

“Creating Climate Justice”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Let me begin with a question: What are the parts of your story that connect you to pathways of climate action?

I have started to feel more connected to the climate crisis and climate justice, in particular, because of a piece of my family history that I didn't know about until very recently.

Both of my parents immigrated to the United States from the Philippines. My father grew up in the southernmost province of the Philippines on the island of Luzon. The province is called Batangas and borders the sea.

At one time, this was a mostly rural, agricultural area, and my father's family owned land near the water. There was also a U.S. military base in this area, and in the 1950s, after the Philippines gained independence from the United States, this base was sold to the Shell petroleum company which opened up a major oil refinery to produce liquified petroleum gas.

The refinery would end up taking up much more land than even the base covered. My great-grandfather was one person who sold some of his land - what was once rice fields - to Shell as part of this development.

The refinery created a lot of jobs and many saw it as a boost for the local economy, at least at first. My paternal grandfather got a job as a security officer at the refinery and other family members worked there as well.

As time went on, the local community began to feel the health impacts of living so close to a petrochemical plant. The land became contaminated and people in the community began to suffer ill effects from the compromised air quality. Despite these environmental and health impacts, the refinery has remained in operation.

Now, when I first learned this family history, I was pretty surprised. It had never occurred to me how closely intertwined the global story of the growth of the fossil fuel industry and the devastating impacts of global warming could be with my personal story.

I can't help but think about my ancestors grappling with the question of how to provide for their family knowing that something of what they loved would be lost for the sake of economic security.

It's a part of my history that causes me to reflect on both the economic drivers behind our climate crisis and the full breadth of impacts of a growth-based economy on our environment and our health and well-being.

It turns out that Shell is one of the top five contributors to global industrial historical emissions, and there is evidence that it knew about climate change decades ago and misled the public about it.¹

I think that probably each of us wouldn't have to dig too deeply to find these kinds of connections - ways that our own personal stories and histories are intertwined with our long history of ecological devastation for the sake of economic progress.

And, our personal stories and histories are part of how we enact solutions. For me, knowing this history makes it even more meaningful to know that today there are people, young and old, joining together to raise consciousness about the climate crisis in the Philippines, including right at the doorstep of Shell Batangas, where in September of 2019 climate activists led a peaceful protest blockading the entrance to the refinery.

There are also groups like Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines, the Filipino branch of the global "Fridays for the Future" movement started by Greta Thunberg, and individuals like Mitzi Jonelle Tan, who are working at the frontlines of the climate crisis to advocate with those most impacted by extreme weather, like typhoons in the Philippines.

¹ <https://www.cdp.net/en/articles/media/new-report-shows-just-100-companies-are-source-of-over-70-of-emissions>

Mitzi Jonelle Tan says, “We know that this isn’t just about the weather and the environment,. It’s about justice. It’s about knowing that we deserve a safe present, a just present, and a green and sustainable future.”²

Returning to that question I asked a few minutes ago: What are the parts of your story that connect you to pathways of climate action?

What are the places and who are the people you love that connect you to pathways of climate action?

I invite you, if you are in the sanctuary to turn to someone near you, to share for a minute or so, and if you are watching the live stream, you can share in the chat.

As Unitarian Universalists, we draw upon values of interdependence, equity, and justice in looking at how we, as humans living upon this planet, impact the planet’s natural systems. We draw upon these values in examining who is impacted and how these impacts are felt in disproportionate ways.

These values lead many Unitarian Universalists to address the climate crisis as an issue of climate justice.

The Center for Climate Justice at the University of California describes it in this way: “Climate Justice recognizes the disproportionate impacts of climate change on low-income communities and communities of color around the world, the people and places least responsible for the problem.”³

Among the world’s 8 billion people, just 10 percent of households are responsible for 34 to 45 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.⁴

² <https://www.voicesofyouth.org/blog/campaigning-climate-justice-covid-19-world>

³ <https://centerclimatejustice.universityofcalifornia.edu/what-is-climate-justice/>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/20/climate/global-warming-ipcc.html>

A climate justice approach recognizes that there is a disparity between responsibility and impact when it comes to the causes and devastating results of the climate emergency.

