

Coal Hard Truth Forum October 25, 2011 Vancouver, WA

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I'm a garden variety pastor, and I have to walk a fine line with my own congregation. In order to maintain trust and connection with folks for pastoral reasons, I have to be careful around political and polarizing issues. It's not just my job – It's my vocation to be a pastor to rich and poor alike, and to folks with a wide variety of points of view around the complex issues that face us. For that reason, let me be very clear that tonight I am speaking for myself. Though many Episcopalians would join me, I cannot say that my congregation has yet found a way to have a serious conversation about this topic as a body. But they also understand that I have to be able to think and speak for myself, according to my own conscience, for the sake of my own spiritual health. So here I am.

A famous man once asked the question: What does it profit a person to gain the world and lose their soul?

One of those abstract sounding spiritual questions, when you rip it out of the context of the life of the speaker. But that particular speaker was addressing the cost of speaking truth to power, and would soon die at the hands of the Roman Empire for concerning himself too much with the dignity of every human being. He was making the claim that there are more important concerns than temporary security. The quality of the life we live has to do as much with compassion and a larger concern for the world as it does with preservation of our comfort, our security, our short-term economic interest.

I think it's a good question for this conversation about coal.

On the surface, folks in Longview can say this is a conversation about the lesser of the evils – job loss v. health cost – but the larger issue of environmental stewardship begs to be addressed. It's a convenience for big business to have places like Longview in which to do their dirty work. In my neck of the woods we are always being asked to compromise our health and safety for jobs. And we're not expected to take the larger health of the planet into account -- its assumed that we are too ignorant, too desperate, too hungry to question any economic opportunity.

At some point it becomes a matter of integrity to say no. It is very much a spiritual issue of our dignity as a community, before those who would exploit our economic vulnerability.

I want to say no to this project. Not just a polite no... but hell no.

Because hell is what we create with dirty coal – pouring pollutants into the air, dumping them on the ground and in the water – contaminating the lives of the folks who not only live on the wrong side of the tracks, but all along the tracks where the mess is made -- in poor and working class neighborhoods like the Highlands of Longview.

Hell is what we make as we heat up our planet and melt our polar ice caps.

Hell is increased rates of asthma and emphysema and other respiratory illnesses in our community – a place already significantly worse off in terms of these health issues than most of the rest of the state.

People tell us that our poor health has nothing to do with big industry – it's just a coincidence that more people in mill towns have lung diseases. Hell is made with lies too.

Hell is what we create when we make bargains with people who are driven by economic interests only. You recall how Millenium Coal deceived us about the volume of coal they wanted to ship through our community.

Hell is what we make in our own hearts, as well as our lungs, when we agree to do their dirty work for the sake of a few jobs.

What does it profit our city, our county, our state, to let the coal industry use us?

It's part of a larger question that houses of worship and communities of faith are asking more and more. What do we lose when we gain the resources of energy that earth provides at the cost of the health of the Earth herself? What do we lose spiritually when we reduce our Earth and its gifts to a use and resource mentality? Have we become so alienated from our humble place in creation that we trade our birthright for a meal ticket?

What does it profit to gain the world and lose our souls?

Work matters. People are really hurting. Kids are hungry, people have no health security, homelessness and addiction rates in Cowlitz County are high. But we will not solve these problems by losing our souls.

We need real economic opportunity that honors our people's overall well-being and health. We need opportunities to make our living in ways that contribute to the well-being of others, and are in harmony with our planet.

We need green jobs, and jobs that honor our connection with people all over the world, and their right to clean air and water. We need to stop accepting degradation of our health and environment as a cost of providing jobs in our communities, and put our creative energy into providing jobs that create hope for our future.

Ultimately, this is the largest of issues. It involves our relationship to the earth, to our nearest neighbors, and to our neighbors in China. It involves our access to healthy jobs, and our dignity. It is a huge spiritual issue that we face in time of spiritual crises. Over and over again as Americans we are being tempted by the false choice of jobs over the environment. The coal industry cynically believes that we in Southwest Washington have no choice but to accept their devil's bargain. They know it will be very hard for those most impacted by poverty to stand alone against this threat. They are counting on the majority of us who imagine that we will not be immediately impacted to be willing to sacrifice the health of others. They want us to believe that the Highlands are not in our back yard.

It's time to recognize that we all share one great big back yard. It's time for us to waken to the deep and ancient spiritual principles of compassion. We are interconnected; we belong to each other in ways we cannot know, though those connections grow more and more obvious and urgent each day as we watch the climate change, see the waters rise.

It is a foolish and costly luxury to worry only about our own well-being. The Judeo-Christian tradition hangs on a couple of simple commandments – one of them being to love neighbor as self. This teaching tells us that not only is my neighbor like myself, my neighbor is myself.

In this sense, Eastern and Western religious traditions alike invite us to Self-interest – “Self” with a capitol “S”, for the larger Self, that includes not only me and my neighbor, but, I believe, our neighbor creatures and the planet itself. We cannot dump coal in the Highlands of Longview or burn it in China without damage to our own health and to our own souls.

I want to thank you for letting me rant a bit. As I say these words to you, I know that I am going to have to go home and work to find ways to enable this conversation in my own backyard, in my own congregation. I ask your partnership and support in the work of building bridges of connection to our neighbors throughout the state, so that we can find the will, the courage, and the energy to stop these trains.

Thank you.