“The First Step to Climate Advocacy”

A Sermon by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

August 29th, 2021 @ St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Scripture Reference: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

This morning is the start of our three-week observance of the Season of Creation, something that we have been doing for a few years now, and I have worried that I don’t have anything new to say. Although our Bishops have newly declared our present crisis a Climate Emergency, my own efforts to participate in slowing Climate change seem stalled—they are in the same place they were last year, and likely the year before that. And like the past few years, I still feel such sadness and fear. I know there is so much more I could and should do to slow climate change, but despite knowing that, I can’t seem to generate the conditions for my follow-through. Maybe some of you find yourselves in a similar place?

And then I heard an interview on NPR’s *The Takeaway* with Katharine Wilkinson, a climate activist and vice president at Project Drawdown. I had heard of Wilkinson—in 2019 her name was included in Time magazine’s list of 15 women who will save the world. That accolade plus the fact that the title of the program was “What we can do to fight climate change,” filled me with relief! Someone inspiring, committed, and highly educated on the topic of fighting for our earth was going to tell me what to do. So, here is how that first part of the interview went down.

*“****Melissa Harris:*** *Let’s get climate empowerment going here for folks who might be feeling distressed at this point. What is the very first step that you lay out in this piece in Time magazine?”*

***Katharine Wilkinson****:…the first step is just to be with those feelings. It is a lot to be human on earth in this moment with eyes wide open. Here we are in the midst of another summer of intense climate impacts, droughts, heat waves, floods, all of it. To be present to that is A.) just really important for being human, but also all of the things that come up, whether it’s grief, anger, anxiety, maybe depression, all of that is actually really good information for us. I think when we’re present to it, rather than numbing it out, it can actually move us into action.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Wait? Did you just hear that?! The climate superhero Katharine Wilkinson says that the first action, the action that is the gateway to further action, is to feel our feelings. To feel our feelings! She did not exhort listeners to turn off the show and run out and sell our houses and move off the grid, or trade in our cars for an electric model, or even storm the offices of our congresspeople. The first action she begged us all to take was to feel—to feel our deep sadness at what is being lost around us every day; to feel the worry we have at what our lives will look like--what we will have to say goodbye to, what will become difficult or not even possible anymore; to feel the hopelessness that can set in as we absorb just how widescale the problem is. The first “to do” item for a very practical, active, go-get-em Climate activist, is to feel our feelings.

Although reacting to a different concern than paralysis related to Climate change, in our Gospel passage this morning, Jesus says something similar. In noting that it is what comes out of a person that defiles, he is re-focusing the pharisees on what is *inside* of them—what is in their hearts and souls. The inner sphere of emotions and longings, Jesus is arguing, is the place to attend to for those who seek to be faithful members of the world which God created.

Logical, action-oriented people like some of us are tempted to blow off this first action item of being with our feelings. It may feel too “soft” or nebulous to really count as an action, and we may doubt that it could really do any good. But, given that both Katharine and Jesus were each named as folks capable of saving the world, I’d counsel us to check our doubt and try it.

A group of us did just that a week or so ago on our monthly Carleton Willard Episcopal Fellowship Zoom call. Afghanistan had just fallen to Taliban control, and our hearts were heavy with worry, sadness, and anger. These feelings seemed to have led nearly all of us to an even heavier feeling of helplessness. Having just listened to Katharine Wilkinson’s advice a day or so earlier, I encouraged us to sit in our discomfort. To spend more time telling one another what we were feeling. As our discussion continued, a shared sense of empowerment emerged almost out of nowhere. Folks began googling how to write and call the White House and our congresspeople, narrating their steps as they did so. They began to cheer one another on. By the next morning, I received numerous emails from members of the group sharing that they had made calls or sent emails pleading for a more responsible end to US involvement in Afghanistan…just as Katharine Wilkinson and Jesus suggested, spending time with their feelings had propelled them into advocacy.

This is what our Climate needs from us now. As our Bishops have noted, we are in a state of Climate Emergency now. Although critically important, changes we make to our own individual lives in terms of electric cars and composting and the like are not enough to halt the changes that are swiftly overtaking us. What we need now, to quote Katharine Wilkinson, is “wholesale transformation of the global economy.”[[2]](#footnote-2) That kind of transformation is going to require our participation in advocacy work in a sustained and determined manner.

I don’t know about you, but advocacy intimidates me. I haven’t done much of it, and before now, I didn’t know where to start. Thankfully, now I do. I start, all of us who may be similarly inexperienced or intimidated or as yet unable to sustain that sort of work, start by spending time together acknowledging the depths of our sadness and fear. We become present to our feelings, confident that those feelings will unlock our divine empowerment and sustained devotion.

We can’t know the actions we will take until we take this first one. So…Sunday September 12th at 5pm, I invite you to join me in Elm Brook Forest for a Contemplative Forest Eucharist. This will be a time when we will become present to the beauty and goodness of the forest, and then to the feelings of loss, fear, and sadness that the changes to that beautiful creation stir up for us. This is an invitation to surround yourselves with a community of others who, like the Carleton Willard Village Fellowship, can band together to support one another in whatever next action arises from this important first step.

Lord of all power and might; the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love your Creation; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. AMEN.

1. The Takeaway: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/climate-solutions>, accessed 8/28/21 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. The Takeaway [↑](#footnote-ref-2)