

Once upon a time a mischievous squirrel approached a wise old owl. The squirrel asked the owl, “How much does a snowflake weigh?” The owl thought for a moment and responded, “A snowflake weighs nothing at all. I’ve seen them hit the ground and completely disappear.” The squirrel grinned and said, “I wouldn’t be so sure, owl. Yesterday I watched the snow fall on a branch of my tree. 1,459,543 flakes fell silently, as you might expect. When the 1,549,544th flake hit the tree, the branch cracked and fell to the ground. If they were nothing, they were certainly a whole lot of nothing.” And then the owl ate the squirrel, because that’s what owls do. For the record, the first time I heard this story there was nothing about the owl eating the squirrel, but we need to be honest, it is “in the nature” of things. Owls eat squirrels. When I talk about “the nature of things” I’m not using “nature” to refer to uninhabited lands or pristine landscapes. I’m talking about the way things work. The way, I believe, that was formed by a Creator for a Divine purpose. I believe there is natural order in creation. Pristine landscapes are part of the Divine purpose and natural order, but so are human activities of laboring, working, and building. These human activities often involve using the resources of the environment.

I know it has been suggested that while the climate may be changing, there is a big jump between acknowledging climate change and believing that human activity has anything to do with it. It seems to me the lessons of history and the lessons we can learn from the natural world should at least make us pause in considering our impact. I doubt the whalers of the 17th century ever envisioned their quest for oil would have the impact it did and lead to the near extinction of their prey. There are times we have exaggerated our impact, but it is undeniable that there have been times when humanity has greatly underestimated our impact on the world. And the lessons from nature herself, while they often take longer, are also clear. Given time, a river can carve a canyon; a single snowflake may seem to weigh nothing, but enough of that nothing will take down a tree. What is the extent of human impact on the environment? I don’t know, but I know that from the faith perspective the way we address this question will say something about who we are and what we believe.

1) Do we refuse to consider the question?

2) Do we acknowledge the impact but look at the world simply as our plaything?

3) Do we acknowledge the possibility as realistic and, in the words of the USCCB in their **Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good**: if enough evidence indicates that the present course of action could jeopardize humankind's well-being, [use the] prudence [that] dictates taking mitigating or preventative action.

Today and tomorrow we will be talking about climate stewardship. We will be talking about energy policy, farming and ranching, industry, and faith. If this last word seems to stick out as having nothing to do with the others, then maybe that speaks to a failure of our faith communities, or at least a weakness that we in the faith communities need to address. I come to this discussion as a member of a faith community. My faith is Christian and my tradition is Roman Catholicism. Too often I believe faith is “tacked on” to the rest of what we do, rather than serving as *the* sign and signature belief that shapes all of what we do and who we are. Faith must be more than a practice at home and in Churches. Faith must be found in the labor of our fields and pastures, and in the work of our businesses. It has been suggested to me that it is not appropriate for the faith communities to get involved in discussions on climate stewardship. After all, what expertise do people of faith *as people of faith* bring to this discussion? Implied in this is the assumption that our treatment of the environment can be separated from our faith. It implies that what is sought in climate stewardship discussions is solely expertise in climatology. But as a person of faith I think this is an important discussion in terms of what it means to be a person. It is very true, I am not a scientist; I am certainly not a scientist with expertise in climatology. I have no special expertise describing, much less explaining why the climate is changing. But as a person of faith I believe that I was created by God, as was everyone here. I further believe that I was created for a purpose. More than this, I believe that you and I are not God’s only creations, but we exist within the rest of the natural

order of the created world and that the rest of creation, too, must serve a purpose. I believe we can read the signs of God's design in the Scriptures.

The scriptures do not begin with our creation, but with the creation of what will become our home, our dominion. In Genesis 1 humanity is presented as the crown of creation, and "God blessed them saying: 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion of the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all living things that move on the earth.' ...and God looked at everything that God had made, and found it very good." Too often the gift of "dominion" has been linked to domination of the world. We forget that being domestic, making a domicile, a home, is God's will for us. This is even clearer in Genesis 2 where we are told that God took Adam, "and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it." To care for the earth and creation is part of our purpose. To the question, "Do we may an impact on the world and the environment?" my response is, "If we don't, we aren't doing what God made us to do."

We are stewards of creation. For me, the most powerful image of stewardship is in the parable of the talents (MT 25:14ff). The Master hands over to three stewards, charges based on their abilities. Two of them invest what they have received and present even greater wealth to their master; they are given greater responsibility. The third steward buries his charge and in doing so fails the Master. As I wrote this talk I had a hard time avoiding the terms "our world" and "our environment." The steward does not own. The steward is a servant. The stewards in the parable of the talents return in abundance what their master gave. They care for and improve what belongs to the Master. When it comes to caring for creation it is not enough for us to "do no harm." We are called to bring glory. Creation is not God's gift to us. God does not give it away. It is still God's creation, "the earth is the Lord's and all it holds" (Ps 24:1). But God has *charged us* with caring for creation; caring for what we do not own. We do develop the world around us as well we should, but our goal is not pleasure or ease for ourselves. We develop the world for the purpose of bringing God the glory. And when we treat creation as nothing more than a resource to achieve our ends we cheapen it and ourselves. We claim for ourselves what belongs to God. When we disregard the rest of creation we begin to disregard our own dignity as we too are created; we begin to see people as resources rather than as persons. In my religious tradition this was expressed by Benedict XVI in this way: Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a "human" ecology, which in turn demands a "social" ecology. All this means that humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that *disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence*, and vice versa. It becomes more and more evident that there is an inseparable link between peace with creation and peace among people. Both of these presuppose peace with God."

This is particularly important as it has been suggested to me that faith communities should have more important things do than get involved in climate change discussions. Everything we do makes a difference, to ourselves, others, the world, and to God. I have a very good friend who is a priest. I have tried to talk to him about steps we can take to be more energy conscious. His response is, "We're not going to talk about light bulbs, are we? Can't we talk about something important, like liturgy, or baseball?" Every snowflake makes a difference. National Public Radio has revived a series called *This I Believe*. One of the stories that particularly struck me was by an attorney named Deirdre Sullivan called "Always go the Funeral." In it she talks about the importance of the "little things," and says, "In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing." As people of faith we sometimes feel more comfortable talking about the epic battle of good vs evil and we miss those opportunities to see Christ in the face of everyone and everything we encounter day in and day out.

A few years ago my parents went on a tour in the Wisconsin Dells. The "tour bus" was an old army duck. Some of you may know these were amphibious vehicles used in World War II. As they were coming out of marshy area the driver of the vehicle came to stop and pointed to a crooked stop sign sticking out of the

mud. He turned to the tour group and explained that he had to stop here. This was not a wildlife crossing and there were no other tours around, but when he interviewed for the job of tour guide he had to give the owner of this particular resort the grand tour. When he did this with the owner he came to this very same stop sign; he slowed down to make sure there were no animals or other vehicles (knowing there wouldn't be) and then rolled through. The owner of the resort asked him if he had seen the sign. The guide said, "Yes, that's why I slowed down." The owner told him to go back to the sign. He jumped out of the boat and pulled the sign out of the marsh. Then, the guide explained to my parents' tour group, "The owner started hitting me in the back with the sign. I yelled, 'Stop! Stop!' The owner replied, 'What? You want me to slow down'"

The story of my parents' tour notwithstanding, clearly I am not suggesting that we simply stop development. But can we read the signs of the times and are we willing to respond? It may well be that there are practices we need to stop; others that we need to begin; and still others where we need to change direction. But are we willing to do what needs to be done for the glory of God?