these last few days. The words that
kept coming to my mind were "reflection, restoration, and renew-
al." (*Praying on the Gulf Coast—SojoMail*, 7/8/10)

Reflection, to see and to hear the news and to process it, not just in terms of how it im-
pacts the people and creatures whose lives are most directly and intimately affected, but also in
terms of how our way of being in the world or, more personally, my way of being in the world
was part of and remains part of a system that ensures the occurrence of and the recurrence of such
events. Asked by a reporter to reflect on the disaster and if it was an "act of God," the Rev. Wallis
said:

... No, this is a result of human folly. And if
you think the people you see here are sad at what has hap-
pened to this place, then just imagine how sad the Creator who gave us
this natural beauty as a gift must be. If you think those who have lost
their jobs are mad, imagine how angry the God who gave us the job to
take care of creation is when we fail like this.

It is not enough for any of us to be sad,
feel guilty, or say we are sorry. We must repent.
That means we have to turn away from the way things
have been and move forward on a new path. We need to turn away
from our addiction to oil that has hurt our neighbors and the planet.
Why this crisis has happened and what we will learn from it
are both spiritual questions we must now ask ourselves.

(*Praying on the Gulf Coast—SojoMail*, 7/8/10)

Certainly we each have our own reflecting to do and yours and mine will reflect our
uniqueness as individuals and may be nothing like the Rev. Wallis'. But, the Rev. Wallis did help
me recognize the direct connection between today's text and contemporary life. The text pro-
claims God's love for the created order apart from humanity. And, the text concerns itself with
how we are in the world which matters to God because God has entrusted us with the care of the
created order.

Recently I came across these words of Mechtild of Magdeburg: "The day of my spiritual
awakening was the day I saw—and knew I saw—all things in God and God in all things." When
she said this she must have been tuned in to the same theme the apostle Paul recognized when he
wrote today's text or quoted today's text which is thought to be one of the earliest hymns of the
Christian church:

[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God,
the first born of all creation; for in him all things in
heaven and on earth were created, things visible and
invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or

powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-17, 19-20).

Or as Mechtild of Magdeburg put it: “The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw—and knew I saw—all things in God and God in all things.”

Since we believe this is true, we are called to reflect not solely on how any one or community of corporations may be responsible for this event, but also on how we in our personal lives and through the economic systems we have helped to create and sustain have knowingly or unknowingly encouraged the process. Put another way, and perhaps more simply, since creation is holy to God, created and redeemed through Christ, then it is holy to us. And, unlike nations and peoples who have a voice at the table when it comes to managing life on this planet, the created order does not. This, in my view, puts people of faith in a similar position to creation as we have been in relationship to human beings whose voices may not be heard in the decision making arenas of human discourse. We become their advocate.

The church, of which Christ is the head and through whom all things are reconciled to God, is called to help humanity reflect on our relationship with each other and with the earth; restore a greater measure of harmony and wholeness within the human community and between humanity and the earth; and, beyond that, seek renewal as the Rev. Wallis puts it, a new way of being in our relationship with each other as people and peoples and in our relationship with the earth going forward.

We’ve spoken of reflection. All the material I’ve read so far makes it clear that there is no single solution in regard to any effort at restoration or reclaiming the affected area of the Gulf. At stake is not just stopping the leak and cleaning up the mess, although it involves all of that. It also involves, as the Rev. Wallis notes, larger realities behind the work—accepting responsibility for the mess, developing appropriate regulation and accountability to reduce the possibility of such an event reoccurring and, more personally, examining our use of energy and its sources.

In the current economic and political climate, none of this will be easy or popular. In his essay, *A Time for Moral Reckoning*, the Rev. Wallis quotes New York Times columnist Tom Friedman who

wondered about the deeper meaning of the Great Recession when he asked, “What if it’s telling us that the whole growth model we’ve created over the last fifty years is simply unsustainable economically and ecologically and that 2008 was when we hit the wall - - when Mother Nature and the market both said, “No More.” (*A Time for Reckoning*. SojoMail, 6/3/10)

Something to think about.

I want to come at this a different way, a bit more in the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi. Our opening hymn is based on St. Francis’ “Canticle of the Sun.” My guess is the angels sing St. Francis’ hymn with some regularity. Certainly the psalms are filled with images of nature singing for joy before God. Who are we, as followers of Jesus, to silence those God-given voices? We who have been given the responsibility to see to creation’s wellbeing, to give creation voice, and, as St. Francis noted, to sing in concert with the voices of creation, are out of tune. We are out of tune.

I think there are three immediate challenges before us. The first is to recognize that “the Great Spill” is not separate from our personal experience. We are all participants in the catastro-

phe. Finding some way to recognize and meaningfully internalize the event is the first challenge. The second is to come to understand that how we live our lives as producers and consumers, never mind as people of faith, has an impact on the natural world which God loves, participates in, and which God has entrusted to our care as well as on relationships in the human community which God loves, participates in and has entrusted to our care. The third challenge before us is not to become defeated, depressed, or unduly cynical, failing to hold people accountable on the one hand, and on the other, enjoying the emotional satisfaction of lashing out at a convenient target—corporation, government, a particular person or people without changing anything.... . It is our unique responsibility to remember that because “all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—... through [Christ] and for [Christ]” and because “all things hold together” in Christ “and through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things” we may live in faith and with hope toward a new future. If all things are reconciled to God in Christ then, by the grace of God, all things are possible and there is abiding hope that we can tune into and sing with the choir of angels and with creation in all its blessedness.

I recognize that this sounds a bit romantic in the face of harsh reality. But I submit to you that when the author of today’s text speaks of peace being made “through the blood of [the] cross” the author of today’s text recognizes harsh realities. In fact, the author of today’s text acknowledges that God has experienced them and indeed, because of God’s connection with creation, continues to experience the harshest realities of life in the created order and in the human community. The biblical promise is that God has not and will not abandon the possibility of an ongoing relationship with humanity and with the created order in spite of our behavior. That is the gospel. That is the message we bear into the world as followers of Jesus. Everything may appear to be going wrong and may, in fact, be going wrong. God, however, remains fully present and deeply in love with us and with all creation. Consequently, a future more harmonious than the present is possible and we may choose to live into it. Let us tune into and hang on to that.

I’m going to close with a psalm, a beloved hymn of our ancestors in faith, sung in the face of catastrophe and grounded in hope.

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;

see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ 'Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth.'

¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.