LOVING THE EARTH
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

“Love without economics is empty rhetoric.”

These words, by Sallie McFague, are thought-provoking and inspiring. The context for this insight is the fate of the earth and its people in a time of great planet and population shifts.

McFague is a former professor of theology at Vanderbilt Divinity School and Theologian in Residence at the Vancouver School of Theology. Her perspective is as a progressive Christian and her work has long been on the curricula of liberal seminaries, including Unitarian Universalist seminaries. Her most recent book is titled, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril.*

“Love without economics is empty rhetoric.”

Each word of this sentence is powerful and is a call to action.

Too often, liberal religious talk about love can seem soft and self-righteous. This can also be true of “green” talk. Concerns about climate change can feel like “finger wagging pressure to personal piety.” To be a good, green person you must do this...

I confess I have at times resisted calls to save the planet because they seemed to separate nature concerns from people concerns.

The actions often proposed, to buy hybrid cars or to eat ethically, seemed small steps for big American consumers, and seemed to omit any consideration of the poor and oppressed of the world, those who had no cars and who did not have enough food. They seemed like feel-good solutions for the “haves” of the world.
I’m not proud of my resistance. I think my resistance was short-sighted and self-serving. I’ve been trying to understand my resistance, to fit it into my life-long experience and concern for the less privileged people of the world. The messages of fear for the planet just haven’t motivated me deep down. I haven’t felt a part of the movement.

I have been waiting for a plea for the planet that connected concerns for nature and concerns for people in a way that touched me deep down. That made we want to fully commit to live righteously green, not because it would make me a better person or be good to the earth, but because it would save lives, it would end suffering.

And yes, of course, rationally, intellectually, I know that saving the earth, the water, the forests, the species, will save lives, but emotionally, I have been resisitant.

McFague’s work is powerful because it clearly and consistently pulls me into concern for both the sustainability of the planet and global inequality regarding the earth’s limited resources.

She makes clear the ways in which the excesses of market capitalism and the greed of the consumer culture are systemic evils...evil systems that contribute to the both the suffering of the poor and oppressed and the suffering of the planet.

Systemic problems can’t be solved by personal piety. Some of us recycling, using less gasoline, buying locally will help, but will it save the planet? Will it feed the hungry?

McFague doesn’t flinch from suggesting that sacrificial living and communalism are required by the wealthy, comfortable nations if we are to slow the tide of environmental degradation which contributes to the drowning of those suffering global poverty. Sacrificial living and
communalism...let those ideas sink in. What might that mean? How might we have to change?

Even our Unitarian Universalist Principles haven’t touched me deeply enough. I’ve been slow to truly understand the call to “love the earth” as well as the mandate of our 7th Principle, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

I think the 7th Principle intends a message similar to McFague’s. Respect or love – if I want a more theological word, love the interdependent web of all existence. I get the first part – love all of life, love all of creation...that seems easy enough.

But there is something missing from the second part of our 7th Principle, “of which we are a part.”

Respecting, loving the interdependent web of which we are a part suggests that we are an equal part. Interdependence feels like balance, it feels good to us humans. But we do not hold a place of equality on the web of life and we certainly don’t hold a place of superiority.

What we humans must understand is that we are utterly dependent on the web of life. How many minutes can we live without air to breathe? How many hours can be live without water to drink? How many days can we live without food to eat?

There is no escaping our dependence on the planet we have named Earth. Yes, we are part of the interdependent web -- we are the utterly dependent part!

Accepting a position of dependence is not easy. As educated, liberal, mostly middle class people, we have been culturally conditioned to
independence. We tend to view dependence as a negative, as a weakness.

This holds true even for our choice of liberal religion. For those of us who left our childhood faiths and came to Unitarian Universalism, it was, for some, a choice for a less dependent theology. “Leaning on the everlasting arms” was not a good fit.

We wanted freedom of thought, freedom of choice, autonomous religious seeking, individualized spirituality. Our culture encourages us to choose independence over dependence whenever possible.

What might it mean to accept the truth of radical dependence? If we acknowledge that the earth’s resources are limited even while the earth’s population has grown, we come quickly to understand that every person has a right to the basic natural resources needed to stay alive.

Every person is utterly dependent on air, water, and food for life...and every person has a right to the air, water, and food they need to stay alive.

Commenting on the consumer society and the so-called “good life,” McFague writes:

“Now that the earth is full of people, all of whom are using and overusing so-called renewables at a high rate, restoration is often not possible. Forests cannot be regrown quickly enough; the fish cannot reproduce at the speed we need; the air cannot be purified when we continue to pour tons of carbon dioxide and other chemicals into it; land that has become desert, while sometimes reversible to an arable state, takes a long time to do so.”
What we formerly considered renewable resources are increasingly becoming non-renewables. The problem is not that there are not enough of them, but that we are using them at an unsustainable pace.

This is a problem of economics. This is what the first sentence of this sermon pointed to: “love without economics is empty rhetoric.” Loving the earth without economics is empty rhetoric.

