

**Reflection on Matthew 25:31-46  
with a focus on Environment Justice  
by Meighan Pritchard**

In September, many people of faith gathered in New York City for conferences about the environment and to participate in the People's Climate March, which drew an estimated 400,000 participants in New York and several hundred thousand more worldwide. At the conferences that preceded the march, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Christians, secular humanists, and others all spoke eloquently about how we must remake our civilizations to be carbon neutral as soon as possible. I heard Jim Wallis of Sojourners put it this way: "I still hear Christians arguing about which issues are most important. Matthew 25 says, 'I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick, in prison.' Climate change affects all of these issues. Until we integrate our approach, we will continue to bicker over the issues."



Here are a few ways in which climate change, resource depletion, and population pressures combine to impact those already in need or to create new conditions of need.

Hunger and thirst: Without adequate water supplies, not only are we thirsty, but the number of people experiencing hunger increases because we cannot grow enough food. As glaciers retreat, as droughts become more frequent and intense, as aquifers are overdrawn, and as growing cities demand more water that had previously gone to crop irrigation, hunger and thirst become growing issues.

Some countries that have overdrawn their own aquifers are now buying land in other countries to grow crops. This redistribution of land displaces the original owners, who sometimes have no say in the sale of their land. Saudi Arabia, which has depleted its own aquifer, now owns land in Ethiopia and Sudan—two countries already experiencing a great deal of hunger. (Lester R. Brown, *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse*, 22)

Closer to home, the aquifers supplying Florida, California, and the Midwest are all being overdrawn. As California weathers a severe drought, ranchers have to cull their herds and bring in hay from out of state because their range lands are barren. Silver Springs in Florida is subsiding. The Ogallala Aquifer in the Midwest is similarly being drawn down at a rapid rate, and because it is a fossil aquifer, meaning that its water collected eons ago, it will not replenish: when it's gone, it's gone.

India and China rely on glaciers in the Himalaya Mountains to feed their major rivers. Hundreds of millions of people rely on that water to grow crops and to drink. But those glaciers are shrinking.

Water is also important for current fuel extraction techniques. Hydraulic fracturing, or

fracking, uses enormous amounts of water to flush fossil fuels from crevices underground. This water is mixed with toxic chemicals, which makes it unsuitable for use by humans, animals, or plants. No sewage treatment plant is set up to handle this water, and so it must be stored. When it is stored in open ponds, birds must be warned away, because those who land in the ponds are covered in toxic chemicals that kill them. When it is pumped down abandoned wells, it has been shown to cause earthquakes in areas that do not usually experience them. This toxic water often does not stay where it is supposed to. When it contaminates wells, humans and animals can no longer live on that land without other sources of water.

In Matthew 25, Jesus says we are to feed the hungry and give something to drink to those who thirst. Certainly we can staff and supply food banks, but if we want to take on the larger causes of hunger and thirst, we must look at the very underpinnings of our society: our use of fossil fuels and inefficient water use. Our current practices deplete resources, destroy ecosystems, and exacerbate climate change.

Sick: Jesus calls us to care for the sick. As we use up resources and pump pollution and excess carbon emissions into the air, the ground, and the water, we are perhaps not surprised to find that more people and animals get sick. Exactly who becomes sick is a justice issue. The UCC's landmark study, *Toxic Wastes and Race*, and its follow-up study, *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty*, show that toxic dump sites are more likely to be located in close proximity to low-income communities and communities of color.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina brought a double whammy to the little town of Moss Point, Mississippi, as depicted in the documentary *Renewal*. The hurricane itself was bad enough, but the storm surge washed the industrial wastes from the highly toxic Escatawpa River into the homes of low-income people of color, and they all got sick. They also continue to fish in this river, and the marine life can absorb and pass on these toxins.

Dead zones the size of Connecticut form annually at the mouth of the Mississippi River because we put so much nitrogen and phosphorous in waterways that drain to that river that the water becomes anoxic (lacking oxygen) by the time it reaches the Gulf. At that point, nothing in it can survive. Needless to say, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 did not help. Studies of its environmental impact are just beginning to track the damage to the ecosystem.

In recent years, Peter Illyn of Restoring Eden and members of Christians for the Mountains have hosted nursing students on their spring breaks and have trained these students to document family health histories near mountaintop removal coal mining sites in Appalachia. These peer-reviewed studies show cancer rates that are twice those of populations not exposed to the toxic dust and chemicals involved in mining.

A new study indicates that workers at fracking sites are being exposed to toxic levels of such substances as benzene, formaldehyde, and hydrogen sulfide that could have both immediate and long-term impacts on their health.

In her new book *Fed Up: The High Costs of Cheap Food*, author Dale Finley Slongwhite gives voice to the African-American field workers around Florida's Lake Apopka, who endured decades of direct pesticide exposure that led to cancer, miscarriages, lupus, blindness, and other health problems.

Certainly we can tend to the sick, as Matthew 25 suggests. But we must also look at the larger issues of how our quest for "cheap" and convenient fuels and food is creating massive health issues for humans, animals, and ecosystems.

Stranger: Jesus calls us to care for the stranger in our midst. Might some of those strangers be climate refugees? Their lands have been or will be destroyed—by rising seas, by drought, by floods—and they have no alternative but to move. Where will the people of Tuvalu move when rising seas erase their island? Who will welcome them? What about those whose homes are destroyed in extreme weather events such as Hurricane Katrina? Or Inuit villages along the shore in Alaska that are having to move inland because their shores have eroded so drastically?

As climate change dries out some areas and makes them unsuitable for agriculture, there will be more people competing for less arable land. This is a recipe for political instability and conflict.

As more and more people are forced to become refugees/immigrants fleeing unstable homelands, how can we make sure that they are valued, respected, and given what they need to set up a new life for themselves and their families?

In prison: What might prison have to do with climate change and resource depletion? There are those such as Tim DeChristopher willing to risk arrest and prison in order to protect our natural resources. There are also those who end up in prison for being homeless (see "climate refugees" discussion above), for crossing borders without documentation, etc. Climate change also exacerbates political tensions as more and more people compete for less and less water, arable land, and other necessities of life. How are we called to work for a world that is just and plentiful for all?

The examples above are only some of the ways in which climate change and resource use create or exacerbate conditions of hunger, thirst, sickness, being a stranger or being in prison. Whew! Just looking at this list can be daunting. And yet we are called to be a people of faith, hope, and love. So on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, how do we not become overwhelmed? When the problems are so large, what are we thankful for?

Here are a few things for which I am thankful. I'm thankful that there is still time for us to change our ways. I'm thankful for technologies that provide cleaner options that use less or no fossil fuel. I'm thankful for a chance to live lightly on the planet, helping it heal rather than making it sicker. I'm thankful for community: opportunities to care for each other, to build relationships that see us through challenging times. I'm thankful for the opportunity to see Christ and the Divine in every atom of creation and to love creation accordingly. Keith Warner, a Franciscan monk, suggests that we can see all of creation as Christoform—as capable of bearing the presence of Christ. In our quest to

follow the way of Jesus, we are always invited to connect the person of Jesus Christ with creation.

This parable in Matthew 25 has a stark judgment aspect to it: those who do not care for Christ in creation are cast into outer darkness. How will we be judged for the ways in which we have lived on this planet with each other? Will we have tilled and kept it well, as Adam and Eve were commanded to do? Or will we have dominated and destroyed it? We have choices every day. Choose to see Christ in every person, every bee, every bite you eat, every river and lake. This passage suggests we are all connected by the presence of the Divine within us, and we are called to care for each other and for all of creation. Our very existence depends upon doing so well.

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