

Addicted to Oil and The Love of Life
Sacred Elements Homily
Church Divinity School of the Pacific—Epiphany West 2010, January 27
Michael Schut

Scriptures Read:

Gen 1:1-2:4
Ps 148
Romans 8:18-25
Mark 4:35-41

Addicted to Oil: Hi, my name is Mike and I'm addicted to oil. I live in Seattle and in 2009 I flew to New York four times; to Alabama; to North Carolina; to Hong Kong; to Fiji; to California; to Washington DC; to Ohio; to Connecticut; and to Florida...all of those trips were for my work with The Episcopal Church which is dedicated to economic and environmental justice and which includes an emphasis on decreasing the greenhouse gas emissions of The Episcopal Church.

Hi, my name is Mike, and I'm addicted to oil. I have a car, but drive it less than half the average American. I bike around town a fair amount.

Hi, my name is Mike and I'm addicted to oil. Certainly a good amount of my food comes from 1500 miles away -- the average distance an American's piece of food travels -- an alarming fact made possible only by cheap oil.

And...I love to garden. I grow some of my own food. All my food waste is composted in my backyard and eventually turns into beautiful rich soil. I eat low on the food chain. I throw very little away (as if there is any "away").

Hi, my name is Mike and I'm addicted to oil. I do eat low on the food chain but every once in a while still order chicken sometimes when I go out, chicken most likely raised in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations which treat these animals as if they are only one part of a machine turning fossil fuel calories into food calories. They are packed six to a

small cage, have their talons and beaks removed, are pumped with anti-biotics to hold disease at bay, fed an unnatural diet, and quickly slaughtered, clean, diced and sliced, packaged, and transported.

Love of Creation: Hi, my name is Mike and I love the beauty of creation. About 10 years ago now I walked into New York's American Museum of Natural History. The museum was featuring a relatively new display, The Hall of Biodiversity. On the wall to my right, stretching around 35 feet high and 120 feet long was a mind-boggling display of the complexity and diversity of species with whom we share God's creation: there were videos, paintings, re-creations, explanations, descriptions of the fecundity of our earth home.

Through the middle of that vast hall stretched a fairly realistic model of a Central African tropical rainforest -- the ecosystems which harbor the greatest biodiversity on Earth.

Stretching along the left side of that hall were videos, maps, explanations detailing the causes of the mind-boggling rate of species extinctions today: habitat destruction, invasive species, population growth; in other words these extinctions are caused by all of us.

I walked out of the Hall, crossed Central Park West and sat down on a mound of granite next to a small lake and wept. Not since disappearance of dinosaurs have we seen such a rate of extinction. Let this sink in a moment: in the history of time there have been six great extinction events. The fifth and last one was the disappearance of the dinosaurs.

The sixth great extinction event isn't over yet -- we are living in it. In the distant future our ancestors will look back and talk about how that sixth great extinction event was different than the others -- in that their human ancestors caused it.

Contradictions: Hi, my name is Mike. I'm addicted to oil. My name is Mike and my heart breaks as species disappear. My life has been transformed and my heart opened through experiences of intense relationship with formerly homeless men with whom I lived in Washington DC. My heart has exploded with gratitude and awe through a heart-breakingly beautiful experience with aspen trees in the Yosemite backcountry, and been broken again

when some time ago now I read about the state of Alaska killing wolves from airplanes in order to increase the size of the caribou herd to attract more hunters and their money.

So that's a little bit about me. I relate these snippets to reflect and confess the contradictions in my own life. I do not do so to create a list of do's and don'ts...or to self-flagellate. Since when has guilt or adhering to a list of do's and don'ts nurtured a place from which we can sustain loving action?

I personally run from such lists because I know of their life and spirit draining tendencies. For a while, for example, my faith became reduced to a list of do's and don'ts and if I was doing the do's and not doing the don'ts -- well, I must have been okay with God. I also was exhausted and my spirit spent.

