

## A Stewardship Sermon for the 21st Century

In the dictionary, stewardship is defined as “care or supervision.”

In the Bible, stewardship means “justice for the poor, the widow, and the orphan.” Amos told the rulers of Israel, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” In our Gospel reading this morning, the criteria for achieving eternal life is to do good to the needy of the world – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.

In the Bible, stewardship is directed only towards men and women - not to other creatures or to the natural world. In our reading from Genesis, for example, God, after the flood, instructs Noah and his sons to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” God tells them that they shall have dominion over all the animals and the birds and the fishes. All creatures shall fear mankind – who is made in the image of God.

As knowledge has grown and mankind has become more sophisticated, the commandment to dominate the earth has properly changed to be care of the planet and all the creatures who live on it with us.

Thus, as Christians, we are called to “love our neighbors” and to “be stewards of the earth.” In the past, these have been two quite distinct, non-overlapping commands. Today, they overlap and are frequently in conflict.

The stewardship question we face today is this: **How can the worldwide poor be raised to a decent standard of living while still preserving the earth?** Let me repeat that: **How can the worldwide poor be raised to a decent standard of living while still preserving the earth?**

Today one billion people live in absolute depredation with incomes less than \$700. They eat nutritionally inadequate diets, drink contaminated water, live in rudimentary shelters or in the open, wear second-hand clothing or scraps, and travel by foot or donkey. Justice demands that the numbers of these marginal people be greatly reduced.

And, in the next forty years, the world’s population of 6.6 billion people will grow to 9 billion people – an increase of 2.4 billion people! Will there be enough food to eat, will there be enough pure water to drink? The situation is further complicated by the fact that billions in China and India desire to live the same good life we do. Do we have the right to say to these people “No, you can not live as well as we do?” Or, alternatively, are we, the affluent of the world, willing to reduce our standard of living so that all may live adequately?

And what about the world’s finite resources? There is no question but that expanding populations and improving standards of living impact the world’s food, water and energy resources. . . . We have time for only a few comments.

First food – The current world production of grain, about 2 billion tons annually, is enough in theory to feed 10 billion East Indians, but only about 2.5 billion Americans. As biologist E. O. Wilson has written: “Either the industrialized populations move down the food chain to a more vegetarian diet, or the agricultural yield of productive land worldwide must be increased by more than 50%.”

Water – Water tables are falling on every continent as the demand for water outruns the sustainable yield of aquifers. In China’s north-central plain, water tables have been dropping an average of 5 feet a year - as demands increase. The shallow water table under Beijing has fallen 200 feet since 1965. In the rich agricultural Punjab region of India, the water table has been dropping 2 feet per year. In the southern Great Plains of the United States, irrigated farmland is slowly shrinking as the Ogallala aquifer (essentially a fossil aquifer with little recharge) is being depleted. Water shortages will grow especially acute in the Middle East and in much of Africa, regions of rapid population increase.

Energy – Currently, 77% of the world’s energy is derived from fossil fuels (that is, coal, oil, and natural gas). Increases in per capita fossil-fuel consumption, in combination with the growing world population, are rapidly accelerating the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the global atmosphere and are resulting in adverse climate changes. The worst offender in this regard is the United States, which with less than 5 % of the world’s population, contributes 24% of greenhouse gas emissions.

Many people hope that the development of solar and wind energy will solve the energy problem. This is a false hope. The use of solar and wind power is increasing very rapidly in percentage terms – but a 100% increase will only increase their share of worldwide electrical generation from 2 to 4 %. Within 20 years, renewables can be expected to generate no more than 20 – 25% of the world’s electrical power needs.

The demand for energy must be limited. And how can this be done? Through conservation and improved fuel efficiency. The United States, as the biggest user of energy, must be willing to lead in energy conservation and curtailment of greenhouse gas emissions.

Actions on the part of everyone – individuals, communities, corporations, nations, and international entities – will be required to solve the interrelated problem of economics and ecology.

Unfortunately, churches seem to focus exclusively on actions by individuals and church communities. For example, two months ago, on October 27th, an excellent day-long program at Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church offered 30 classes on what we as individuals and churches can do to “Make the World a Better Place.” While such actions are very worthwhile, they will not, they can not be enough – the truly important actions required are those to be taken by nations -- in particular, by the colossus that is the United States. Maybe churches and church people are afraid to step into the political arena – but we must, if there is any hope for mankind to prosper and the world to survive the next forty years.

Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, and Chairman of the World Health Organization’s Commission on Macroeconomics and Health writes:

“The rich are already rich enough to be able to end poverty. But we also have the capacity to wreck things. . . . Many of our problems revolve around our capacity to cooperate on a global scale, which we’ve never done before in the history of the world.”

The gifted theologian and ethicist, John Cobb, offers this thought:

“As a Christian, I must live by hope. There have been wonderfully surprising historical changes in the past half-century that occurred with startling abruptness. One thinks of Vatican II, the ending of the Soviet Empire, and the transformation of South Africa. In all these, the Christian sees the working of God through responsive human beings.

“Perhaps our own nation, which has led the world into the worship of wealth, will awaken to the idolatrous and self-destructive character of the ideology of economism. Perhaps the world’s people will recognize the impossibility of solving human problems with a growth whose costs often exceed its benefits, even in strictly economic terms. Perhaps the economics profession will devote some of its enormous knowledge and profound insight to finding another way. Perhaps national leaders will have the will to implement a deeply different form of international life. None of this seems likely. But Christians can look to God in hope.”

I end with the question with which I began: **How can the worldwide poor be raised to a decent standard of living while still preserving the earth?**

We, as people of God, must find an answer to this question.