In an article about the impact of extreme heat, Somini Sengupta writes: "...a hotter planet does not hurt equally. If you're poor and marginalized, you're likely to be much more vulnerable to extreme heat. You might be unable to afford an air-conditioner, and you might not even have electricity when you need it. You may have no choice but to work outdoors under a sun so blistering that first your knees feel weak and then delirium sets in. Or the heat might bring a drought so punishing that, no matter how hard you work under the sun, your corn withers and your children turn to you in hunger...Extreme heat is not a future risk. It's now. It endangers human health, food production and the fate of entire economies. And it's worst for those at the bottom of the economic ladder in their societies."⁵

Climate change inequities are also felt here in Vermont. A report published in January of 2022 showed that due to the warming of the Earth's atmosphere, "Vermont is expected to experience heavier and more frequent rainfall, swelling rivers and extensive flooding."

Researchers also found that "lower-income households will be disproportionately hammered by flooding costs, and in particular residents of mobile home parks, which often are located in low-lying areas prone to flooding. Those households are less likely to have savings or flood insurance that could help them rebound from a severe flood."⁶

This past winter, we endured multiple storms here in central Vermont that led to power outages - the one back at the end of December led to multiple days without power for many of you and others in our community. That meant no electricity, no running water, no heat, no internet. Some are fortunate to have generators as a back up source of power, but others do not. The impact of these kinds of storms are going to affect those with the fewest resources the hardest.

As we strive to meaningfully address the climate emergency, we can do so in ways that advance justice and equity and center the inherent worth and dignity of every person. In the language of our mission statement, we can serve human need while also protecting the earth, our home.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/06/climate/climate-change-inequality-heat.html>

⁶ <https://vtdigger.org/2022/01/19/uvm-study-says-climate-change-will-magnify-flood-damage-in-the-next-century/>

Another important aspect of climate justice is that it is locally based. Elizabeth Yeampierre is a Puerto Rican climate justice leader, born and raised in New York City. She is the executive director of UPROSE, a grassroots organization working on environmental and climate justice in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. She describes climate justice this way: “Climate justice operates at the intersection of racial and social rights, environmental and economic justice. It focuses on the root causes of climate change and calls for a transformation to a just, sustainable, community-led economy...[C]limate justice also means that those most impacted offer the most effective solutions. That’s why we say that the path to climate justice is local.”⁷

A local approach is central to the Unitarian Universalist Association’s recently revamped Green Sanctuary program. Our congregation was first certified as a “green sanctuary” in 2003 and then re-certified in 2014.

The new iteration of the program, called Green Sanctuary 2030: Mobilizing for Climate Justice, supports UU congregations in developing plans and implementing projects to engage in an ambitious environmental and climate justice movement that seeks to live fully our principles and achieve our vision of a sustainable and just world for all.⁸

Green Sanctuary 2030 has four components: Congregational Transformation, Mitigation, Adaptation & Resilience, and Justice.

Through congregational transformation, we focus on *how* we do this work - shifting from isolation to collaboration, deepening our spiritual and emotional capacity, assessing our choices through the intersections of climate, class, and race, and building accountable, collaborative relationships with systematically oppressed communities.

Through mitigation, we reduce the carbon footprint of our church building, our homes, and our community.

⁷ “The Path to Climate Justice is Local,” Lecture at Vermont Humanities Council Fall Conference 2021, “This Mazed World: The Humanities and Climate Change,” <https://youtu.be/TZuAvEFk-Zo>.

⁸ <https://sidewithlove.org/green-sanctuary-2030>

Through adaptation and resilience, we adapt to the impacts of increasingly severe climate conditions and cultivate strength of spirit, relationship, and shared resources to respond to ever-changing climate impacts.

Finally, through climate justice, we work with frontline communities, who face systemic oppression and are impacted first and worst by climate change, to bring about inclusive and mutual well-being for all.

This may sound like a big charge, and it is.

The good news is that we have tools for taking action at every level: within our congregation, the broader community, as a state, and on the global level. The solutions are not unknown. Many have already begun.

All around the world and right here in Vermont solutions are being offered and enacted with creativity and with hope.

Let us be part of the solution knowing that the tide is rising and so are we; the storm is raging and so are we; the world is ready and so are we.

Let us work towards climate justice knowing that, as the UUA Side with Love organizing teams puts it: “We can use our gifts to offer love, to work for justice, to heal injury, to create pleasure for ourselves and others.

We can recognize our mutual interdependence with all life.

We can take actions that are grounded in justice, guided by wisdom, and sustained with hope.

We can learn, act, and reflect to cultivate the beloved community.”⁹

So may it be.

⁹ <https://sidewithlove.org/climate-resilience-through-disaster-response-and-community-care>