Dominion and De-Creation: At my first initial, rather quick reading of today's texts a couple things did jump out at me:

- In Genesis 1, dominion was given to us before the fall. Now, the very idea of exercising dominion over the rest of creation would have been absurd to those originally reading Genesis 1. They knew very well they did not have such dominion.
- God had dominion. Psalm 148 speaks of the "stormy winds" that do God's bidding and Mark writes about Jesus waking up from his slumber in the boat and calming the wind and the waves.
- But when we read these texts today I think it's fair to ask whether or not the stormy winds in Psalm 148 and the wind and the waves in Mark 4 still do God's bidding. More and more of the evidence says that the wind and the waves now respond to our bidding, our power, and our carbon emissions -- suggests that we have achieved dominion. What does it mean when we have become so powerful that very climate systems shift in response to our way of living; when the chorus of praise emanating from God's creation, as depicted in Psalm 148, loses one of its voices, an entire species, once again in response to our way of living. As author Bill McKibben asks, what does it mean when we now have the power to "de-create"?

It's a difficult, and in a way rhetorical, question. But to me it certainly means we must change. But how do we do so in the face of the scale of the need and in light of the fact of our culpability in hastening "de-creation?" And in light of the fact that I for one do not think we can hammer away at what is wrong forever, but rather need to offer an invitation to ways of living and being that are more meaningful, beautiful and fun than the ways we live now.

I often come back to stories -- like the one I told of my experience at the Hall of Biodiversity or mentioned relating my experiences with homeless men, with wolves and aspen trees. These are all experiences of relationship with parts of God's creation that might on the surface seem very different, "other" -- but with whom we are all more intimately connected than we know.

So recall those stories in your own life. What do they teach you? How do they call you to respond? For me, what have the aspen trees, homeless men, wolves, and the loss of biodiversity taught me? How do they call me to respond?

Personally, I've mentioned some of the ways I have felt called to respond. Called to this work -- in spite of the irony and tension that all of its travel engenders; seeking to live lightly on the planet; eating lower on the food chain, nurturing a vegetable garden; biking around town some... and adding my voice to the political process knowing that we must have strong policy if we are to, for example, decrease worldwide carbon emissions and habitat destruction and support the millions of low income people around the world needing to adapt to the impacts of climate change. And opening myself to be in relationship with those that might on the surface be deemed "other."

Biophilia: The great ecologist E.O. Wilson believes we are all lovers of life; we are hard-wired, he says, to love life, what he calls biophilia. At the same time, many say that our separation from the natural world is unprecedented. And that healing that separation will be the difference between extinction and survival.

In my own stories I can see both the separation and the biophilia. And I'm sure you see and experience both in your life too.

If both are true -- biophilia of and unprecedented separation from the rest of creation -- then you and I and all of us live with a profound sense of dislocation, unease and grief.

Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recently told an audience at Southwark Cathedral that people had allowed themselves to become: "Addicted to fantasies about prosperity and growth, dreams of wealth without risk and profit without cost".

The consequences of such a lifestyle meant the human soul was "one of the foremost casualties of environmental degradation. Many of the things which have moved us towards ecological disaster have been distortions of who and what we are and their overall effect has been to isolate us from the reality we're part of. Our response to this crisis needs to be, in the most basic sense, a reality check."

Healing: So perhaps part of the really good news of the changes asked of us is that they will heal us. They will correct the distortions of who and what we are and serve as a reality check, as the Archbishop of Canterbury says; they will reunite us with that internal love of life, that biophilia, that EO Wilson and many others believe is hardwired within us. They will literally re-place us within the web of creation so no longer will we quiet the song of another species or alter the winds or raise up the sea.

May it be so. I believe it is not some sort of utopia but rather something Jesus believed in so much that he was willing to die for it—for such will the Kingdom of God be like.

Amen.

Michael Schut

Economic and Environmental Affairs Officer
The Episcopal Church
mschut@EpiscopalChurch.org; 206-323-1126