The first world nations have taken more than their share. Our country has taken more than our fair share. Most of us in this room have taken more than our fair share. If we love the earth, if we love our grandchildren, if we care about the children who die from hunger – every day, children die from hunger -- we must understand and respond to the realities of global economics.

How shall we align our lives so that we take only what we need? How can the natural resources of the earth be shared with all the people on the earth? That is the question.

Here we arrive at our fear.

Sallie McFague writes: “we who are well-off refuse to acknowledge our fear, our terror, at the prospect of the systemic economic changes needed for the just and sustainable distribution of the world’s goods to all people and all creatures.” McFague calls this refusal “sin.”

I agree with the theologians who call upon the well-off people of the 21st Century to sacrifice some of our comfortable, excessive lifestyle so that others might live. How can we align our lives?

It’s a radical question and only radical approaches will make an impact. Consider sacrificial living and communalism. Many of us have struggled to find ways to better align our lives to meet the responsibility of our
time. And many of us have, at moments in our lives, experimented with various forms of communalism. Some of our fondest heroes are those who have lived lives of simplicity and practiced values of communalism.

McFague offers the model of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement. They followed the socialist principles of sharing both the work and the income equally, with all. I have always been inspired by Jane Addams and the settlement house model, which provided group living and home-based education for women and children in poor neighborhoods. There are Gandhi and the Buddha and Jesus - all monastic movements are models of sacrificial living and creating community around radical sharing. All practicing simple living - not for personal salvation or piety, but on behalf of all people.

In the history of Unitarian Universalism there is a strand of communal experimentation. During the Transcendentalist period of Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller in the 1840s, an agrarian community, Fruitlands, was founded in Harvard, Massachusetts by Bronson Alcott, the father of Louisa May.

A large piece of land was purchased with the intent to live by the work of their hands. It was strictly vegetarian. They drank only water (no spirits). There was no artificial light; they rose and went to bed by the light of the sun. All property was held in common and no animal labor was used. A grand experiment, certainly, by this group of Harvard educated writers and thinkers.

Alas, it soon proved too difficult, too Utopian a vision...Fruitlands lasted only 7 months.

Another alternative community was founded near Boston in the 1840s by Unitarian minister, George Ripley. Rather than farming by hand, the
emphasis was on work and education...and on a balance between labor and leisure. Everyone was allowed to choose their own work. All were paid the same amount (even the women) whatever the job. All work was for the benefit of all. Their experiment lasted for 5 or 6 years, and was largely supported by the schools they founded at the farm. The schools were run by Mrs. Ripley.

Communal living requires giving up privacy, negotiating power, valuing and sharing all work, sharing ownership of material goods, living in right relationship for a higher purpose, making choices for the common good rather than for personal advantage or comfort. All in sharp contrast with the competitive, capitalist system for which we have been trained and socialized.

America has had decades of prosperity that has privileged some of us at the expense of others. America has had decades of prosperity that has encouraged privacy, and consumerism, and an anxiety to protect what we have earned.

Our culture, our consumer culture, has become a broad and deep system of oppression and it is ruining the planet. How can we align our lives, find our proper place on this crowded, at-risk planet?

First, we need to change our perspective, alter our world view, and understand our own personal history in economic terms. To love and save the earth, we must think about consumer based capitalism and sacrificial communalism.

For “love without economics is empty rhetoric.”

McFague, writing from the perspective of liberal Christian theology, turns to the biblical promise of abundant life. In both the Hebrew Bible
and the Christian Bible, humanity is promised abundant life. Believe in me, keep my laws, follow me and you will have life abundantly.

How can we live faithful to the promise of abundant life, not just for some, but for all? Our Universalism - grounded in the confidence that all people are beloved, all are born with dignity and worth - calls us to help build a world of economic justice for all.

Can we think of abundance in different ways? Can we experience an abundance of gratitude and increasing generosity of spirit that comes from taking less for ourselves so that there is more for others?

Can we face up to the truth of our utter dependence on nature, and then discern how we are to live in the face of that truth?

Can we step outside of the mainstream culture and create an alternative way of living? Is that not one purpose of religion, to see with new eyes, to hear with new ears, to walk in the ways of love - a love that is full of meaning because it asks much of us?

Isn’t religious community - Beloved Community - a place to practice a meaningful communalism?

There are signs of hope.

There are many voices calling for an ecological economic worldview.

Theologians John Cobb and Herman Daly voice that hope:

“Love of earth is not altogether dead within the human heart. There is still a willingness to live a frugal and disciplined life if that can be seen as truly meaningful in relation to the massiveness of the problem.
Capacity for sacrifice is not altogether gone. There is a religious depth in myriads of people that can find expression in lives lived appropriately to reality. That depth must be touched and tapped, and it must be directed by an honest and encompassing view of reality. If that is done, there is hope.”

Let us face our fears and our resistance together. Let us take seriously the great work before us, the great work of ecological reformation. May ours not be an empty love. Let us fill our love for nature and the earth with love for the hungry and oppressed.

Let us work on our alignment.

So May It Be/Amen