

Global Heartwarming

March 29, 2007

A few weeks ago, I was having breakfast with a friend in a local eatery. He was running late, and I was engrossed in reading a book I'd brought along—at least until a table full of retired gentlemen gathered at the table next to mine for what appeared to be a weekly get-together. Their conversation was fairly animated, and it was hard to avoid overhearing their take on the various topics that came up.

One of those topics had to do with Al Gore winning an Oscar for *An Inconvenient Truth*. Actually, they were asking a guy if he had a movie that several of them wanted to see. He replied “no,” and then he said, “but I do have Al Gore’s movie.” As they stumbled trying to come up with the name of it, their conversation turned to the issue of global warming and the environmental crisis. Finally, one of them said to the rest, “Well, nobody believes global warming is real; even Gore doesn’t believe it!” After agreeing with his statement, they went on to other topics that weren’t quite so interesting to me, and I got back to my book.

I’ve found myself thinking about what those guys said a lot lately—I suppose partly because I knew this topic was coming up for a Sunday in April. And I’ve tried to be more attentive to all the information that keeps coming out about how serious the environmental situation really is. For instance, there seems to be documentation that glaciers are melting, that plants and animals are being forced from their natural habitat, that the number of severe storms and droughts is on the increase. In fact, one projection that I heard was that the Arctic Ocean could be ice free in summer by the year 2050. That isn’t all that far away!

What is happening, really? I don’t know that any of us knows for sure, but as I understand it, global warming has to do with the observed increase in the average temperature of the Earth’s near-surface air and oceans in recent decades, which is projected to continue. I’m not a scientist by any means, but the explanation I’ve heard is that there is a natural phenomenon by which carbon dioxide and other gases warm the surface of the planet by trapping solar heat in the atmosphere. That’s a good thing because it makes our planet habitable. However, the problem seems to be that we burn fossil fuels like coal, gas and oil, and we’re busy clearing away forests to the point that we have dramatically increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, causing temperatures to rise.

That’s about the extent of my knowledge, and I certainly can’t answer the question about whether all this is real, or not. Probably none of us can. I guess the only thing I can say is that, real or not, what harm can it

do for us to be more attentive to the environment and to the world around us? I heard Len Sweet say once, “**God so loved the world, and we won’t...**” Maybe a little more care and attention to the environment would be one way that we could begin to love the world.”

Author and speaker Tony Campolo said, “**To be full of the Spirit is to have your heart broken by the things that break the heart of God.**” Do you remember the cards we filled out a month or so ago when we talked about what one thing we could do to live more the way Jesus lived? Jesus paid attention to the things that he knew would break God’s heart, and we can do the same. We can be the hands and hearts and voice of God in this world. You and I can begin to love the world.

I know that can seem like an insurmountable task, but I’m convinced it really begins with the little things. One example I’ve heard about is something that happened during the time Rudolph Giuliani was mayor of New York City. He ascribed to the “Broken Window” theory that was developed by Professors Wilson and Kelling sometime in the 1980’s. The idea behind it was that it was important to pay attention to the little things. If a window was broken out in a building, and it never got repaired and replaced, soon more windows would be broken, and then vandals were likely to enter the building and set fire to it, often taking the lives of those who had sought refuge there.

By paying attention to the broken windows at the earliest possible stage, the problem with vandals didn’t escalate. Cleaning off graffiti from the subway cars as soon as it appeared had the same effect. Clearly litter from the street right away had the impact of the street being cleaner and more livable. Paying attention to little things like that reduced crime in New York City to a very significant degree. In fact, Giuliani said, “It worked because we not only got a big reduction in things like street-level drug dealing, prostitution, graffiti, in all the things that were deteriorating the city, we got an improvement in the quality of life.” In large measure due to this effort, New York City turned from the crime capital of America to the safest large city in the country for five or six years in a row.

The things that happened there are just little things, but they are things that you and I can do to love the world, and to make it better for others. We can pick up litter when we see it, and not just in our own yard, but wherever we find it. Some of us might be pretty proficient at spotting broken windows and replacing them. I’ve seen folks who have turned foul graffiti into beautiful artwork. They’re all little things, but they’re ways we can show that we can; they’re heartwarming acts of kindness and compassion.

That’s about the extent of my knowledge

Another way we can help is by recycling our used clothing. I read an article in the *New York Times Magazine* a year or two ago about all the good the clothes we no longer wear can do for others. The article

actually began with these words, “If you’ve ever left a bag of clothes outside the Salvation Army or given to a local church drive, chances are that you’ve dressed an African. All over Africa, people are wearing what Americans once wore and no longer want.” Estimates are that Goodwill Industries sends abroad some 50% of the billion pounds of clothing it handles each year. Some sources estimate that, of the 2.5 billion pounds of clothing Americans donate each year, as much as 80% of it gets sent to entities that package it to go where it’s most needed. That’s a simple way that we can get our lives in order, reduce all the stuff that clutters many of our closets, and help others in the process. A simple thing, a little thing—something we can all do.

Not long ago I was admiring a necklace that Stephanie Brater was wearing. Since I knew she had a special connection with the people of Kenya, I asked if the women of Kenya made it. She responded in the affirmative, and then told me that the lovely necklace was actually made of magazine pages. She went on to say that the Kenyan women had discovered that the best magazine for making this beautiful jewelry was Oprah’s magazine, *O*.

I don’t know if Oprah knows that, or not, but her magazine does more than inspire some women in this country. It provides a means of making a livelihood for women halfway around the world. I take *O*, and I’m ashamed to say that after I finish going through and pulling out anything I think might be helpful for sermon preparation, I trash the magazine. However, no more. Now I’m saving the remains that I would have discarded, and giving them to Stephanie so they can be sent to Kenya. A small thing, perhaps, but a way to “love the world.”

There are so many ways you and I can make a difference in this world. We can show the heart of God in everything we say and do, whether in our work life, in retirement, on vacation, or in school. Phil Gulley and Jim Mulholland, in their book *If God is Love*, share several stories about those who have made loving the world their life’s work.

One such person was a man by the name of Bob Thompson who spent his entire life building an asphalt company in Michigan. It was hard work and long days, and he began with a few employees. Over the years, he built the company into the largest road-paving company in the Midwest. In 1999, at the age of 72, he sold the company for \$422 million.

Even though he lived in a modest ranch style home he had bought when he first got married, he didn’t indulge himself. He gave millions away to various charities, and then he did something that was unheard of: he gave \$128 million of the purchase price back to his 550 employees—even though the new owners had promised not to lay off a single one of them! He had a generous spirit and warmed the lives of others.

Gulley and Mulholland also share the story of an elderly couple, each of whom received a Social Security check as their income. They lived on one check, and used the other to help people who were in need. They did without some of the things we tend to think essential so they could love their neighbors, and love the world.

Our Bible passage for today is one that we hear relatively frequently. The classic way it begins is “For God so loved the world...” but listen to what it says at the end of our passage: “God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending the Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.” You and I play an important role in helping and in putting the world right again. When we share what we have, when we show love and concern for our creation and for all peoples of the earth, when we reach out to help another, we are putting the world right in a small way. We are being God’s hands, God’s heart and God’s voice in a world that badly needs a touch of God’s love. Are we ready to love the world?

I know I’ve shared this with you before, but I really like something William Sloane Coffin once said. He wrote, “It’s always a good time to change your mind when to do so will widen your heart.” In order for us to love the world, to be God’s hands and heart in this world, most of us need to change our minds and widen our hearts.

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that our hearts will become wide enough to truly love the world as God intended.